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**Eating the Past, Feeding the Future:  
Value, Adjudication and the Politics of Integration Among Migrants from Congo**

*“But he merely stood holding his papers in the middle of the room, looking at the door, which did not open again, and was only recalled to attention by a shout from the warders, who were sitting at a table by the open window and, as he now saw, devouring his breakfast.”*

*-Franz Kafka, The Trial*

On January 16, 2003, The United Nations released the results of an investigation into allegations of cannibalism in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). According to witnesses, UN aid workers, children, and indigenous “pygmies” were being systematically raped, tortured, killed, and consumed in the country’s four-year civil war. “While people may not believe that one man would eat another, that was what was happening in the Congo,” testified Sinfasi Makelo Bambuti of the Ituri region.<sup>1</sup> Western observers attributed these atrocities to a number of rebel armies, warring tribes, and the general dystopia that is Africa, “a continent suspended, trapped somewhere closer to the ancient than to the modern, a continent so many visas lead to places that feel utterly lost, not only for their wretched poverty and cataclysmic civil wars and devastating histories of exploitation and neglect, but also for the primitive understanding their people have of all that happens in their world, an understanding that may, along with the wretched and the cataclysmic and the devastating, allow for little in the way of modern development.”<sup>2</sup> Published in the New York Times the following October, these words echo reports of a century ago, when Henry Morton Stanley, Leopold’s henchmen and corporate prospectors vied to stake their claims on that dark heartland.

Congo brings out the Conrad in reporters, and the voyeur in their audience. Fifty years after decolonization, the region continues to represent an archetype of disorder, everything that the modern, liberal West is not. This is a trope as old as modernity itself, yet its persistence hardly means that nothing has changed. Indeed, scholars have long protested representations of

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<sup>1</sup> “U.N. Says Congo Rebels Carried Out Cannibalism and Rapes,” New York Times, January 16, 2003; “Delegates at UN Forum tell of alleged cannibalism in DR of Congo,” UN News Centre, May 21, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Bergner, “The Most Unconventional Weapon,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2003.

Africa as a “land without history,” (Wolf, Vansina, Austen) and the classical anthropological model of the “bounded community,” insulated from contamination or structural change, has receded into its own mythological past. (Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Redfield) The “reflexive turn” in the social sciences emphasized the indeterminacies of interpretation, and enough perspectival relativism has seeped into popular consciousness to make “culture” an everyday word. On location in the DRC, that reporter *did* bother to ask a range of informants what they thought was going on. He was told repeatedly that eating the flesh, especially the organs, of your enemy is a way to augment your own power. Yet that explanation, as well the lurid descriptions of the act itself, remain locked within the familiar frame of savage alterity. Notwithstanding the accuracy of his field notes, he was as ill-equipped as his predecessors to understand his observations. Neither he nor the U.N. investigators referenced the vicious international struggle over control of the diamond mines in Ituri, the spate of occult related violence throughout sub-Saharan Africa, or the colonial history of cannibal-fear. (Hunt, Geschiere, White ?) More significantly, they neglected to inform their readers that, within Bantu cosmologies, “eating” is metaphorically related not only to the accumulation of power, but also to questions surrounding the value of human life. In the words of Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe, “the explorer’s text is not epistemologically inventive. It follows a path prescribed by a tradition.” (Mudimbe 1988)

Grasping other life-worlds - even those next door - in terms other than one’s own, continues to challenge many within the increasingly multicultural West. Though the United States formed through successive waves of immigration, popular discourse generally exhibits little awareness of international history or its role within it.<sup>3</sup> With the end of the Cold War and the worldwide quickening of capital circulation, narratives of failed modernization and personal responsibility have a pervasive, “common sense” credibility among commentators and their public. Satellite images of the earth at night illuminate our good fortune: bright bands of light where one would expect, and an ominously black Africa. Within this global frame, immigrants and refugees fortunate enough to gain entry to the modern world are directed to “integrate” seamlessly into the fabric of their new nations. Yet these hypothetical time-travelers carry other, equally potent images within them, along with intimate knowledge of another modernity, both

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<sup>3</sup> See Kasie Hunt, “Some stories hard to get in history books,” USA Today, April 5, 2006; and James Curran et. al. (2009), “Media System, Public Knowledge and Democracy,” *European Journal of Communication* 24 (1): 5-26.

alien and integral to the one they must now inhabit. Whether professionally well-equipped or disabled by trauma, well-connected or *sans papiers*, their prospects depend on their capacity to conjure a quantum of value within a tightening labor market and an increasingly punitive migration regime.

***How do recent Congolese immigrants to the United States interpret and perform their value, and according to what criteria, within the ambiguous and heterodox context of the contemporary United States? How do they “eat” the mythologies, resentments, fears and fantasies of the past, and convert them into social power? In particular, how do the legal conditions of entry and livelihood influence the terms of engagement, and what does this dialectical self-assessment tell us about the adjudication of value and the politics of recognition within capitalist modernity?*** My research will explore these questions through participant observation and case ethnography among Chicago area Congolese. Francophone among Anglo-Africans and African among African-Americans, they confront multiple boundaries of national and ethnic difference, as well as a racial script embedded at the heart of American history, imposed through the legal sanctions of the security state and embellished by the nightly news. Chicago has been a center of immigrant research and activism for over a century, and vital to African America for nearly as long, yet black immigrants have only just emerged as a visible constituency. I intend to investigate the causes and consequences of this trend through an archival component of my project, which will probe the history of personal, organizational and political connections between Chicago and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Finally, I plan to interrogate the normative ideal of “integration” as it operates in the administration of immigration and employment law.

