

## The Purple Cow Paradox

A group of fifteen or so Chinese women, ranging in age from about sixteen to thirty-five, are standing in a line along Da Jie Road in the Haidian district. They are offering both document counterfeiting and daycare services for other migrant families, who are mostly working in service industry jobs and are unable to take care of their children at work. From early morning until early evening, these women walk up and down the road with babies in their arms, advertising their services to passers-by. As dusk arrives in a cloud of urban mist, a complex mixture of smoke from the streetside lamb kebab grills (*yangrou chuanr*) mingles with the smog from the afternoon traffic and a white fog of pollution that has drifted into the city from the south. At this moment, when the sun is either engulfed by these layers of human substance or given a beautifully muted orange hue, the women with other people's infants return to their makeshift residences and workshops to complete the orders they received that day, or to prepare for a second occupation. As they do so, many distribute name cards advertising services for romantic or erotic companionship, offered either by themselves or others.

All of them are Chinese migrants from a rural village in northeastern China. They are all without *hukou*, residence permits that allow Chinese citizens to "own" property or live legally within a designated place—in this case Beijing. Not having a local *hukou* is a common situation for the swelling population of migrants in urban centers throughout the country (Carillo Garcia 2004; Jacka 2015). As a result, many non-Beijing working-class residents find themselves increasingly vulnerable to exploitation from employers, property owners, and low-tier government officials. If one of the women in question were to be arrested for engaging in the illegal activities mentioned earlier—counterfeiting or prostitution—she would either be jailed or sent home to her province, having lost any profit she'd gained in the city through fines or bribes. The babies these women carry for others are an arrest-prevention "insurance" measure, given that police officers in Beijing are reluctant to arrest anyone carrying the infant of another person, because of the complexity

involved in finding the child's mother. The Haidian police are fully aware of this and the women also know that the police are aware of their activities. This uneasy tension between their precarious position and their reliance on it appears to be the cumulative result of the simultaneously unenforced yet exploitable illegality of practices like prostitution and non-*hukou* labor migrancy. As a result of these precarities—not only of employment status, but also of living conditions and constrained mobility—the erotic services offered by some of the counterfeiters may be the only opportunity to have a place to sleep for the night: whether arranged by a customer, pimp, or “provider-lover” (Hunter 2010). Such “opportunities” make explicit not only the fundamental differences in access to capacities for mobility compared to elite, aspirationally cosmopolitan Chinese subjects, they also reveal how rural Chinese women must inhabit urban space, and often sustain their own mobility in a zone of liminal, yet functional, illegality compared to the large numbers of rural men who undertake contract labor in large Chinese urban centers.

Trotsky Tsvangirai, a Zimbabwean student at Da Hua University, became such a provider-lover to one urban migrant, Meimei. He came to know her through decoding one of the name cards she regularly dropped on the street in front of his university. Through the use of his Pleco Chinese-language app on his iPhone, he translated the services offered on her name card and called the number. Following the exchange, much of which (by his own admission) he was unable to follow, they met one evening in the back of a massage parlor “behind a secret door that looked like a cupboard,” as he explained in one interview. After a number of visits as a regular customer—partially funded through Trotsky's English-teaching pocket money and following his improved Chinese-language abilities—Meimei came to spend additional evenings in his dorm room and received dining hall lunches with a counterfeit student card in exchange for a companion-like living arrangement. This relationship resembles what Mark Hunter (2010) has referred to as “provider love,” which is differentiated from prostitution as the impersonal exchange of an erotic commodity. In a more transnational setting, Jennifer Cole (2010) has explored these themes in the context of Malagasy-French sexual economies. Meimei and Trotsky's relationship, though irreducible to a paper caricature of the sexual and erotic dynamics at play in their interactions, can certainly be approached in the ways Cole's and Hunter's work suggests. In terms of my own limited access, I came to know a lot about their relationship and was even introduced to Meimei because of the fact that Trotsky and I often played music together in his dorm room—we were both guitarists and fans of Zimbabwean Chimurenga music—where Trotsky was something of a Zimbabwean hipster.

