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“Your Mouth is Your Lorry!”

How honk horns voice the acoustic materiality of reputation in Accra¹

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Materializing Conversation

This is about the multiply intertwined materialities of Por Por, a horn honking music from Accra, Ghana. It is about a world of old trucks, their drivers, mates, and passengers. It is about their now-antique klaxon horns, how those horns became musical instruments, and how those instruments perform memorial music for driver funerals. Along with the music, other funerary arts, particularly coffin-carving is involved, and along with the trucks and klaxons, diverse other objects, including cloth, documents, uniforms, insignias, paintings, signs, photographs, and souvenirs, are also in play. All of this takes place in a distinctive local sound environment, one especially charged by voice, by stories, and by the performance of names in a spiritual habitus of deep listening. The historical-intercultural timespace now approaches seventy years, and while sited in Accra, Ghana, and even more specifically in one of its townships, La, the presence of Europe and the United States are never far away.

To open a door into this world of acoustemology in contemporary Accra I'll replay a conversation I had with Annette Weiner in 1990. It was a conversation about how so many of us working in Papua New Guinea then were endlessly caught up in thinking through reciprocity and obligation, often enough coming back to mortuary rituals, to the public emotional business of dealing with death, not to mention dealing with tensions between enmity and sociality. We talked about the many ways objects and currency stand in as, and for, persons in funerary exchange. We talked about how New Guinea person-ness and thing-ness are endlessly entangled.

I told Annette that the absence of material object-based exchanges at Bosavi funerals led me to think about how words, texts, voices, and sounds constitute a similar network of circulation. I told her that while western epistemology, and anthropology's received divisions strongly insisted on the difference between the material and intangible, I was more and more convinced that there was little difference between them in the production of memory in Papua New Guinea.

Annette took issue with that, gently but firmly insisting that there were real problems amalgamating the exchange circulation of names, words and songs with cloth, bundles, baskets, carvings, food, and so forth. She suggested that it was important to distinguish material from ephemeral, especially as regards circulatory consequence, despite our agreement that at the end of the day it was all about reputation, and how to look after it.

Now, fast forward to another conversation, one Annette had with close colleagues Fred Myers and Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, reproduced in the chapter that closes The Empire of Things, Fred's edited collection of essays dedicated to Annette (Myers 2002). In that conversation Annette commented on the distinctions between perishable and permanent objects, their durability and temporality, indeed, their material renewability.

"I came up with an idea that actually I got from a Nobel prizewinner at the turn of the century. He talked about things that have a permanence having energy, and they continue to have this energy. That's what allows them to circulate and become other things. Something that is iron can be smelted down, it can have another life, these things continue [emphasis added]" (Myers and Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 2002: 277).

Is sound any different than iron? It has precisely this kind of energy, and words, songs, stories, ambiances surely have endless generativity to transform, truncate, elaborate, expand, contract, morph toward more vague or more precise, flow toward secondary, tertiary and further multiple lives, and to create echoic reproductions that circulate in multiple ways. Can voices and sounds be smelted down like iron? I still think the answer is yes.

Horns Voice Reputation

Por por (phonetically pɔɔ pɔɔ) is the name of the squeeze-bulb klaxon horn introduced to Ghana and its colonial Bedford, Austin, and Morris lorries in the late 1930s by East Asian traders. These horns were attached to wooden lorries central to carrying passengers, trucking goods, and opening up the timber and market roads in Ghana in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. These vehicles were locally called *tsolorley*, “wooden lorry,” and with public transport of passengers came to be known as *trotro* – *tro* from ‘three pence’, the original cost of an inner city ride.

In the township of La, one of the seven Accra residential areas of Ga-speaking people, the city’s original inhabitants, something very unique happened. The La drivers took these *por por* horns off of their *tsolorley* and with them developed a honking, squeeze-bulb horn music with the addition of tire rims, bells, drums, songs, and dances. Their drivers union Por Por group developed until formalized in the late 1960s and is now active performing at driver funerals for the memory of departed union colleagues.

Because the *por por* players are unionized drivers and not professional musicians, and because the music was only performed at worker funerals, no recordings or documentation appeared. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of Ghana’s March 6, 1957 independence, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings released the CD Por Por: Honk Horn Music of Ghana (La Drivers Union 2007). I produced that project from 2005-2007 together with Accra photographer Nii Yemo Nunu, son of legendary La driver Ataa Anangbi Anangfio.

That CD reveals how *por por* horn music honks a multi-layered story of regional history, colonialism, the diaspora, and globalization. In the context of Ghanaian indigenous music history, Por Por obviously derives from *mmenson*, the multi-part animal horn ensemble music of Akan origin. Later there is also a clear articulation with brass band music, indigenized from colonial origins to become central to the sound of highlife and combo jazz.