The bodily incarnation of displacement, immigrants are subjected to a particularly explicit battery of tests, both literal and figurative, through which their objectified qualities are assessed according to a set of, often ambiguous, legal and social standards. These ambiguities are due in large part to unexamined assumptions, central to the modernization project, which are no longer consistent with national policy goals – and perhaps never were. In fact, with the “end of work” and the retreat of government supports from everyday life, state systems generally exhibit inconsistencies at the experiential level, particularly in terms of class and race, which have their effect on less formal social relations. Neither rational choices nor categorical imperatives, our actions emerge in response to these adjudications, through a dialectical process of social relations

rooted in an aesthetics of self and community - or rather, of multiple selves and communities. Initially defined by difference, immigrants offer a particularly salient view of these negotiations. I hope to demonstrate how Congolese from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds approach what may well be a new regime of immigration, during an historical moment in which we are all struggling for purchase within moral and material economies of improvisation, what Jean and John Comaroff have called “a metaphysics of disorder.” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006)

### ***Migration and Modernity***

Rather than meeting as unrelated worlds, the Congo and Chicago have entangled each other for over a century. The city’s founder, Jean Baptist Dupont de Sable, was actually the son of a Frenchman and an African woman who may well have been shipped from Loango, the slave port at the mouth of the Congo River. Nearly half of the intercontinental trade in slaves passed through the Kingdom of Kongo, with devastating long-term consequences for the region. (Manning 1981) Across the Atlantic, African slaves and their descendants comprised 20% of the North American population by 1800 (Lovejoy 2005); following emancipation, this diaspora flowed steadily into the Northern cities until the Second World War. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw peak arrivals from Eastern Europe and Italy; together, these migrations provided just the surplus labor needed to fuel the ravenous growth of American industry. Chicago, in particular, was the center of an emerging modernist discourse of rationalization and “creative destruction” (Berman 1980), “a place of transformations and appropriations, the object of various kinds of interference but also a subject that is constantly enriched by new attributes,...simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity.” (De Certeau, 1984) Notwithstanding the onset of a major fiscal depression, 1893 was a banner year in this regard, featuring a World’s Fair of unprecedented magnitude and the formation of the first sociology Department in the United States. The implications of this coincidence were not lost on Robert Park, co-founder of what would become “the Chicago School”: “In these great cities, where all the passions, all the energies of mankind are released, we are in a position to investigate the process of civilization, as it were, under a microscope.” (Park 1928: 890)

The same year, a twenty-year old Liverpool shipping clerk, E.D. Morel, first became aware of certain commercial irregularities in his company’s patterns of commerce with the

Congo Free State. His inquiries led him, literally, into Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the first international human rights campaign against the Belgian King's uncivilized mission of personal gain. (Morel 1904; Twain 1905; Hoschild 1998) Morel publicized the reports of American Protestant missionaries living in Congo, such as African-American William Sheppard and his colleague, Samuel Lapsley of Chicago's McCormick Theological Seminary. Within a decade, the "Red Rubber" campaign had tapped into a proliferating network of missionaries and their local churches, educational institutions and social service agencies, already engaged in reorganizing the moral codes, bodily practices, and institutional landscape of domestic urban life. (Peel 1995; Jacobs 1987) In the United States, this inter-racial, predominantly evangelical movement gained momentum through abolitionism and the challenges of reconstruction, to take on a bewildering array of social problems engendered by modernity, modernization, and modernism: urbanization, immigration, industrialization, and secularization, to name but a few. Robert Park's influential theories of these transformations took root during his pre-academic career as journalist and publicist for Booker T. Washington and the U.S. office of Morel's Congo Reform Association. However, he rejected the moralism of the reformers, asserting that conflict was the formative stage of a social process which would culminate in the disappearance of differences based on race and ethnicity. Through comparative empirical research, his understanding of race was inflected by both the sink-or-swim solidarity of ethnicity and the diverse strategies of "acclimation" which he encountered in the field. (Shils 1996) His "race relations cycle" became the dominant model of both immigrant "assimilation" and racial "integration" for the next half-century.

Not all of Park's peers were so sanguine about the inevitability of modernization. The dark shadow of the modern myth of progress, degeneration theory adopted a line of reason expounded perhaps most forcefully in 1854 by Arthur de Gobineau: "that all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it, provided that this group itself belongs to the most illustrious branch of our species." (De Gobineau 1999: 210) Racial theories central to the development of anthropology and the natural sciences diverged in response to Darwin's *Origin of Species*; even for many of those who accepted the shift to the historical *épisteme*, Darwin's emphasis on the randomness of selection could not deflect the commitment to a *telos*. (Pick 1989; Nye 1993; Menand 2001) As social pressures mounted,

interest in population science flourished both in Europe and the United States, where generous funding from the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations enabled University of Chicago geneticist Charles B. Davenport to establish the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, an institute dedicated to “the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding.” (Davenport 1911:1; Allen 1986) The Red Summer of 1919 appeared to validate this agenda, as dozens of riots between African Americans and immigrants roiled the crowded Northern cities. The most explosive violence occurred in Chicago, where dozens died, hundreds were injured (Sandburg 1969), and the sense of invasion dovetailed with the anti-Semitic fear of Bolshevism.

On the international front, success in the Spanish-American war whetted the country’s imperial appetite. Under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt, projects of military expansion without colonial commitments such as the Panama Canal and the annexation of the Philippines established strategic bases worldwide that would prove critical during the Second World War. (Kelly 2003; Mahan 1893) Along these lines, the University of Chicago’s first anthropologist, Frederick Starr, appears to have been motivated less by the anxieties of contamination than by national interest when he returned from a 1905 visit to Belgium and the Congo Free State, convinced that the Congo Reform Association was exaggerating its claims. Attesting to King Leopold’s quality of character, Starr urged the public in a series of articles for the Chicago Tribune to beware the imperial intentions of the British, clothed in the pious language of humanitarianism:

If we assist England in expanding her African possessions at the expense of the Congo Free State, Liberia will be the next fraction of Africa to succumb to English rule. England’s methods of procedure are various. It might be a useful lesson for our statesmen and politicians to study Liberia’s prospects with care. We are still young in the business of grabbing other people’s lands. England could teach us many lessons. The latest one may well be worthy of our attention, since, in a certain sense, it deals with a district where we naturally possess and interest. (Starr 1907)

It is central to my thesis that policy consequences of these diverse perspectives were complementary in many respects. The social sciences emerged in response to a complex of historical forces, with often contradictory presuppositions and explanatory imperatives. However, they were all catalyzed within the same crucible of industrial capitalism, and as such, articulated within a common political dynamic. From an American viewpoint, both the accommodation of difference and the cultivation of superior status were key to the accumulation

of international capital, literal and symbolic. Thus nativist and egalitarian discourse vied for discursive hegemony in a dialectic interplay through which both ultimately promoted the interests of the power elite, both at home and abroad. On the campaign trail in 1915, for example, Roosevelt warned the Italian Knights of Columbus that “those hyphenated Americans who terrorize American politicians by threats of the foreign vote are engaged in treason to the American Republic.” Woodrow Wilson, on the other hand, echoed his internationalist ambitions when he exhorted a group of naturalized citizens “not always to think first of America, but always, also, to think first of humanity.” Even as Park, Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas, and Cornell anatomist Burt Green Wilder effectively countered the methodologies and conclusions of their racialist contemporaries (Beardsley, 1973), eugenicist testimony held sway in the passage of restrictive immigration legislation in 1924 (Ngai 2004). Yet by 1935, advances in the field of genetics, Depression-area instabilities and alarming developments in Europe had prevailed, and mainstream foundations had reallocated their funding accordingly. In neither context, however, were the structural outcomes of the prior position revisited; indeed, the outposts of American influence and rigid segregation of Chicago neighborhoods were prerequisites for the internationalist and New Deal policies that followed.