Meimei and his relationship can be understood as a meeting of two migrancies—hers from rural Sichuan and his from Zimbabwe—where both of them regard Beijing as a space of cosmopolitan, urban opportunity despite the possible threat of terminal immobility or simply “getting stuck,” which might result from the discovery of their interaction—the looming precarities of imprisonment

or deportation. However, the difference between them is that the futurity of Meimei's migrancy is simultaneously certain and chronic, in the sense that working-class sex workers like Meimei—with no educational background or *hukou*—face considerable intersectional obstacles. Here, constraining economic conditions in rural China bring larger numbers of *hukou*-less and exploitable migrants into Beijing (Gaetano 2004; K. Yang 2008). Trotsky's future position, by contrast, is both uncertain and temporary, since—as suggested in chapter 1—the result of his educational mobility generates the expectation that he is to be transformed. Of course, this kind of mobility has its limits: In the first instance, it does not give him the capacity to perform the same kind of mobile personhood as the city's growing white expat population. In the second, if he were caught with Meimei, his possibilities of travel—not only to and within China—would potentially become curtailed.

Eventually, Meimei and Trotsky's arrangement came to an end when the groups of women began to disappear from the university entrances in Haidian. One day, Meimei simply stopped coming to his dorm. At the time of writing, the group outside of Trotsky's university had diminished from around thirty to just one or two advertising their counterfeit services once or twice a week.

## INTERSECTIONALITIES

Many contemporary arguments concerning ideological stratification of gender and sexuality have treated language, mobility, and race as discreet “intersectional” domains. Bridging these domains, however, remains elusive as can be seen in much canonical work within each of these realms.<sup>1</sup> This perhaps results from ethnographic difficulties in identifying or empirically grounding an overlap between ever-changing semiotic and linguistic practices; the unfolding hierarchies of race, class, sexuality, and gender; as well as the always emergent intersection between identity and value distinctions as integrated social phenomena within a political economy of mobility. Seeing how Trotsky and Meimei's relationship is explicitly situated at a nexus point between these vectors—rather than involving each discreetly—remains an obstacle to critically theorizing intersectionality beyond Eurocentric settler colonial contexts, even if a persistently implicit stratifying relationship between language, race, and mobility remains evidentially intelligible. Perhaps this is an “epistemic” problem as Michel Foucault ([1966] 2002) has suggested, but how are epistemes sustained both in the micro-interactional present while being contingent upon historical micro-interactions?<sup>2</sup> This analytical contradiction remanifests when the analyst considers the effects of intersectional stratification as not only palpable in English-speaking, elite disciplinary theaters interested in marginal people; but that they are, in fact, experienced by the very marginal people being talked about. In what follows I will show how the attempted realization of aspirational archetypes of cosmopolitan personhood among two

groups of elite women—one Chinese and the other black African—generates further compromised conditions for these already marginal, intersectionally vulnerable subjects.

In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how linguistic anthropological framings of spatiotemporally contingent personhood—particularly those expounding on the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin—have profound methodological affinities with analyses of micro-interactional poetics and their politics in the humanistic social sciences.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, I will demonstrate how some of these affinities are foregrounded in a few different contexts and modes of interaction within Beijing's Afro-Chinese Angloscene: how an intersectional relationship emerges between mobility, language, and race in this context. Finally, I suggest that critical engagement with intersectionality—in precisely such settings—allows for analytical opportunities to map the contours of white space-time as a horizon of stratification that persists and mutates precisely within the “equal opportunity” logics of globalization.

#### INTERSECTIONAL MOBILITIES

In the summer of 2014, Palesa Ntsoaki and I arrived at her residence after one of her classes at Pingguo University. Palesa was a black female MBA student from Botswana who shared an on-campus apartment with two other women—also MBA graduate students in her program. One was from Sweden, the other from Indonesia. International student residences are usually separate from Chinese residences in Chinese universities. Before we sat down for our interview in her cramped but cozy apartment, Palesa offered to brew a pot of rooibos tea—a popular beverage in its place of origin, Southern Africa. As Palesa poured two steaming cups of tea, I returned to the topic of a conversation we were having on the way to her apartment and asked about her next step in getting a job in Beijing. She sighed, took a sip from her mug of tea, and said in a prim English accent—acquired while attending a private girls' high school in South Africa—“I am going to be the best Purple Cow I can be.”

The Purple Cow in question was drawn from a book by Seth Godin, an American marketing guru. Titled *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (2009) this text has become a prominent discourse object among one group of aspirational African elites in Beijing. For many in this community, it mediates attempts to generate students' own icons of achievable cosmopolitan futurity via Beijing. This is attempted in the absence of present role models of African excellence that stand as ideal and attainable futures facilitated through a commitment to Chinese education. The Purple Cow is also the inspiration for the appropriated nickname that this small group of African students use cynically among themselves and forms a part of a tension this chapter explores: for the majority of the female members of this in-group, the very raceless, genderless cosmopolitanism that the Purple Cow epitomizes comes to compromise, stratify, and ultimately

reinforce the asymmetries that these students aim to provincialize through their commitment to an all-commensurating “cosmopolitan” horizon of aspiration.