Radio in 1940s and 1950s Ghana brought well-remembered big-band jazz recordings, such as those of Count Basie, to listeners in Accra. The sound and choreography of big-band saxophone sections seen in popular film shorts also had a role

in shaping the Por Por performance style. As the music became ritually specialized, only played by La drivers and exclusively at funerals for transport industry workers, another Black Atlantic connection was revealed, to the “rejoice when you die” musical traditions of the New Orleans jazz funeral, the driver’s road to heaven paved by road songs and the sounds of car horns (Sakakeeny 2013).

Specific local markers of global musical contacts also entered the mix. A Ghanaian television show of the 1960s, *Show Biz*, used as its theme music a lively arrangement of Broadway “belter” Ethel Merman’s rendition of the Irving Berlin song “There’s No Business Like Show Business.” One of the catchy saxophone section phrases in the arrangement, itself reminiscent of the background vamp to Dizzy Gillespie’s “A Night in Tunisia,” was picked up as a por por horn riff. The result was a distinctive sound signature relating the honking of Por Por music to the modernity of both African-American bebop jazz and Ghana’s television service in the years immediately after independence.

I entered into this story in May 2005. As my taxi pulled up towards the Drivers Union office in La, it was overtaken by the honking and singing of the Por Por band, surrounding, greeting and escorting me down the final stretch of road to their office. We did the first round of brief greetings outdoors, with honked fanfares in between introductions and poured libations. As the music ended, I was told: “Prof, you are welcome. The good Lord has blessed us with your presence, Prof, and we pray that you will be happy and come back to hear us blow.” Those first words were spoken to me by the man everyone calls “Vice,” Por Por group leader and union Vice-Chairman Nii Ashai Ollenu. To Vice’s left stood Adjei, the group’s lead instrumentalist. “Prof,” Vice continued, “this is Adjei, our number one blowing por por man.” As our handshake slid toward finger snap Adjei smiled and said, “Prof, you are welcome. You can call me PARKer, (extended pause), Charlie PARKer.”

I was still green, verbally that is. It wasn’t until later that I learned why the delay in Adjei’s delivery had such playful value-added. In Ghanaian English everyone male is Charlie. Charlie is man, guy, dude, bud. The ubiquitous flip-flop footwear is called ‘Charlie *wote*,’ “Charlie, let’s go!” But the name Charlie for generic man comes from someone famous for rather different footwear, Charlie Chaplin, everyman.

Later I learned that it was Adjei, Parker, Charlie PARrker, who was hip to the Dizzy Gillespie vamp on the head of “A Night in Tunisia.” He was the one who introduced bebop phrasings and syncopations to Por Por, re-grooving the metrics of Ghanaian dance rhythms.

In the 1960s, the government declared wooden vehicles too vulnerable for inner-city transport in case of traffic accidents. So the mammy wagons have become restricted to long-distance transport, and today they are a relatively rare sight in Accra, replaced by metal minibuses still generically called trotro. But in La one still sees *tsolorley* all the time.

La township holds an important place in all of this history, and it is no accident that it is the birthplace of Por Por music. Because the Burma Camp Barracks, a sizeable colonial station, was located on land owned by the people of La, a great number of transport vehicles were in the vicinity during the long colonial period. Men from La sought employment at the Barracks, taking up driving as a profession or becoming specialized machinists or car mechanics. Ataa Awuley, the first local man to hold an Accra driver’s license, was from La, and legendary 1920s Gold Coast governor and commander-in-chief Sir Frederick Gordon Guggisberg had a personal driver from La, Dzatei Abbey. In pride, the community renamed him Dzatei Guggie.

The practice connecting names, stories, vehicles, and material reputations has developed considerably since then. At the January 2008 funeral for Humphery Ablorh Annang, known as “Humphery Bogerd,” the Por Por Group was called on to send up the body with a session of spirited honks. Just outside the funeral chamber stood a coffin modeled on a classic wooden-body Bedford *tsolorley*. Prepared by one of the local workshops, it waited ready to receive the body for its final journey on the succession of literal and spiritual roads to follow. The coffin was signed “Humphery” on its mantle, following the practice of inscribing a vehicle with personal names, distinctive phrases, or proverbs associated with a driver, his personality, his road stories. Like the vehicle, the name is memorial testimony to reputation. Indeed, the material history of the vehicle and its driver’s work is completely merged with the circulatory history of that driver and vehicle’s name, and its repeated verbal citation.