### **Brave New Worlds**

The cumulative effects of these interrelated domestic and international processes became evident in the years following World War II, as the United States reaped the benefits of its military superiority, decades of capital investment and abundant surplus labor. The victor consolidated its postwar power with extraordinary speed, asserting uncompromising leadership over the design and management of international institutions that would ensure the fruits of dollar-diplomacy and decolonization for decades. (Ikenberry 2001; Schlesinger 2003) Equally important, however, was the \$13 billion funneled into the European economy through the Marshall Plan, an intervention with wide sweeping political, cultural and ideological effects. (De Grazia 2005, Ross 1995) Isolating the Soviet Union and engineering German “rehabilitation,” the installation of American-style consumer capitalism in the war-ravaged countries of Western Europe served as a decisive preemptive move in the Cold War. (Fehrenbach 2005) The second was to promote the end of the empires, in no uncertain terms, through the doctrine of self-

determination. This was a critical function of the United Nations, as President Truman made clear in his address before the inaugural conference. It would be the war to end all wars, a war of peace in which the Soviet Union was an anachronism, the sole invader. (Kelly 2002) In an epochal reworking of recent events, Truman explicitly assumed the mantle of destiny: “The world has learned again that nations, like individuals, must know the truth if they would be free – must read and hear the truth, learn and teach the truth...This occasion shows again the continuity of history.”

The implications of these developments were significant for Chicago and Congo, as the opportunities and challenges of world power generated contradictions that were increasingly difficult to reconcile or ignore. As the United States grew rich from European consumption, the children of immigrant workers enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, enhanced by government funding for college education and home ownership. African-Americans, on the other hand, were “red-lined” from properties in the new suburbs and in many cases excluded from competitive colleges and universities. (Adelman 2003) Returning from posts at which they had received far better treatment, black veterans represented a formidable challenge to a legal order in flagrant contradiction of the newly minted human rights regime. This was not lost on international observers, as evidenced by Gunnar Myrdal’s encyclopedic 1944 survey of U.S. race relations, *An American Dilemma*. The fact that this study by a Swedish economist was commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation – previous benefactor of the Cold Harbor Institute – indicates to what extent “the Negro Problem” had become an embarrassment to a national elite seeking moral authority as an international guardian of democracy.<sup>4</sup> (Bertleman 2001; Dudziak 2000) There is no question that the work of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was key to a fundamental shift in American cultural consciousness, generally speaking. Equally influential were the paradigmatic adjustments in the law produced by *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, which reaffirmed the centrality of federal authority created by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. (Kluger 1975) Yet, for all the moral, scientific, and legal credibility that civil rights leaders brought to the

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<sup>4</sup> “There is a certain ironic fittingness about the fact that these volumes, prepared with the streamlined thoroughness of a *Fortune* magazine survey, and offering the most detailed documentation of the American Negro’s humanity yet to appear, should come sponsored by a leading capitalist group. I say this grudgingly, for here the profit motive of the Right – clothed, it is true, in the guilt-dress of philanthropy – has proven more resourceful, imaginative and aware of its own best interests than the overcautious socialism of the Left.” Ralph Ellison (1995), “An American Dilemma: A Review,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, John F. Callahan, ed. New York: Modern Library.

task, they were unable to significantly alter the patterns of economic, residential, and educational segregation that had been put into place in the Northern cities during the years of the Great Migration. In fact, the focus of attention on legal reforms in the Southeastern United States effectively marginalized the systemic critiques of “militants” like Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Fred Hampton and even Martin Luther King, once he stepped onto the dangerous terrain of labor rights. Of the four, only Davis survived the decade.

While the murders of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King have never been definitively solved, that of Fred Hampton bears a striking resemblance to the assassination of another prominent black leader: Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Hampton was the charismatic head of the Black Panther Party’s Chicago Chapter, Lumumba the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Both enjoyed popular support as leaders who could speak truth to power, and both were brutally murdered while under surveillance by the U.S. government. In both cases, later investigations revealed substantial involvement at upper levels of the Eisenhower and Nixon Administrations. (Churchill 2001; De Witte 2001) Such extralegal measures were a routine component of a counter-insurgency program, initially developed in collaboration with NATO partners, which spanned the duration of the Cold War. (Westad 2007; Paret 1964) These covert operations were extremely effective at squelching leftist organizing at home and ensuring American influence over a significant proportion of the geopolitical map. In Congo, Lumumba’s former aide and military chief of staff, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, was ensconced as high chief of his kingdom, enjoying the support of every president until the election of Bill Clinton in 1993. Over the course of his 32-year dictatorship, Mobutu embezzled an estimated \$5 billion US dollars through government practices which political scientist Crawford Young coined the term “kleptocracy.” (Young 1985) Mobutu brutally intimidated opposition while in power, yet my Congolese informants regard their country’s economic ruins to be his most notorious legacy. Thus, in order to fully appreciate the impact of the cold war on the Congolese people, it must be considered in relation to the broader project of international development.