As many like Palesa attempted to embrace the Purple Cow in pursuit of their educational goals in Beijing, their female Chinese student peers were attempting similar (neo)liberal projects through their own literary genealogies. Caihong Qiao (“Rainbow Bridge”) is one of many small Chinese feminist organizations in Beijing and is co-run by Vivian Xu—the organization’s American-educated founder. Rainbow Bridge forms part of a network of similar LGBTQ organizations in China, which at the time of writing continued to organize annual intensive courses (or boot camps) in feminist theory. These boot camps and seminars are promoted with a view to recruiting elite Chinese students with profeminist politics into American institutions like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. For many of them, and for this group in particular, Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) has become an important discourse object—in English and Chinese—around which to promote an elite public sphere of feminist Chinese who embrace the “equal opportunity” promise of free-market capitalism as a path to personal empowerment and gender equality.

In the activities of the Purple Cow and Rainbow Bridge communities in Beijing, a contradiction emerges—one that arises in the cruel optimism of aspiring to Godin’s and Sandberg’s respective promises of universal personal transformation. This contradiction gave impetus to the formation of Chinese and African cosmopolitan spheres, as well as consolidating their compromised relationship to the Angloscene. Compromise and contradiction in matters of social transformation and revolutionary politics have been an enduring concern for critical feminist scholars. Audre Lorde ([1984] 2007) and Judith Butler (1999) have in their respective projects converged on the problem of the master’s tools’ Hegelian affordances: their retooling for liberation inevitably recapitulates the dynamics of oppression. In her early framing of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) identified the ways in which universal implementation of legal reforms frequently discriminated against the very marginal subjects such reforms were meant to assist or to protect. In what follows, I will explore a common analytical thread between the very different empirical contexts within which these incredible thinkers identified the political stakes of compromise and contradiction. This common thread lies in some of the paradoxes of language generally, and, more particularly, within a domain of language and social interaction called enregisterment.<sup>4</sup>

In the same way in which the “newness” of a commodity obscures the primordial and cultural relations of respective natural forces and chains of organized human activity that produced it, the contemporary meanings, circulations, and associations of “words,” signs, and languages obscure the social labor of history that has engendered the semiotic and value systems they mediate. Just as the work of assigning economic value for objects has little relationship to their intrinsic or

use value (Marx 1972), so too the attributions of meanings to language signs (at various scales) unfold and transform through time, having no intrinsic meanings in themselves (de Saussure 2011). In fact, the very attempt to fix, standardize, or regulate meaning and value in both cases necessitates constant tinkering and semiotic transformations precisely so as to stabilize the mutual endeavor of value maintenance. This is because the constantly changing material conditions of history and space-time that encompass such stabilizing acts necessarily render the fixing of meaning and value an unstable enterprise that entails persistent curation and the establishment of elaborate institutions tasked with such complex divisions of social labor (Manning 2001; Lee 2018). No singular economic model can stand the test of time. Similarly, no grammatical system can endure without adaptation and change. Neither operate in the vacuum of a “special theory” of controlled value. Rather, both must operate in the more general realm of interaction-based meaning-making. These paradoxical dynamics of meaning and value were foregrounded within the interactions of Chinese and African students in Beijing—where commitments to the “equal opportunity” language and associated theories of personal value transformation of Purple Cow and Lean In ultimately came to remake a familiar stratified hierarchy that these respective projects were meant to undo. In unpacking the ways in which language and value seem to be fundamental to the persistent dynamics of intersectional stratifications in any combination of race, mobility, gender, sexuality, and class, I have found Asif Agha’s explorations of enregisterment (2003) and mass-mediated chronotopes (2007a, 2007b) extremely valuable.

#### HOW TO BECOME REMARKABLE

In 2014 I had attended a number of Purple Cow events with Palesa in Beijing. These were arranged by Purple Cow members who wanted to host “seminars” specifically meant to feature and discuss the implications of Seth Godin’s book for African students in China. As a student about to graduate in China, Palesa was looking for a job in Beijing, where she had been living for nine years as the daughter of a diplomat. At the time, this process was proving difficult. This, I naïvely thought, seemed surprising given her political buy-in. Her parents had considerable government connections; what’s more, she had acquired complete Chinese colloquial and technical fluency after completing both a bachelor’s and master’s degree at top Beijing-based institutions. This was a remarkable and difficult achievement among African students in China. The majority of African students in Beijing don’t see any reason to become fluent in Chinese since most of them graduate after taking their main subjects in English—meeting the baseline language requirement for graduation from a Chinese university.