While I abstractly understood the Ghana parallel to the Papua New Guinea sentiment here, that photos, licenses, and documents, like a worker's coffin, will stand in for a driver's memory, his reputation of "name," the material significance of work to memory and memory to work was brought home to me more directly one afternoon as I traveled with the La Por Por Group.

"Prof, do you want us to bury you in a camera or microphone?"

"Uh . . . I don't know, Amarah [dumbfounded pause] . . . I mean, I've never thought about it."

"You see, it's your work, like driving is our work," he offered quickly. "So your coffin will tell the story of your work, that's why you can have a camera or a microphone."

When Nii Amarah Amartey said those words to me I was wearing a stereo microphone on my head and had a video camera in my hands. I was seated next to him in a minibus filled with Por Por band members and we were returning from the funeral of a prominent driver who was buried in a carved wooden replica of his vehicle.

Later that week we made a video with Nii Yemo Nunu, my collaborator, presenting and discussing his collection of independence-era photographs and the uniform his father, driver of 'M.V.Labadi,' wore on Ghana's independence day.

Afterward, as we packed up, he asked me:

"Prof, have you kept something like that?"

"You mean an important family object?"

"Yes, something like that."

"Clothing no, but I have my grandfather's clock, a big one, taller than me. When I was a little boy I loved the sounds and my fascination delighted my grandfather, so he left the clock to me. It stayed in our family house for thirty years after he died, and then it came to live with me. So it has been in the family a long time."

"You see, we all have one custom," he reflected. "Maybe you don't pour libation like we do, but you are including the ancestors in how you live, just as they include you. So when you hear the clock you know your grandfather is around somewhere just as he knows you are aware of him. That is like me having my father's uniforms in the wardrobe. You see, we all have one custom."

The look on my face likely signaled that I wasn't entirely convinced about this, so Nii Yemo continued, developing the thought. "We are keeping the names of the ancestors with us when we keep their things. That is why we inscribe the vehicles. The inscription gives you reputation, because your name then follows to your son, daughter, wife. Even your driving mate can be called by the name of the vehicle. Me, all the time in the streets in La people will call out, 'Hey, M.V. Labadi, where are you going? Hey, M.V. Labadi, how is it?' So the reputation of my father's work is always with me. You don't know how far name goes! Now I walk around town and people call me 'M.V. Labadi' though my father has died more than thirty-five years ago... This is why the inscription will always be remembered. It's the driver's name."

On their front and rear mantles and tailgates, vehicles have always displayed distinctive phrases or proverbs associated with the names, personalities and road stories of their drivers and owners. On the CD recording of the song honoring 'M.V. Labadi', the Por Por band asked Nii Yemo to rap the names of many of the classic vehicles from his father's era in the 1950s. These included "They Talk What They Don't Know," "It Pays Your Way," "Sweet Mother," "Slow but Sure," "Fear Not," "Safety First," "No Sympathy," "All Shall Pass," "Never Say Die," "God's Time Is the Best." "No Condition Is Permanent," "Champion," "Don't Try," "No Fear," "Goods Only," "Your Time Go Come." "Rebel Without a Cause," "Quo Vadis."

Following up on Nii Yemo's suggestion that I learn the vehicle names associated with the band members, I asked the leader, "Vice, did you write something on your vehicle?"

"Yes, Prof, I wrote 'May be.'

"Why did you write 'May be'?"

"Prof, you see, when you are driving people ask you *sooo* many things and all you can say is "may be." When they ask you if something is true or another thing will happen, you can't really say. Either it can happen or not, it can be true or not. So that's why I called my vehicle 'May be.' "

In January 2006, Nii Yemo Nunu and I commissioned Accra sign-painter Nicholas Wayo to do a cover painting for the Smithsonian Folkways Por Por CD. We asked Nicholas to paint a classic independence-era Bedford *tro tro* bearing the La

Drivers' union logo: hands on a steering wheel topped by a crowing cock to symbolize industriousness, surrounded by por por horn and double bell. We asked him to site the vehicle heading down the La road along the cloudy Accra seacoast, an image from a song. Nico suggested "Sea Never Dry" as a mantle inscription. The phrase was signed on several 1950s vehicles and comes from famous song by highlife king E.T. Mensah, whose portrait also hangs at the union office.

Returning in January 2008, two years after that commission, I brought the union its first royalty check from Smithsonian Folkways. To accompany its presentation I asked Nicholas Wayo to repeat the same painting for the union office, topping it, in Ga, with "Congratulations and praises to you all." On his own Nicholas decided to change the mantle inscription from "Sea Never Dry" to "Dromo" – Blessings. As he and his assistant held the painting for a snap, I asked: "Why did you change the *tro tro* name?"