### **No Nation Left Behind**

In the context of the seemingly inexhaustible growth of the postwar boom, the newly elected leaders of the decolonized world demanded reparations from their former oppressors. In April 1955, delegations from 25 Asian and 4 African countries met in Bandung, Indonesia, to share grievances, generate solidarity, and strategize. The anticipated liberation of British, French, and Belgian Africa promised a significant voting block within the UN, if they could decide on collective priorities. Acclaimed writer Richard Wright covered the conference with high expectations, and found himself deeply moved by their shared “burden of race consciousness.” Yet he was discouraged by the impression that these leaders were ill-equipped to govern themselves; indeed, he worried that their affective identification would be their undoing, that a title wave of rage would engulf the rational problem-solving that would make “development” possible. The capability of the United Nations to “make a world new” was coming into doubt. In the words of Philippine spokesman Carlos P. Romulo, “this conference suggests that for the peoples of Asia and Africa the United Nations has inadequately met the need for establishing common ground for peoples seeking peaceful change and development. But I think that we must say also that if the United Nations has been weak and limited in its progress toward these goals, it is because the United Nations is still much more a mirror of the world than an effective instrument for changing it.” (Wright 1956: 150)

An African-American from Chicago, Wright had taken to living for extended periods of time in Paris, drawn by a black community of extraordinary diversity and political commitment. An outgrowth of the interwar *négritude* movement, African-American artists, performers, and intellectuals mixed with French socialists and exiled *evolués*, dabbled in Marxism and translated between American civil rights with African nationalism through a Pan-African argot which had ramifying effects on three continents. (Senghor 1970; Gilroy 1993; Julien 2000; Edwards 2003) The parallels between the depredations experienced by African Americans and colonial subjects became a key theme in U.S. civil rights discourse; African-American leaders were a diplomatic focus of the new nations. (Malcolm X 1964; DuBois 1965; Blauner 1973) Yet there was a persistent disconnect in terms of political orientation, which was just as likely to create misunderstandings. Notwithstanding African American overrepresentation among the ranks of the poor, they were fighting for full membership in the wealthiest society on earth. For Africa, the problem of legal exclusion had been (ostensibly) solved by independence. Now, they were struggling for survival.

On the academic front, postwar debates diverged sharply along fault lines dictated by funding prerogatives and disciplinary specialization. The division of labor in the social sciences effectively served both professionalization and policy interests, yet undermined interdisciplinary and international pollination, and contributed in the United States to an increasingly compartmentalized scholastic culture, highly regulated in its intercourse with the public sphere. (Pletcher 1981) Nevertheless, modernization theory provided a common frame through which social scientists could peg their respective contributions onto the world-historical map. This practice-oriented resurrection of social evolution merged Durkheim's organic solidarity and Weber's rationalization with varying degrees of Smithian "rational choice" into a systems-based theory of social change. The idea that global capitalism would inevitably all boats was the presupposition underlying most foreign policy debates in the United States, and for the most part still is. This paradigm found archetypal expression in economist Walt Whitman Rostow's 1960 *Stages of Economic Growth*, a recipe for national mobility vis a vis a schematic history of capitalism. Subtitled "A Non-Communist Manifesto," Rostow's book guaranteed that compound interest would yield prosperity, an argument that he had developed while working on the Marshall Plan. As a Special Assistant for National Security Affairs for presidents Kennedy and Johnson, Rostow was a key architect of the country's cold war policy and a virulent anti-Communist. There were more politically nuanced variations of the development theme. Social philosopher Karl Polanyi and Keynesian economist John Kenneth Galbraith, whose career closely paralleled Rostow's, emphasized the institutional determinants of economic life, while sociologist Talcott Parsons focused on behavioral and symbolic interaction. However, all of these influential theories had a functionalist thrust, associated less "developed" societies with the archaic West, and assumed a progressive, rational integration of norms and cultural practices at a global scale.

There was a problem with this classic approach, however. By the mid-1950s it became clear that the new nations were *not* replicating 19<sup>th</sup> century patterns of modernization. In fact, Stalin's planned economy had made extraordinary advances, while the "Third World" countries were having difficulty establishing profitable industries; in fact, even in Latin America, where import substitution strategies had been firmly in place for since before the war, informal sector activity was on the rise. (Worseley 1984) Labeling this phenomenon "marginality," economists sought to preserve the model by blaming mitigating circumstances, such as a technological

deficit, poor human development (i.e. public health and education), excessive population growth, even “metaphysical pathos.” (Goldner 1955) A group of Latin American social scientists, on the other hand, advanced an explanation stressing the structural dependencies through which “core” countries siphon away the resources needed for economic growth at the “periphery.” (Frank 1969; Wallerstein 1974) This reworking of Marx - and updating of Lenin’s theory of imperialism – provided a sophisticated counter-discourse for leftists seeking a “third way” within the polarized ideological climate of the cold war. Nevertheless, “World Systems Theory” – as this approach came to be known – operated at too high a level of generality and abstraction to appreciate the degree to which local dynamics affected critical institutions. While subscribing to the basic tenets of modernization theory, anthropologist Clifford Geertz brought attention to the cultural questions surrounding the term “nation,” often blindly used as a unit of analysis:

As with industrialization, urbanization, restratification, and the various other social and cultural “revolutions” these states seem fated to undergo, the containment of diverse primordial communities under a single sovereignty promises to tax the political capacity of their peoples to its utmost limits – in some cases, no doubt, beyond them. This “integrative revolution” has, of course, already begun, and a desperate search for ways and means to create a more perfect union is everywhere underway. (Geertz 1963)

Geertz’ anthropological intervention involved both retrospection and unanticipated foresight. His analysis of the identity struggles that were tearing apart “nations” as different in the details as India, Lebanon, and Nigeria, brought a much needed dose of empirical specificity into the global debate. In this regard, he invokes not only the “thick description” of cultural anthropology, but also Robert Park’s seminal analysis of U.S. immigration, which was still exerting considerable influence among the urban sociologists down the hall. Like Park, Geertz attributed ethnic conflict to a Durkheimian collective consciousness, which is more likely to form within local, religious or kinship-based groups than the impersonal state. But was “ethnicity” what was tearing these polities apart? The Congo would test his theory soon enough.

In 1971, a little more than a decade after Lumumba had been swept from power, Mobutu donned his Mao-style *abacost*, renamed himself and his country, and ordered his people to do the same. With his signature leopard-skin hat, the full-fledged Mobutu Sese Seko Nkuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga stood as the iconic father of *authenticité*, a national campaign of cultural consolidation intended to purge the newborn Zaire of its colonial residue. Penalties were levied

for Western clothes and Christian names, though religious institutions were otherwise spared. Mobutu had no interest in damaging his ties with the West; during the summer of 1970, he had received Belgium's King Baudouin and visited President Richard Nixon, who had welcomed him with full military honors during a luncheon on the South Lawn of the White House. In his remarks, Nixon congratulated his guest for a job well done, noting that: "The Congo is a good investment not only because of its natural wealth but because of a wealth even more important than its natural resources, a strong and vigorous and progressive people, and a stable leadership." (Nixon 1970) Before his own constituency, Mobutu performed this leadership as divine right according to the logic of authenticity:

*Authenticité* does not tolerate easily the simultaneous existence of multiple political parties. According to our philosophy, we are not a people of opposition. Our politics, which is to say our public life, is based on dialogue and collaboration, and not on the confrontation of contradictory forces. Every time Africans have failed this sacred law, they have run up against troubles without end and without name. This constant is illustrated by the family that must have only one cook, the village which never has more than one chief; because, for us Africans, two or three heads on a single body makes a monster. (Mobutu 1972: 201)

Such pronouncements took place during ritual occasions that Achille Mbembe has described as simulacra of intimacy, a dynamic reciprocity through which the State and society consume each other. (Mbembe 1992) Viewed from this perspective, Mobutu's reference to monstrosity was more than metaphor; the father of the nation was literally reminding his children to beware the pot from which they are fed. Following two generations of colonial repression, Mobutu's facility with torture and public execution could not have generated the political force necessary to contain more than 200 ethnic groups speaking 700 languages over a territory the size of Western Europe. His longevity as absolute monarch was made possible by his willingness to coopt his opposition, and an almost hallucinatory power over the Zairean imagination, both figuratively and literally. (Schatzberg 2001; Wrong 2001)

Meanwhile, Western states were resorting to enchantments bearing their own common-sense logic. If World War II had led its survivors through the fires of hell, their children were raised securely enough to question their own sources of comfort. (Brinkley 1998; Finkelkraut 1980) For a moment, or rather a year, a door seemed to open onto a "third way" between the rigid polarities of the postwar world. (Hobsbawm 1978) Yet the plenitude of oppositions that

converged in 1968 were each on their way elsewhere; in many cases, the substantial victories of the “’68 Generation” also marked its failure. In the wake of the civil rights movement, for example, a succession of legal measures institutionalized government recognition of the United States as a heterogeneous society. The 1964 *Civil Rights Act*, and in 1965 the *Voting Rights and Immigration and Nationality Acts* outlawed formal discrimination in most government agencies. Concurrently, Johnson’s “War on Poverty” assembled a range of entitlement programs to address domestic disparities of “human development.” The political implications of these institutional adjustments were significant: just as the Left was abandoning its hopes for Soviet socialism, the federal rejuvenation of social services undermined class critiques while grassroots activists discovered their identities. Scholars attuned to the word on the street summarily dismissed Park’s assimilation ideal in favor of multiculturalism, preparing the way for the next ethnic reconfiguration of urban America by immigrants from Asia and Latin America. (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Portes and Rumbaut 1990) The integration ideal hardly disappeared from public discourse; on the contrary, the term became synonymous with civil rights. Yet by the early 1970s, *that* term invoked nothing less, or more, than universal access to legal equality. In sharp contrast with the international imperative of economic integration, the domestic politics of difference mimicked an earlier standard of “separate but equal,” albeit from multiple perspectives on a flatter field of legal play.

### **Structural Adjustments**

World systems theorists generally identify 1973 as the year the bubble burst; political historians point to 1989, the year that the Soviet Union succumbed to the market. Some drew a straight line from one event to the other: the oil crisis impedes industrial production, which slows down capital circulation, leading investors to balk and producers to seek cheaper alternatives. Technological and managerial innovations restructure the means of production; high-speed transport and communications eliminate spatial constraints; astute, forward-thinking governments lift trade barriers and, voila! Globalization is born, a natural phenomenon with the momentum to sweep the failed communist experiment right off the map. From this vantage point, political economist Francis Fukayama could see forever (Fukayama 1993), and the foreign affairs correspondent for the New York Times could gloat that: “Countries basically get the

economic outcomes they deserve, and those outcomes are directly related to the quality of their operating systems and software and their degree of democracy.”<sup>5</sup> (Thomas Friedman 2000: 456)

But parallel stories have other endings. For millions of displaced workers in the United States and Europe, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century meant the disappearance of the industrial middle class and the inexorable decline in real wages and overall standard of living. (Harris 1984) For African Americans, whose lost manufacturing jobs were not so easily replaced in the service sector, lifetime unemployment and spatial segregation were becoming a norm. (Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1996) For new immigrants fleeing the Cold War’s deadly battlefields - and structural displacements of their own - the 1980s were about doing the dirty work and moving up. (Rajjman and Tienda 1999) And for most of the “Third World,” the flight of international capital and souring terms of trade put an abrupt end to the golden era of post-colonial development. While anti-communist heads of State could still depend on the political support of the United States, foreign direct investment (FDI) was gradually replaced by sporadic disaster relief and loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). (Hoogvelt 1997) To make matters worse, the primary commodities that supported most developing nations lost 40% of their exchange value between 1945 and 1985. Even the prices of their manufactured exports fell compared to those of rich countries. (Todaro and Smith 2003) Growers, who could no longer support themselves through cash cropping, joined the exodus of subsistence farmers to jobless, congested urban slums. Then the loans matured, with compound interest exceeding the gross domestic product of many countries, and the game was up.

These were days of vindication for Chicago economist Milton Friedman, who had long championed the virtues of perfect competition, unfettered by state interventions. In an early essay, he condemned value judgments in scientific thought (Friedman 1953), yet his faith in market justice implied an indifference to inequality that would have put Adam Smith to shame.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Compare this statement with a report published at almost exactly the same time: an analysis of U.S. government and World Bank figures on trade and investment found that American companies significantly favored doing business with authoritarian regimes. “Today, with more democracies to choose from, the democratic countries supply barely one-third – 34.9 percent – U.S. imports from the Third World.” Researchers listed lower labor costs, fewer regulations, political stability and greater efficiency as contributing factors. R.C. Longworth, “Democracies paying the price: Globalization survey reveals U.S. corporations prefer dictatorships,” *Chicago Tribune*, 11/19/1999

<sup>6</sup> “That wealth and greatness are often regarded with the respect and admiration which are due only to wisdom and virtue; and that the contempt, of which vice and folly are the only proper objects, is often

In the neoliberal code of “personal responsibility”, international development and domestic welfare programs were ethically suspect for having infantilized the poor by fostering dependency. Trapped in this intergenerational “cycle of poverty,” they were culturally isolated and in need of integration. (Mayer 2006; Leacock 1971) According to “the Washington Consensus,” this theory helped to explain why the post-colonies had failed to modernize, and why the Latin American countries had modernized without integration. Armed with this ideological reorientation, which included a distaste for wasteful “big government” and a fixation on “family values,” the IMF and World Bank attempted during the 1980s to resuscitate the development project by imposing “structural adjustments” on its debtor nations.