Some, like Palesa, have also had to build relationships with Chinese patrons who have sustained their residence or endorsed their continued studies in Beijing. Such “elite” students have all benefitted from Chinese and government

support from their home countries, as well as political and economic relationships that are often reinforced through kinship ties to ministers, diplomats, or heads of state. For example, a considerable number of Zimbabwean students whose parents have close ties with the ruling ZANU-PF party attend and have scholarships to the same university where President Robert Mugabe's wife attained her degree in Chinese studies.

Large numbers of elite African students in China (many in Beijing) represent an important outcome of Chinese soft power and Sino-African educational and governmental cooperation. As such, many new arrivals have become persons of interest to an earlier wave of African elites who have situated themselves as Sino-African brokers trying to motivate the market value of both a Chinese-educated African subject, as well as a climate of south-to-east exchange where Sino-African relations cut out western middlemen. Miriam Bakgatla is one of these first-wave brokers. She styles herself as an entrepreneur, talent scout, and Sino-African expert, and is one of the few long-term members of Beijing's Sino-African community—a position acquired through both business and political acumen (as someone who worked for the government of an African country and came from a political family background). Through her organization, Azanian Achievers China (AAC), she generated opportunities and organized projects—like the Purple Cow initiative—that attempted to promote China-Africa relationships and broker opportunities for African students as well as Chinese business and government personnel. Through this process, she has become a formidable gatekeeper for her young African male and female apprentices—a guardian of their interests through events and workshops meant to “promote and mobilize African talent in China.” At one event, she opened our discussion with a quote from Seth Godin's text: “If a product's future is unlikely to be remarkable—if you can't imagine a future in which people are once again fascinated by your product—it's time to realize that the game has changed. Instead of investing in a dying product, take profits and reinvest them in building something new” (2009, 27).

Suggesting that African students in China are like this product and, in particular, should “embrace [their] inner Purple Cow,” Miriam emphasized a mode of conduct where her apprentices should carry themselves as “self-made,” and create narratives of professional excellence, where one has achieved “success through one's own endeavors.” In one-to-one interactions with many Purple Cow members, Miriam also often emphasized that remarkability was measured according to an “international standard” where “the game has changed.” How the game has changed, however, was less important than Miriam's overall message: “In marketing your Purple Cow . . . every second and every contact counts.” Later on, when I was able to interview Miriam, she explained further: “We have to make the most of our opportunities as African students in China by finding a way of profiting from our very unique, but not yet marketable brand . . . the Chinese underestimate us



because we are blacks, but we don't see them as colonizing us since we are here to take their country one little piece at a time." Voiced in a dialectic of black consciousness (Biko 2002, 48–53) and neoliberal "common sense," this was a position she and other Purple Cows maintained as a matter of course.

Seth Godin's Purple Cow concept becomes a conduit for this self-expression, framing an ideal subjecthood that attains personal or financial realization by understanding a universal set of laws governing human interactions; in essence, it is a how-to guide for making oneself marketable to others, where the reception of others is more or less taken for granted. Given this co(n)textual *a priori*, Seth Godin's text emphasizes an approach to making what is unique about your brand desirable to others—a recipe for self-fashioning an all-commensurating person-as-commodity (M. Silverstein and Urban 1996, 1–20). This particular aspect certainly resonated with several subjects, who, like Miriam, were trying to tailor philosophies like the Purple Cow not only to the context of African students' aspirations in China but to cosmopolitan translations in a variety of subaltern space-times.<sup>5</sup> Miriam's particular angle, however, equates the Chinese-educated African subject of excellence with the Purple Cow as a product that is "truly remarkable." Of course, *translating*—and thus motivating—a "sameness" between the African educational migrant in China and the efficacious neoliberal subject necessitates an erasure of the possibility that her product's future "is unlikely to be remarkable." It also requires a constant vigilance about the fact that the future of her product depends on others' imaginative labor and conditions of felicity (Austin 1975; Appadurai 1996, 2016): "If you can't imagine a future in which people are once again fascinated by your product, it's time to realize that the game has changed" (Godin 2009, 27).

In arguing for the remarkability of her apprentices' expertise, Miriam often demonstrated her knowledge of dominant China-Africa narrations of history, by equating the Purple Cow with historical giraffes brought as gifts from Africa to China during the early Ming dynasty. This serves as a popular historical reference—in the Chinese context—of Admiral Zheng He's gift to the emperor after returning from his expedition of Africa during the early fifteenth century (1405–1433) (Yamashita 2006; Dreyer 2007). When I later asked why she compared the Purple Cow to the giraffe, she answered: "Because everybody only remembers the fucking giraffes and none of the other gifts . . . giraffes are remarkable."