"Prof, their ship has come in."

Many earlier and most contemporary *tro tro* and taxis bear some kind of Christian or Muslim religious slogan like "Blessings" on their rear windows, either in English, Ga, Ewe, or Twi: "By His Grace," "The Lord Is My Shepherd," "Jesus Saves," "Hallelujah," "Blood of the Lamb," "Merciful God," "Pentecost Fire," "The Prophet," "In the Name of Allah," "Young Hajj." I encountered them often.

One day I was reviewing tapes with Union Chairman Quarshie Gene. "Chief, did you inscribe your lorry back in the days when you were a working driver?"

"Oh yes, Prof, of course. In fact, I called it "Hallowed be Thy Name."

"Why?"

"*Ona*, you see, Prof, because I love The Lord's Prayer. And there was already a *tro tro* signed 'Our Father.' And another signed 'Who Art in Heaven.' So I came behind with 'Hallowed be Thy Name.' And you know 'Thy Kingdom Come,' he is parking behind the petrol station. We also had 'Thy Will be Done.' 'On Earth as it is in Heaven' still carts goods in from Bawjiase, you can see him at the yard Tuesday afternoons."

"Yes," I say, "just last week I was in a taxi signed 'Our Daily Bread'."

But I stopped short of telling him that there was once a famous linguistic philosopher named Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) who drove a *tro tro* named "Polyphony." On its rear tailgate was signed his motto: "the word in language is half someone else's."

So to take stock: the horn enters the arena as a commodity, purchased and used on vehicles as a practical signalling device, sounding out warnings, announcements, and requests, marking the everyday life passage of the vehicle, becoming its voice on the road. As such it resides acoustically in a figure and ground relationship to the road, to the running engine, and all the other squeaks and hums, the voices and radios, the larger acoustic environment of the vehicle, those who move in, briefly inhabit, and move out of it, and all the sounds that surround it in its pickups, drops, its movements on the road. But more, the horn, like the mantle sayings, becomes part of the vehicle's material presentation and history, thus its reputation, its personality, its distinctiveness. This distinctiveness is directly tied to the character, the personality of its owner and driver, whose own expressive tendencies, vocal repertoire, ethical manner of working, and interaction with the world of the road is performed through horn honking.

As announcer of passage and presence, the driver attempts to conduct the orchestra called traffic in the symphony hall called the highway. His *por por* horn becomes his voice, and that voice, like his mantle signage, is his "name."

Off the vehicle, recontextualized as musical instrument, the *por por* horn embodies and rematerializes all the sensory dimensions of its prior life. When it becomes a musical instrument, it is fitted with a new bulb, a larger and more flexible one, capable of faster squeezing, of more voice. The new bulb pushes more air through the tubing, makes the new body and voice bigger. "All the way from the *bee-hind* to the mouth, Prof," Vice explains. He is referring to the fact that the *por por* becomes a musical instrument through the grace of the local medical supply shop, where the union buys the Czech made size ten enema bulbs that make the horns blow fast and loud.

All of that sonic materiality is sounded in vocal iconicity. *Pɔɔ pɔɔ*, the reduplicated name, is packed thick with vocal physics: a pulmonic egressive voiceless bilabial plosive tailing off to double length nasalized vowels. Roman Jakobson, who urged that the whole of language is a sea of potentially consummable iconicities, only a very few of which are ever consummated, delighted in such splish-splash morphophone pileups (1980). The high priest of both linguistic iconicity and poetic parallelism reportedly liked to quip, in his own inimitable English: "some words just TAKE the CAke."²

The Empire of Names and Stories

“This is my teacher,” said NYU anthropology graduate student Ruti Talmor, introducing me to some of her friends at the National Arts Centre during my first week in Accra in 2004. “Teacher, you are welcome.” “Hello, thank you, my name is Steve.” “Teacher, you are welcome.” “You can call me Steve.” “Professor, you are welcome!” “My friends call me Steve.” “Prof, you are welcome.”

“So what do I do to get people to address me by my name” I ask Ruti later. “You don’t,” she said. “You have age and status. They need to show you respect. They can’t do that by addressing you by your name, it would be really uncomfortable. Anyway, nicknames are big here, they’re friendly, and important, like respect for seniority.”

Of that I’ve been endlessly reminded. Like this. A call from Vice woke me earlier than usual one morning. “Prof, The good Lord has taken our brother Ashirifie, rest his everlasting soul. The Lord works in mysterious ways, Prof. We have lost our brother and we must now prepare to blow big to help send him on his passage.”