Whether this was “tough love” or a toxic dose of social Darwinism depends on your sources. Mike Davis writes in *Planet of Slums* that “the IMF – acting as bailiff for the big banks and backed by the Reagan and Bush administrations - offered poor countries the same poisoned chalice of devaluation, privatization, removal of import controls and food subsidies, enforced cost-recovery in health and education, and ruthless downsizing of the public sector.” (Davis 2006) In the domestic context, corporate downsizing and the outsourcing of jobs may have been motivated by narrowing profit margins, but was justified as a qualitative improvement, of “cutting the fat” and “streamlining operations.” (Newman 1988) Similarly, as Congress dismantled Johnson’s elaborate infrastructure of anti-poverty programs, both beneficiaries and bureaucrats were forced to make do. By July 2000, the Commerce Department reported a 6% growth rate, the peak of an unprecedented 113-month expansion, overtaking by 6 months the duration of the postwar boom. It looked like recovery, at least on paper. In the post-Cold War age of casino capitalism (Strange 1986), increasingly speculative in concept and practice, that was where it mattered most. Why? Because with the diversification of media outlets, the proliferation of specialized products and the segmented structure of information flow over the internet, each audience can find its news and the news can find its audience. Thus, the incompatibilities between related strands of discourse rarely interfere with their effects, especially when their object doesn’t even own a computer.

One exception, however, is the complex of rules and practices surrounding immigration.

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most unjustly bestowed upon poverty and weakness, has been the complaint of moralists of all ages.” Adam Smith (1976) *The theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

While alienage has been a formative component of many societies (Sahlins 1985; Barth 1969; Kuper 1969), the vital role of newcomers to the work of social reproduction has created special problems for modern nations, constructed according to an ideal of sovereignty. In his *Politics*, Aristotle recommended “laws for the expulsion of aliens,” who are assumed to represent a threat to the *polis*. But capitalism asserts exigencies of its own: a worker is a worker according to the laws of supply and demand, regardless of juridical status, and business has always benefited from surplus labor. This tension between ascription and inclusion is evident in Ernest Renan’s famous Sorbonne lecture of 1882, “What is a Nation?” and even more so in the fierce immigration debates that have been going on in the United States for over a century. What strikes the student of this history is its recursive quality, like rituals of purification which must take place with every cycle of bust and boom. Indeed, the hand-wringing that accompanied the social dislocations of 1980’s and 90’s – with an acceleration and geographical diffusion of immigration, the exodus of women into the workforce, and a radical restructuring of the economy – bore an uncanny resemblance to the circumstances giving rise to a nationality-based quota system in 1924.

Considering the roots of both immigration and slavery in the bedrock of American politics, It is hardly surprising that successive waves of immigration should activate the inherent contradictions of liberal capitalism in racial terms. Though the interplay and overlap between race, ethnicity, and class marginalization have varied by context, it would be fair to say that, in keeping with the myth of meritocracy, minority groups have been ranked in relation to a black “underclass,” regardless of income. Race has been a fundamental category of identification in the United States, the indelible mark that carries the ink of essence. But this does not mean that its boundaries are stable or free of contestation. History has shown us how the racial “knowledge” and the law have constituted each other dialectically, via the protection of slave ownership (Cover ?), the stratification of work, and the restriction of immigration. The racial polarization of labor politics, itself both product and pattern of these processes, ensured the supremacy of race over class and cursed its own capacity to mediate the powers of capital. (Dubois 1935; Roediger 1991) The unions’ metaphysical association of race with degradation led them to stigmatize the workers over the work, further legitimizing the institutionalization of racial science within emerging technologies of population management. (Weil 2003) With an inexorability worthy of both Weber and Foucault, a random exercise in classification at Ellis Island became a naturalized

standard for exclusion through the rationalization of the law. The result? Three generations later, the unions were dead, having colluded in the production of their own worst nightmare: the perpetuation of wage labor as a form of slavery, a seamy shadow of that peculiar institution in its uniquely American form. “Immigration restriction produced the illegal alien as a new legal and political subject, whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility – a subject barred from citizenship and without rights.” (Ngai 2004;Bowe 2007)

This bastard result of the rule of law has haunted every effort at immigration reform into abject failure. As with most modern projects of social engineering, democratic intents and purposes are utterly at odds with the systemic contradictions being addressed. Thus, the 1986 “amnesty,” which coupled the regularization of 2.3 million undocumented immigrants with employer sanctions, intended to punish illegal work rather than workers, was followed up with vigorous policing of the former and virtually no enforcement of the latter. The results could have been predicted; faced with dislocations of their government’s new development strategy, hundreds of thousands took the plunge by crossing the border. (Durand 1999) A decade later, President Clinton outdid his Republican rivals in the ethics of neoliberal humanitarianism by signing a pair of the most punitive laws to date, which applied criminal sanctions to “illegal aliens”, tightened naturalization requirements and withdrew noncitizen eligibility for what remained of the social safety net. In addition to a five-fold increase in funding for the border patrol, the “Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act” effectively discontinued seasonal migration patterns by making it impossible for those without permits to leave. Ironically, this enforcement-heavy approach was diametrically opposed to the deregulation taking place everywhere else in government. Few specialists of any persuasion were pleased with this aberration. (Zolberg 2003) As long as the economy was growing, they were quick to point out, employer appetite for cheap labor would be insatiable; as the service economy flooded with immigrants, even the unions decided that it was pointless to impede the flow.

Refugee and asylum policies in the U.S. - and for that matter the U.N. – have been equally nonsensical. The domestic climate of resistance to immigration continued for decades, and the Johnson Reed Act of 1924 kept admissions to a trickle of more “desirable” individuals, even as efforts were underway to repatriate European refugees after World War II. The politics surrounding the formation of the international Human Rights regime were just as tricky; as Cold