It is worth noting that Miriam's Purple Cow is an un-actualized potential in the sense that it is retrospectively *anticipated* to emerge through the strategies laid out by Seth Godin's Purple Cow. As Palesa suggested before, she *aims to become* the best Purple Cow she *can be*, hinting at the ultimate unattainability of the Purple Cow's "ideal type"<sup>6</sup>—where one form of cosmopolitanism sets the horizon for its Afro-Chinese "third world" analog. The relationship between these two cosmopolitanisms is further complicated by African and Chinese students' electronic and social propinquity with those beyond Beijing via social media landscapes in multiple international space-times. This Beijing-and-beyond



connectivity generates a pluralistic but highly stratified cosmopolitan diasporic chronotope. Following WeChat, Twitter, and WhatsApp feeds on their newly acquired smartphones—commonly during a stopover in Hong Kong—African students and Chinese students try to calibrate these increasingly divergent chronotopes.<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective of many well-connected Beijing-based African students, it is also clear that recent mass-mediated decolonial narratives, like #Rhodes-MustFall, #FeesMustFall, “decolonizing the University,” and “Africa Rising,” heavily inform Miriam’s appeal to an empowered, postcolonial, yet very Anglophone, elite “Afropolitan” ethnoscape (Appadurai 1996; Mbembe and Nuttall 2008).<sup>8</sup> As suggested so far, this has more than a little to do with English as a former language of command to many African students (particularly in the context of the internet age). In this setting, English’s perceived role in brokering an “international” cosmopolitanism for their Chinese postsocialist interlocutors counts for somewhat less. However, a counterpoint between English as a neutral lingua franca and hegemonic discourse appears to unfold in the space-time of subjects like Palesa and Miriam adopting the Purple Cow register—where aspirational horizons and their compromises are immediately entangled in hierarchies of race and mobility that constitute a supposedly neutral ideal subject. To be sure, this desire for a neutral means of leveraging more desirable futures out of constrained contemporaneity is by no means specific to the African students in Beijing.

#### MOTIVATING LEAN IN

Vivian Xu met me in her apartment close to the Lama Temple in central Beijing. She had worked in China for a number of years, moving between China and the United States since childhood. She later studied at one of the most prominent Ivy League colleges and went on to found the organization Rainbow Bridge. At the time of our interview, Vivian was a graduate student at another prestigious American university and was also running an English-language editing business in Beijing (alongside her Rainbow Bridge activities). This was because she needed to sustain her income while deciding on a project for her PhD dissertation. In addition to establishing a lucrative side-profession assisting Chinese students’ undergraduate applications to prestigious US universities, Vivian was an LGBTQ activist. Working for Rainbow Bridge was one way of bringing together entrepreneurship and liberal activism. The workshops or boot camps her organization arranged brought US academics from top-tier institutions into expensive Beijing hotel conference rooms, where young Chinese women (mostly high-school students and undergraduates) paid a considerable fee to participate in seminars that taught a combination of western feminism and US college application strategies. All of this was taught in an environment where English-language immersion and the possibility of a reference letter from a white American professor was part of the workshop’s package deal.

My short-term role at Rainbow Bridge, and other organizations like it, was to work as teaching assistant, editor, and facilitator, but mostly as a token white face providing international flavor (or color) to educational activities that fundamentally did not require either my presence or expertise beyond the horizon of cosmopolitan aspiration that my whiteness indexed. This was apparent to both Vivian and the other facilitators working for Rainbow Bridge. Vivian would likely agree that I was useful not because they believed in my competence, but rather because they believed in others' belief in it: this mirrors Slavoj Žižek's (1989) argument for the persistence of ideology despite actors' reflexive awareness of the ways in which they are stratified by it. Vivian later stated in an interview that "the parents paying for the workshop want to see authentic [white] foreigners." In this capacity, I helped to organize seminars, grade written work, and provide mentorship on how to approach US college and university applications. During a boot camp held by Rainbow Bridge in the summer of 2016, I was able to observe classes taught by Vivian and an American Ivy League professor (another authentic white foreigner) who had been invited especially to participate in some of Rainbow Bridge's workshops.