Like Vice, Ashirifie was active since the late 60s in the Por Por group. By the time I met him 3 years earlier he was well in place in his driving retirement job as superintendent of the union office, holding the keys, opening and closing, greeting, keeping the office clean and organized. He was also caretaker of the Por Por group’s instruments and their uniforms, lovingly ironing and folding them before each performance.

Friends played on the sound of his name Ashirifie, transforming it to Sheriff, smelting it down to Ricky. Who knows which came first, Ashirifie’s cotton plaid shirts or being nicknamed Ricky Nelson. But he was a respected man. Rarely was he just called Ricky. It was always Ricky Nelson, Mister Nelson, Sheriff Ricky, Mister Ricky, Sheriff Nelson. It turns out that he also had the given name of Nelson. In the mid 1990s that led to another nick-name: Mandela.

My personal nickname for Ashirifie was “Lester Young” because of the way he would swing his por por horn off to the side, or in frontal circular motions, recalling the gestural practice and bodily stance of the famous saxophonist of the Count Basie band. Ashirifie fancied caps and hats. In his repertory was a black felt one that also recalled the

saxophonists of the fifties era, although Lester Young was more famously known for wearing the pork pie hat.

Jazz legend holds that on the night Young died the news was passed to bassist Charles Mingus while he was on the bandstand playing. A kernel from his improvisation in the moment became the opening melody of his composition “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,” a sensuous jazz lament memorial to Young. The song took on an expanded listening life when Joni Mitchell (1979) wrote lyrics to it, just before Mingus himself died, and recorded it in tribute to the bassist.

When Charlie/ speaks of Lester/
 you know someone/ great has gone//
 The sweetest/ swinging music man/
 had a porky/ pig hat on//

Like the hat that tops the head, reputation here is the pileup of names one accumulates through life, the ways they are layered into and implicated in the pileup of gigs played, roads driven, flat tires pumped, funerals attended, uniforms ironed, doors locked and unlocked, floors swept, libations and drinks poured and/or drunk, stories told, handshakes snapped.

Ashirifie’s nickname for me was no less about deeds, reputation, and verbal play. “Right hand man!” It’s a name that derives from a story Ashirifie liked to laugh over and tell, about the day I showed up early for a meeting at the union office, and did a very un-senior, very un-white-man thing, namely, assist him to set out the chairs for the event.

In the month’s following his passing, I filmed Ashirifie’s por por funeral, to produce, with Nii Yemo, [A Por Por Funeral for Ashirifie](#) (Feld 2009). The film closes with a powerful libation speech. While we were editing the sequence I asked Nii Yemo the name of the elder with the astonishingly deep and resonant voice who poured and spoke it. He said he didn’t know him by name, he hadn’t met him before, but would check up so that I could add the name to the final film credits. A few mornings later, Nii

Yemo sent the name, with no other comment, as a text message from his cell phone to mine: “Ashirifie Frank Sinatra.”

If senior male speeches accompanying libation were delivered with calm yet pointed direct address to Ashirifie, the powerful contrast was the sung-texted crying that women performed through the process, most powerfully throughout the film sequence where overlapping bells, songs, prayers, horn honks, conch shell and flute laments sound as the band and closest mourners surrounded the body and voiced their presence to Ashirifie before he was placed in his coffin. “Why leave this beautiful life?” one crying woman asks, her sorrowful rhetorical question overlapped by numerous others telling Ashirifie to wake up and come back, reminding him, and everyone listening, of the pain his passing has produced.

In the final moments of that sequence, just before the coffin is brought into the room to receive the body, the *por por* players break into “Novi Deke,” a song whose simple text laments, “I have no brother, I’m all alone, finished without you.” As they sing it, Olojo (Hello Joe) Mensah’s voice rises above the horns, shells, and wailing. Waving a yellow-and-black *Por Por* band uniform T-shirt over the body, he addresses Ashirifie a last time: “Ashirifie!! Here! We wore this shirt with you! And you wore it with us! Now we are giving it to you to take on your journey.” With that he lays the shirt on Ashirifie’s chest, a final act of vocal and material respect to link a past and future of work pride on the *por por* “road.”

To enter even more thoroughly the ways names link persons, stories, reputations, vehicles, and discursive circulations, take the story of a special vehicle in La, parked at the Total filling station as you enter the town. It is Boafo, “Good Friend,” owned by Frank Annertey Abbey, known to all La residents as “America Man.” Boafo is a kind of hybrid small *tsolorley*. On the wooden door is painted a Ghanaian and American handshake, following the USAID insignia.