War antagonists took their positions, the question of refugee status depended largely on what side of the fence you were on. (Loescher 1993) Thus, the principle of *nonrefoulement*, enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention as a universal standard, was immediately subject to the vagaries of political specificity.<sup>7</sup> In the U.S., this meant the scales of justice were tipped by the cold war in favor of those fleeing communist repression, while right-wing terror went unpunished and its victims found ineligible for relief. The 1980 Refugee Act addressed the more egregious inconsistencies by adopting the U.N. definition of “refugee,” and establishing standard criteria for the adjudication of asylum claims. Nevertheless, the prevarication among traditional receiving countries following the fall of the Soviet Union has brought the nature of the commitment into question. Temporary suspensions of deportation and indefinite “holding zones” have become the norm. Observers worry that “the denial of asylum applications sends a message to the general public that the claims made by the new arrivals are not warranted; that these people do not have a well founded fear of persecution, they just want to improve their lives.” (Mertus 1998) Yet even this statement of sympathy accepts without question the distinction between “economic migrant” and “political refugee.” Despite copious evidence of deprivation being used as subjugation, the segregation of economic and political domains, so central to the liberal tradition, remains critical to the adjudication of meritorious claims. In fact, as refugee admissions to the West from the world’s poorest countries contract worldwide, these categories appear mutually exclusive.<sup>8</sup>

### **Neoliberal Nightmares and the Right to Survive**

According to the latest United Nations Human Development Index, only two countries in the world are harder to live in than the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>9</sup> This would have

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<sup>7</sup> Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (28 July 1951), Article 33: “No Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”

<sup>8</sup> Statistical Online Population Database (2007), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), [www.unhcr.org/statistics/populationdatabase](http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/populationdatabase)

<sup>9</sup> “The HDI is a summary composite index that measures a country’s average achievements in three basic aspects of human development: health, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. Health is measured by life expectancy at birth; knowledge is measured by a combination of the adult literacy rate and the combined primary, secondary, and tertiary gross enrollment ratio; and standard of living by GDP per capita.” The Democratic Republic of Congo ranks 177 out of a total 179 countries, followed by the

surprised Ronald Reagan, François Mitterand, or any of the other heads of state with whom he had particularly amicable relations. As late as 1990, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Irvin Hicks, told Congress that “we need him’ because he ‘continues to play an important role mediating regional conflicts.’ (Dunn 2001: 256) At the time, inflation was averaging 200% a month, the country’s GDP had dropped well below zero, and the debt was more than double Zaire’s annual export income. In other words, “by 1985, Mobutu and his ruling coalition had already sold Congo to its foreign creditors.” (Emizet 1998) This catastrophic state of affairs was no secret to those who kept track of such things. In a survey published the same year, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Bruce Bartlett remarked: “Corruption is so widespread that postal workers have been known to refuse to deliver one’s mail without receiving a bribe.” But Western leaders had high hopes for Congo-Zaire a fact that Mobutu made use of with consummate skill. His carefully cultivated image as the anti-communist warrior who could tame his unruly compatriots rendered him practically immune to political criticism until another magician appeared in 1996 to take his place. Bartlett said as much in his wry closing statement: “Mobutu remains popular and he retains strong support from the United States for his strongly pro-Western foreign policy.” (Bartlett 1990: 341)

However, it would be facile to assume Mobutu’s popularity, or his political bankruptcy. Bankrupt the State he did, but there is much more to African politics than meets the creditor’s eye. If Mobutu indulged in conspicuous consumption, it was to generate the power needed to conquer his enemies. If he channeled the wealth of the nation into the pockets of his kinsmen, such was the obligation of his office. If he refused to recognize opposing parties, it was because all institutional power derives from God, as mediated “the Leopard King,” and of course, the ancestors. As the Congolese are fond of saying, “power is eaten whole.” Michael Schatzberg has documented how these presuppositions are expressed, performed, and reproduced throughout the sub-Continent (Schatzberg, 2001); however, what is most significant to our story is the way in which Mobutu lived in two political worlds both coextensive and incommensurate.

The State in Africa rests upon autochthonous foundations and a process of reappropriation of institutions of colonial origin which give it its own historicity; it can no longer be taken as a purely exogenous structure. This affirmation is, however,

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Central African Republic and Sierra Leone. 24 of the 25 countries classified as having “Low Human Development” are in sub-Saharan Africa. Human Development Index (HDI), Statistical Online Database (2008), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), [www.hdr.undp.org/en/stastics/](http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/stastics/)

immediately complicated by a second conclusion: the social foundations of any State are socially, geographically and culturally heterogeneous. The most spectacular manifestation of this characteristic is the extreme complexity of political identifications from one context to another south of the Sahara. Coexisting within the heart of any given power are several time-spaces, whose adjustment is problematic and always precarious. Consequently the State in Africa is not an “integral state” but a State of “variable polarization”... (Bayart 1993)

I quote this conclusion of Bayart’s not to absolve Mobutu of his crimes, but to shed light on both his shameless behavior and his constituency’s notorious passivity. For Mobutu’s *Zairis*, the end of the development dream came gradually, as all the King’s promises remained unfulfilled. But they were, perhaps, always skeptical, and they knew how to *debrouiller*.<sup>10</sup> Central Africa was cross-hatched with manifold systems of production and trade, both established and improvised, long before the Europeans arrived. (Guyer 2004; Austen 1987; Vansina 1962) Thus, when Mobutu “nationalized” the private sector and it promptly collapsed, taking all the jobs with it, people kept working, transporting goods on the river, repairing electronics, servicing the soldiers and civil servants who still received pay. When he required farmers to sell cash crops to state marketing boards at fixed prices, the black market flourished. When he attempted to “commercialize” the sale of gold and diamonds, they were smuggled into Congo-Brazzaville, Burundi and Zambia. When he “demonetized” the *zaire*, dollars became the currency of choice. (McGaffey 1991) The informal economy evaded every attempt at control, with a collective dexterity that some scholars consider a form of political resistance. (Emizet 1998; White 2004) It was only in the early 1990s, when conditions deteriorated to a point at which the food supply faltered – largely due to the deterioration of the roads and the destruction of the railroad – that Kinshasa took to the streets. (Bilakila 2004; Villers and Tshonda 2004) June Nash made a similar observation in 1994, following fieldwork with three very different communities that had recently been “structurally adjusted.” She admitted having to adjust her Marxist framework to accommodate her unexpected conclusion, that “it is not only when exploitation in the workplace is most severe but rather when subsistence strategies are threatened that people move into protest actions.” (Nash 1994: 24)

Chicago and the newly re-named Congo diverged radically during the 1990s, yet in doing so have come full circle. Chicago both spread out and moved up, taking its place as the

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<sup>10</sup> *Débrouiller*: vt. 1. to untangle. 2. to unravel, to solve. *Se débrouiller*: to manage. Larousse Dictionnaire. Paris: Larousse, 2005.