During one of Vivian's classes, titled "How to approach your college admissions essay," another narrative of marketable remarkability emerged. Drawing on a book titled *50 Successful Harvard Application Essays: What Worked for Them Can Help You Get into the College of Your Choice*, Vivian emphasized the need to "make your application stand out," that a US institution like Harvard "does not value the typical profile of a nerdy, modest, female, Asian student." She underlined the fact that applications essays "need to make their authors look remarkable . . . even if you don't really feel you are." Vivian's presentation immediately provoked a discussion, during which one college student, Ally, put her hand up and asked Vivian if saying she was a lesbian from China was likely to make her application stand out in Harvard medical school's application pool? Ally was also the leader of a *Lean In* reading group at her elite university in Beijing and a strong advocate for Chinese women seeking elite education abroad, particularly in the United States. To this end, Ally's parents had invested a considerable fortune in providing her with an "international" education and long-term immersive classes in English, which she spoke with a perfect (possibly Californian) American accent, even though she had never left China. Her occasional interjections in class, punctuating discussions on feminist revolution or heteronormativity with phrases like "totally awesome!" or "that shit cray" respectively conjured a sense of having-already-arrived in a place she was always meant to be. Ally, like the other workshop participants, was completely enamored with Vivian's "professional" presentation, with her and many of her classmates consciously copying Vivian's semiformal attire following her introductory seminar, saying, "I want to look as professional as her."

Responding to Ally's question, Vivian hesitated for a moment, then looked down to her right where I was pretending to prepare the next PowerPoint slide for the presentation, and continued honestly: "Yes, saying that you are a lesbian and how that has given you diverse and unique experiences may definitely benefit your college application." For the remainder of the seminar, Vivian emphasized the need for remarkability, citing the archetype of the cowboy as a social-value icon in American society, where you have to be the "hero of your own narrative." When I later asked Ally what she thought of the seminar and what prompted her question to Vivian, she cited Sheryl Sandberg, saying that "she shows how women can pursue their rights in China." I asked if anyone in class could really be anything like Sheryl Sandberg. I was drawing on bell hooks's critique of the author of *Lean In*, which had been taught by their Ivy League professor that morning. Ally responded without hesitation: "Yes, Sheryl expects all women to be more remarkable." Indeed, *Lean In* does emphasize that the achievement of remarkability depends on courageous actions of individual women contesting society as members of an oppressed class: "We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in" (Sandberg 2013, 8).

These descriptions raise important questions regarding both Vivian's and Miriam's charges: Is Sheryl Sanders the cowboy of Ally's narrative, just like the Purple Cow becomes the placeholder for Palesa's cosmopolitan future? To what degree are Miriam and Vivian able serve as actualized manifestations of, and conduits for, these respective projects of Purple Cow and *Lean In*? Drawing on a western philosophical genealogy of thought concerning the relationship between personhood and property, Ilana Gershon (2017) theorizes contemporary logics of mobility and the cultivation of subjecthood as having a contingent relationship within neoliberal logics. She reveals how "branding a self" as competitively remarkable—in the ways similarly voiced by Vivian and Miriam—has become integral to this process. Taking a more historical-ethnographic approach, Timothy Burke has discussed the social histories of two hygiene commodities—Lifebuoy and Lux—in Zimbabwe (1996). Similar to Gershon, Burke explores the ways in which archetypes of personhood mediate the relationship between persons and an encompassing capitalist political economy, but situates this process within a longer historical *durée*. What the specific examples of Azanian Achievers and Rainbow Bridge more generally reveal is that such neoliberal logics (old and new) are underpinned by other far-from-neutral, encompassing cultural currencies. English, whiteness, and heteronormativity are dense formations of social capital constituting a web of intersectional vectors that refract neoliberal as well as older capitalist ideologies of value that underpin the commensurations of personhood. As Cedric Robinson (1983) powerfully revealed in his political economy

masterpiece: capitalism precisely operates through the recruitment of categories of value—like race—that appear to transcend or precede capitalism itself. This should be apparent to anyone paying attention to the relatively recent Euro-American trend toward identity branding.

#### CANONIC POETICS

While Vivian's "success" served as an aspirational beacon for many of Rainbow Bridge's participants, her own relationship to the aspirational horizon she represented for others was more complex. Although Vivian had received a considerable amount of grant money in the United States (for her research project in Beijing), she had always been involved in entrepreneurial activities, given that her parents had largely cut her off, as they did not approve of her being a lesbian. Thus, she was required to be financially independent. After she received grant money and left to begin fieldwork in Beijing, her white male project advisor discovered that she was running what he called "a side business in the field." He reported her to the grant-awarding organization, who revoked her funding. All this came after humiliating her among faculty members and her peers at her own university. As a result, Vivian had to intensify her entrepreneurial activities to compensate for the loss and the labor needed to *motivate* the efficacious elite, Anglo-Chinese cosmopolitan personhood she had worked so hard to cultivate. Yet, the very aspirational horizon she pursued always situated her, and many like her, as in-between cosmopolitan chronotopes. In one chronotope, she was the Ivy League-educated educational professional in "truly cosmopolitan" Beijing; in the other "third-world" chronotope, she was the precarious, cheating Chinese graduate student who is perpetually "almost-but-not-quite Harvard," despite having checked all the boxes to achieve that status. The way in which Vivian becomes systemically marginalized in one context while valorized as an aspirational icon in another extends the geographical and analytical terrain upon which racialized, gendered, and queered intersectionalities might be mapped (Crenshaw 1991; Butler 1999; Lorde [1984] 2007).