In 1998, when President Bill Clinton visited Accra, the American entourage took over the nearby La Royal Palm Hotel. Someone saw America man’s Boafo sitting at the La filling station and asked that it be parked in the La Royal Palm driveway during the official visit. America Man obliged. Rumor has it that Bill Clinton and some ranking Ghanaian politicians were photographed shaking hands up against the vehicle’s

signboard. But nobody has ever been able to locate that picture. America man is still trying. He has begged for my help on virtually every occasion that we have met.

Per chance Nii Yemo and I walked into a La bar for some refreshment one afternoon, and there we encountered America man. “America man, how are you? It is good to see you again.” “America Prof, you are welcome! Welcome Prof, oh Welcome!! Fine! Fine! Prof Take a seat with me.”

Nii Yemo brought us a round of Guinness malt drinks and as we sat I asked America man the question of the moment. “America man, did the La Palm ask you to bring your Boafu during last week’s Accra visit of President Bush?”

Long pause. “John Kennedy,” he answered. Pause. “John Kennedy, yes, John F. Kennedy.” An even longer pause as he adjusts his Ray Charles-eque tortoise shell wraparound knockoff Gucci sunglasses. “Yes, John Kennedy. That’s why I was inspired to paint Boafu with an American handshake. I saw your America for a loong time, Prof, Washington DC, Maryland. Chevy Chase. Silver Spring. I drove. Once all the way to Florida. Yes, John Kennedy, John F. Kennedy. The man.” Another long pause. “And Bill Clinton too. Yes Bill Clinton. I love him too.”

Later Nii Yemo tells me that one of the three jumbo airplanes that the Bush party brought to Accra for their 24 hour drop-in was filled with presidential vehicles. This time when the American entourage took over the La Royal Palm hotel the driveway was packed with a presidential fleet of armored Cadillacs. “All the drivers from La walked over to see them,” he said. “But the place was surrounded by rings of soldiers and security. Everyone was chased away. None of us were welcome. That’s why America man didn’t speak your president’s name.”

When he lived in the States, America Man took the name of the boxer turned tough-guy-thug actor Jack Palance, whose original name was Volodymyr Palahniuk. America Man called himself “Jack,” or “Palance,” sometimes “Heavy Palance,” or “Palance Motherfucker.” Sometimes he called himself by names of his favorite Palance films, the 1952 *Shane*, or the 1953 *I Died a Thousand Times*. He also called himself “The Meanest Guy That Ever Lived,” after a country song written and recorded by Palance in the early 1960s. But people in America were, not surprisingly, confused when he introduced himself as “Jack Palance.” So he also called himself “Lee Palace of Africa,”

“Lee” for short. “Everyone knows Africa has chief’s palaces,” he told me, “and I loved Jerry Lee Lewis. And Lee Marvin too.”

A thumbs-up appears on the left and right rear of America Man’s vehicle tailgate, framing the proverbial phrase: “Care not what others may say. Think about yourself and do the right thing.” Over the windshield on the front mantle he painted the words “In God We Trust” in between two packets of Lucky Strike cigarettes, a heart dividing the first two words from the second two. Why did you sign Boafo “In God We Trust”? I ask. No Pause. “You know why!” he replied. Big smile.

In November 1999, Queen Elizabeth visited Ghana to meet with President J.J. Rawlings. The royal entourage took over the La Palm Royal hotel. America man went all out and really spiffed the truck, down to the impeccably shined overlarge whitewall tires, something rarely seen on even the most expensive cars in Accra, and never on trucks. He got his picture into a glossy magazine spread about the visit. He wore his vintage USA tee-shirt and bermudas, or donned his Panama hat, carried his classic 1960s American transistor radio, decked out the vehicle with US, Ghana, and British flags, and offered himself as a symbol of intercultural friendship through the road. He posed together with his wife, Juliana Anyekai Adjei, whose US flag headwraps, keds, and bermudas took them back to suburban Maryland in the 1970s.

“Why do you wear white gloves when you drive, America man?”

“Respect, Prof. ‘R-E-S-P-E-C-T, Find out what it means to me,’ ” he chants, in the Aretha Franklin cadence, switching off seamlessly to “ ‘If you don’t respect yourself ain’t nobody else...’ ” his voice trails off, allowing me to fill in the echo completion of the consequent song phrase from “Respect Yourself,” another soul era hit by the Staples Singers.

On most days America man used Boafo to cart cinderblock bricks, made in the yard next to his house. He was a working lorry driver, industrious and proud. Then there was an accident in 2004 that left him with a broken leg and other wounds, destroyed the truck’s wooden shell, and otherwise severely damaged his vehicle.

Juliana nursed him back to health. “Each day,” he told me “I sat outside next to my painting of President Kennedy, and remembered the stories of how his back pained him so. It helped me gain my strength again. By the grace of God I recovered.”