country's third global city. (Abu-Lughod 1999) This scenario resembles that of a century ago in more ways than one. A world's worth of new immigrants have moved into subcontracted service jobs, working their way into the suburbs just as professionals decided they were tired of commuting. The construction industry accommodated this shift in social geography, and city government complied by rezoning the Loop and training more cab drivers, most of them from South Asia and Africa. This is where white Chicagoans are most likely to meet someone from the Congo. The census shows Africans to be the fastest growing category of foreign-born residents in the United States, with a 63% increase in Illinois between 2000 and 2006.<sup>11</sup>

According to Ali Kabba of the state's African Unity Organization (AUO), "the largest number of African immigrants hail from Nigeria, with many others from Ethiopia and Ghana; [we expect] growing numbers of refugees from conflict zones like Somalia and the Congo and more immigrants from Francophone Africa, as hostility to immigrants increases in France."<sup>12</sup> This statement isn't technically accurate: the current demographics actually reflect a surge in family and employment based immigration.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the term "refugee" invokes media images of war in Kivu and riots in Paris, bringing the Congolese to attention as protagonists in a tri-continental drama, and incorporating them into the national narrative. This act of recognition is a form of adjudication, a prequalification for coalition membership by virtue of origin and hardship. It's also an invitation to the dance for newcomers and the arrivals yet-to-come, an expectation loaded with history, race, and agenda. Whether or not they will take it is anyone's guess.

Kabba's story intertwines with many others that might be extracted from the tangled web of the neoliberal moment. Some have already receded from the discursive spotlight, like the postmodern question, the labor-based society and the disappearing state. Or have they? Perhaps these interpretations are still alive and well, counter-discourses that have been restyled for reuse whenever the time is right. For example, postmodernism may be dead, but the space-time compression, fragmented representations, and the nagging sense of indeterminacy remains a key feature of "late modernity." As for the obsolescence of class, Marxist Anthropologist Terence Turner has referred to the immigration debate as the class politics of the international division of

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<sup>11</sup> US Census Bureau (2006), Current Population Survey, <http://www.census.gov/cps/>

<sup>12</sup> "African Immigrants Plan Chicago Summit," Newstips, Community Media Workshop, May 21, 2007

<sup>13</sup> US Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics (2008), Data on Legal Permanent Residents, <http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/>

labor. (CITATION) And if the events of September 11, 2001 brought back the security state with a vengeance, giving concrete form to our diffuse millennial anxieties, the state is decidedly absent in Congo, and its future is chaos.

Some historians learned, during their uneasy encounter with deconstruction, that while no single narrative is complete and no combination is comprehensive, a qualified piecing together of the evidence may challenge assumptions about the nature, context, and causality of events. History and culture are always flashing their indeterminacies, but that doesn't mean they're obscene. A provisional knowledge of Congolese immigration in time and space is still knowledge that engenders more knowledge. Hence, it is not my goal to minimize the reality, unitary or plural, that my informants bring with them, or to reconcile its inconsistencies with my own. But by attempting to keep their disjuncture in view, I hope to learn something about living in two (or more) worlds at once. This methodological point, a technique, let's say, of living with one's eyes crossed, serves as my angle of entry into conversations about race and personhood, global capitalism and history, political action and the law. While historiography shows how memories, both collective and personal, are reconfigured as evidence with each articulation, classic anthropological literature demonstrates how rules generate meaning and consensus within the social order. (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992) Understood in broad terms, contemporary subjects and citizens undergo a complex and often contradictory array of normative judgments, made by legal, government and religious institutions; employers, educators and doctors; landlords, neighbors and friends. For any of us, but particularly for people who move, these determinations of value may differ radically by context. Thus, an individual's capacity to "integrate" into her surroundings is a relational problem stubbornly located in the immediate here and now, yet continually influenced by histories and happenings throughout space and time. This adjustment process implies neither the coherence nor the homogenization assumed by multicultural and assimilation models of integration, and pivotal to current policy discourse. On the contrary, it is far more elastic and dialogic way of understanding collective action.

In the March 2009 edition of *Foreign Policy*, political scientists Jeffrey Herbst and Greg Mills explain, in no uncertain terms, "Why the only way to help Congo is to stop pretending it exists." (Herbst and Mills 2009) I'm sure that the authors ran their argument by a few Congolese friends before going to print, yet mine have all laughed at the sight of that headline. Chicago is a long way from the Congo, I've been told, but it is at least as real to them as I am. They don't

disagree that “Congo has become a collection of peoples, groups, interests, and pillagers who coexist at best.” But a place you’ve called home is something you carry in your body; whatever your associations, it’s a living memory that exists alongside everything you do and experience now. For the Congolese I know, Mobutu may have been a liar and a thief, but he shaped their world in a way that cannot be forgotten. If the adversities of their unraveling economy stirred a bitter nostalgia for colonial prosperity, the grandeur of the Leopard King was a different kind of wealth full of excitement and fear, Bayart’s “politics of the belly.” He may have enchanted them by dumping medicine in the river (Schatzberg 133), and he certainly gave their country a bad name. But his betrayal was not duplicity. It was cannibalism, an unwillingness to share his food (Hunt 1999), a sense of “personal interest” too narrowly defined. He created an oligarchy indifferent to the welfare of other *Zarois* who should have been kin. In a history of perpetual irony and disconnects, the virtual reality of *authenticité* may trump them all. At the close of his memoir, *Kinship: A Family’s Journey in Africa and America*, journalist Phillippe Wamba de Wamba describes his reaction to the news that his Congolese father, Ernest Wamba de Wamba, a history professor in exile at the University of Dar en Salaam, had returned to his country to lead an opposition movement against Laurent Kabila. Raised in the United States and Tanzania, the son had paid a single, brief visit to his patrilineal village a few years before. He has an uncertain relationship with Congo, a place imagined and felt through the memories of others. Yet his language, full of a young man’s immodest pride of his father, suggests a wistful fantasy of homecoming in an unmistakably American idiom of political possibility:

Perhaps this war will do what no other war in the Congo’s history has: silence the guns once and for all by returning power to the Congolese people, allowing them to take control of their own destiny. If the much-touted “African renaissance” is to become a reality, if the twenty-first century is to be the moment of Africa’s triumph, perhaps it begins here. (Wamba 1999)

The irrationality of such a statement is a matter of perspective, and testament to the shifting parameters of identity. It invokes DuBois’ “double consciousness” and the faltering essays of ESL students. Its unabashed hope, a refusal of purity and unwillingness to choose, is a powerful politics.