Through her own rigorous and empirically directed research into the stratifying social effects of blanket forms of legislation on the very subjects the US legal system often aimed to "protect," Kimberlé Crenshaw demonstrated the ways in which women of color find themselves doubly stratified in terms of race and gender in American multicultural contexts. At the same time, she reflected the ways in which an equal-opportunity assumption of identity politics could ultimately come to compound the racial and gender asymmetries they elide. Vivian's case extends Crenshaw's argument given that Vivian both became the receiver of almost-unmarked privilege in one national context (China) while becoming precariously marked in another (the United States), revealing both intersectionality's

analytical purchase beyond singular, bounded, national polities and also the ways in which whiteness emerges as a problem beyond the bodies that may normally be understood to inhabit it.

One critique to the intersectional analysis at play here is the argument that Vivian's professor was not intentionally prejudicing her in this instance, but was rather meeting his obligation to the relevant funding institution. This would be an excruciatingly wrong-headed observation, fundamentally missing the point of an intersectional analysis given: (a) that intersectional violence is not about individual intentions, but rather persistent structural outcomes; and (b) I encountered dozens of young non-Chinese social science scholars undertaking explicit entrepreneurial activities while doing NSF, SSRC, or Fullbright grant-funded research in China who had never had this experience. Perhaps there is something wrong with the funding or selection structures of these organizations? In either case, the professor knew that her work was an extension of her involvement in LGBTQ organizations, yet reported her "cheating" as purely self-serving entrepreneurial endeavors.

The fact of Vivian's queer identity as a marginalizing factor in her own life, despite promoting the value of its "remarkability" to Ally, underscores the performative, yet far from arbitrarily relative, dimensions of intersectionality. In providing a dialectical frame for conceptualizing the ways in which intersectionalities emerge performatively, Judith Butler (1999) defines performativity as where "one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits." Performativity thus becomes the "anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning" as "the means by which that authority is attributed and installed." It is thus through this dialectical temporality that "anticipation conjures its object" (xiv). Here, performativity's range is limited by the degree to which subjects like Vivian can gain their footing in different ideological contexts of interaction.<sup>9</sup> The fact that this horizon of aspiration—which she promotes to Ally and others—is one that marginalizes Vivian, certainly does not make her a charlatan. It indicates the limited range of aspirational potentials available to her and those she mentors, whose only choice is to operate in a performative mode until alternative ideological gaps arise. While Crenshaw provides a historical and case-based account of how the fact of intersectionality is visible through its effects, and while Butler provides a compelling argument for its dialectical emergence performatively, this stratification can also be studied in real-time interactions.

As Judith Butler shows, observing language performativity requires both attentiveness to language as fundamental to the emergence of intersectional stratification as well as an understanding of language as both mediating and inextricable from that context. Here, linguistic anthropologists' concern with a phenomenon called enregisterment opens up analytical terrain for revealing

intersectionality's interactional manifestations (Gal 1991) as well as performativity's dialectical manifestation in mass-mediated ethnographic contexts (Nakassis 2012). In his work, Asif Agha reveals enregisterment as a process emerging between actors encountering one another within an interactional space-time or chronotope (2003, 2005, 2007a). He does this through a rigorous synthesis of Bakhtinian and Goffmanian views on language and co(n)textual phenomena as providing the semiotic means and categories for social stratification. In his discussion of *voicing* (Bakhtin 1981, 1984) and *footing* (Goffman 1979) as analytics informing enregisterment, Agha proposes an attentiveness to the figures of personhood and stereotypes these dual processes animate. In Agha's work these appear to be dynamically socially motivated archetypes appearing to simultaneously emerge out of—and yet are motivated to presuppose—the space-time of semiotic interaction. As a starting point, Asif Agha defines registers as “contrastive patterns of register use [that] index distinct speaking personae in events of performance.” Furthermore, “the social existence of registers depends on the semiotic activities of language users, particularly those characterized . . . as matters of alignment” (2005, 38).