“Your mouth is your lorry! In God We Trust!”

Just before I left Accra for New York in April 2008 to give the Annette Weiner lecture, Nii Yemo arrived with a bulge in his camera bag. “Prof, I brought you something. A *tsolorley* souvenir made for you by Odoi Perkoh, AlHaji’s son. He’s the one who makes them for the grand hotels; you can see them at Golden Tulip or La Palm or Novotel. He was so happy when he heard about Por Por’s big royalty money. So he wanted you to have something back. It’s a special one, Prof, because you Americans trust in God to bring you money. This one is your yellow cab, it brings good money like the *tro tros*, so it is called ‘In God We Trust.’ You know that is why we Ghanaians love your American money, because it says that you trust God. Did America man tell you that too?”

“Well not every American who works for their money believes in that. I mean it’s not really a literal expression Nii Yemo. “

“Oh yes,” he continued, “of course, but it is like what we inscribe on our *tro tros*, something that is a good memory to inspire us in our work. ‘In God We Trust.’ Me, I don’t go to church but I like the sound of ‘In God We Trust’ very much. So I enjoy seeing it on the American money, like I enjoy seeing ‘Ben Hur’ on a *tro tro*.

With a change of voice, lower, and slower, he asks: “Prof, you will be receiving money when you next go to America?”

“Yes, for my work, lecturing.”

“*Ona!* You see! Your mouth is your lorry. They will pay to listen. Tell them about “In God We Trust.” These vehicles are wealth to drivers like teaching is wealth to you. *Onu!* You hear! This is why “In God We Trust” is a good *tsolorley* for you, Prof! Drive it well!! Tell them!! *Eh-heeh!!*”

“What about “Cool Running,” I ask, referring to the inscription on the souvenir vehicle’s tailgate.

“Oh!! Cool Running. You know, America is *soo* cool, everything is cool from America. Miles Davis! ‘The Birth of the Cool.’ Cool, man, cool!”

He can’t stop laughing. Finally he does. “*Ona!* You see Prof, Dodge introduced ‘Cool Running’ in the years before independence, that is what they called their special

engine, ‘cool running.’ We loved the Dodge, we loved the cool running motor vehicles. America is ‘Cool Running’.”

Nii Yemo knows about American cool. He is typically dressed in Keds, Levis, a photographers vest over a tee- or tennis shirt, and big aviator sunglasses. One of his nicknames is “Flick” and he rides a motorcycle. His favorite film and tro tro name is ‘Rebel Without a Cause.’ But he says he got cool when he started spelling Africa with a “k.”

When we met in 2005 Nii Yemo told me that he became a photographer in 1986. Before that he had a contract job supervising air conditioning repair for the American Embassy in Accra, from 1970. He started with the US Embassy crowd about the same time that his father was a chauffeur driver there, in the retirement job he held until his death in 1973.

“Tell me about working for the Americans in those days.”

“Prof, you see, that was something else-o. Because in the days of President Ford we got a wonderful surprise. Yes. Shirley Temple Black. She was the Embassy boss from America. Shirley Temple Black. Oh how we loved her! She came from the movies all the way to Accra! We loved the American movies so of course we loved Shirley Temple Black. And her husband too. He was very relaxed, going around town in his shorts!

So, you see, Shirley Temple Black had a daughter. Maybe she was about twenty. And she had a place of her own at the residence. So my assistant and I we were called one day to go there to fix up her air conditioning. And we had to take up the rug around the air conditioner. And there we found that this daughter had hidden a small packet of *wee* (marijuana). As soon as I smelled it I said to my mate, ‘oh, the girl is buying a very bad *wee*. She will be sick!’ And I gave him some coins to go and come with some proper ganja. Later I finished the work and put the new packet there in the same place for her. Then I told my mate, ‘she will like this more-o.’ I didn’t want her to be scared and think she was being set up so just as soon as I spotted her around the grounds I went to say ‘don’t worry, it was only me, Nunu, who took care of you.’ So we became friends and from then on she always asked me and my boys to look after her *wee*. She was a real smoker, Prof, she was one of us. I wonder what has become of her. We never heard from

her again after your Henry Kissinger sacked her mother. Her name was Lori but we called her 'California Dreaming'."

"What happened in 1986?"

"Prof, do you know the story of Sharon Scranage and the CIA in Ghana in Ronald Regan's time, when the US was trying to overthrow President Rawlings?"

"A little. Wasn't Scranage the black American CIA agent jailed for passing classified information to her Ghanaian boyfriend, an intelligence officer?"

"Correct. His name was Michael Soussoudis, a cousin of Rawlings. After the Americans trapped and arrested them both in the US, they exchanged him back for some CIA agents arrested here, ones who were exposed by Scranage. It was a real mess. So some months later we still knew that this CIA business was not finished. You were bombing Libya so the ambassador wasn't around. Running the place was a new man named Kile, Robert Kile, Robert Lee Kile. He was the admin officer but he was all CIA. The word was around town. And he was a thief. He thought me and my boys were stupid. In fact, he had a business with a Lebanese man called The Colonel (a pseudonym) who lived here in Nima near your place. He ordered containers of air conditioning and refrigeration equipment, all kinds of things for the Embassy. But the containers were never brought to me for inventory. They went to The Colonel who sold them and split the money with Kile. I hated him. So I organized all my boys to join me and expose him and all his theft and CIA business going on in our area. He was sacked. But at the beginning of 1986 they sacked me too and then eighteen more of us."

"How did that get you into photography?"

"I'm coming with that. *Ona*, you see, after sixteen years work they gave me a sixty dollar severance. I borrowed another ten from my brother and bought a Canon T50 off an Embassy man who was leaving for a different posting. From there I became a photographer. So Prof, bring us some malt, so we can drink to Ronald Reagan and the CIA, because without them we might not be working together as we are today!"

A quick internet trip to Wikipedia as we spoke told us that Sharon Scranage remains the only person convicted of breaking the Intelligence Identities Protection Act. She pleaded guilty to three of eighteen charges, got a five year sentence reduced to two,

and was incarcerated for eighteen months. I stopped short of asking Nii Yemo if he knew the names Valerie Plame and Karl Rove³.

“Nii Yemo, in America I am speaking at New York University in the memory of a friend named Annette Weiner. Like her I studied in Papua New Guinea. Like her I studied funerals. Like her I saw how the things people give and the things they say carry into the future. Like her I saw how memory and reputation live in things like cloth or statues, songs or stories. I would like to leave this ‘In God We Trust’ model *tro tro* there in a study room dedicated to her memory.

“Of course! You see! ‘In God We Trust.’ ‘Cool Running.’ America is well-known to us. Leave the *tro tro* with them Prof. We will help honor your friend’s memory. *Onu!* You hear! In return they will feel moved to buy Por Por’s CD.”

So is a voice any less material than a lorry? Is the musical use of an old truck horn any less a smelting down than transforming and circulating reputations in mantleboards and tailgates, names and stories?

I think that Annette Weiner got it right about energetics, about the dynamic interplay between transience, durability, and permanence. And right about guardianship often trumping ownership, sentiment distinctively pervading materialities of all kinds. The Por Por story is layered as thick with all of this as any tale from the Trobriand Islands or Papua New Guinea rainforest. It is a story about how sound and voice have no less profound materiality than a truck’s rear view mirror. Like the durability and permanence of physical material objects, sound rematerializes in echoic hearings, in repetitions, and in multiple mediations of technologies of recording and sampling. What makes sound distinctive is the way its materiality breathes in the elegant ephemerality of now it’s here, now it’s gone, and then - now it’s back.

“*Ona!* you see! Your mouth is your lorry! They will pay to listen. Tell them about “In God We Trust.” These vehicles are wealth to drivers like teaching is wealth to you. *Onu!* You hear? This is why “In God We Trust” is a good *tsolorley* for you, Prof! Drive it well!! Tell them!! *Eh-heeh!!*”

Endnotes

1. This essay was originally voiced as the 2008 Annette Weiner Memorial Lecture for the Department of Anthropology at New York University. I thank Fred Myers and the NYU Department for the generous invitation to honor a wonderful colleague and friend; thank Bambi B. Schieffelin for many conversations on the sensuous evidence of linguistic materiality; and thank Ruti Talmor for the 2004 introduction to Accra that ultimately led to encountering Por Por music in 2005. I thank Jillian Cavanaugh and Shalini Shankar for inviting a piece that dialogically performs the resonance of conversations across multiple NYU generations. For essays that substantially theorize the terrain underlying the intervocality performed here, see especially Keane 2003, and Myers, ed. 2002. Portions of this essay previously appeared in the Por Por chapter of Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana (Feld 2012); some driver quotations derive from The Story of Por Por (Nunu and Feld 2013).
2. My anthropological linguistics professor, C. F. (“Carl”) Voegelin, told me the “TAke the CAke” story in 1972 when I was a graduate student at Indiana University, reading Jakobson’s works on poetics for the first time.
3. Ghana Expels Four US Officials; State Department Threatens Aid Halt, *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 1985; Plame 2007; the url we viewed is: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharon_Scranage

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