In the following analysis of an interaction between several members of a Southern African community of students in Beijing, I try to capture a complex play of alignment and disalignment that animates multiple intersectional tensions through the ways in which different voices in a conversation become stratified. The following interactional text is drawn from an interaction among members of Purple Cow in 2014. The interaction took place at the corporate headquarters of an elite Southern African students' organization in China called the Azanian Achievers Group in the affluent district of San Li Tun in eastern Beijing. The participants were: CK, a black male Botswana MA student in China; JP, a white male English-speaking South African on a short-term study exchange in China; Gabriel, a younger male Zimbabwean student studying business in China; as well as Miriam and Palesa. Here, both Miriam and Palesa are the most elite Purple Cow members participating in the interaction.

The transcription method I use here is informed by Bakhtin's metaphor of “voicing” to depict the ways in which language's diachronic emergence always presupposes a dialogical, intersubjective ideological space-time.<sup>10</sup> For Bakhtin, the primary metaphors of language were aural, tactile, and emergent between moving parts, much like the experience of listening to contrapuntal voices converging in real-time—not as linear, stratified melodies, or vertical, synchronic harmonies that essentialize meanings to the sum of their parts. Drawing inspiration from Bakhtin's understanding of language as a musical metaphor (as opposed to the inverse) my analysis aims to give a sense of contrapuntal alignment and disalignment voiced between different actors participating in an interaction. In doing so, I will focus on moments in the course of this contrapuntal voicing, where attentiveness

to a *canonic* poetics reveals both implicitly enregistered interactional orders (Goffman 1983) as well as their potential recruitment in service of overturning initially presumed upon interactional orders among the participants.

In making use of a western musical metaphor, the canon, I identify moments where actors repeat or anticipate words or phrases uttered by a conversational protagonist (as a means of emphasizing alignment and disalignment) during this dynamic encounter. By way of this metaphor, I am trying to capture the staggered aural effect—mirroring those of choral canons—as a way of emphasizing an affective alignment to a “head voice” by taking on a subordinate, rather than protagonistic role—for instance, the example of the backing singer in American popular music. Such moments, I suggest, distill or reveal implicit interactional orders that may contradict those that are explicitly assumed. In the case of the following interaction, Miriam and Palesa are recognized as leaders of Azanian Achievers. However, through the unfolding interaction, the stability of this hierarchy is rendered somewhat more precarious.

Once everyone had arrived for the session, and the door to the boardroom we were occupying was closed, I opened with the general question as to how everyone had initially found adapting the life in China. CK spoke first, emphasizing how jarring the transition from Gaborone (Botswana) to Beijing was:

1 CK: Now it's good I'm enjoying it,  
2 but at first the language barrier was  
3 there.

4 [JP then enters the interaction once CK pauses]

5	JP: Ja, but it's a bit of a challenge
6	this language thing, eh? When I
7	got here, my initial thought was
8	that, you know, there'd be more
9	people that understand English or
10	basic English, but none of that eh.

Here, CK leads, explicitly contextualizing his initial arrival in China in terms of a language barrier. His delivery is relaxed at this point in the interaction. JP, the only white person in the focus group apart from myself, quickly interjects, trying to build rapport with the Azanian Achievers by using “Ja” and “eh” as South African English shibboleths to signal potential alignments with South Africans in the room generally, but with myself in particular. He, like CK, keeps his delivery relaxed, maintaining or perhaps emphasizing a South African accent, using “Ja” to index agreement with what had just been said, and “eh” seeking confirmation of his participation. Both CK and JP indicate obstacles and disappointments with their experiences of the absence of English in China.



Speaking to JP, before the focus group, he appeared to embrace the discourse of post-apartheid reconstruction and reconciliation: “It’s a whole new world, eh, we can all sit around the same table and just talk about China.” JP was referring to other black people sharing the same corporate setting overlooking one of the wealthiest parts of Beijing, imagining an equal postracial interaction unburdened by less-privileged interlocutors who still constitute an economic, mostly black, majority in his home country. In his conciliatory hubris, JP further sought to indigenize himself by recruiting me to his aid, drawing attention to the fact that, like me, he too was “a real dutchman like Jannie . . . we are from the same tribe”—deliberately using both the diminutive form of my Afrikaans name, *Jannie*, and the derogatory ethnic slur, *dutchman*, as both a self-deprecating strategy and a way to suggest both that he was on equal footing with his other African interlocutors, and that he had “pale native” solidarity with me.

Picking up on (what he perceived to be) the elite makeup of the group, JP often invoked the rhetorical phrase “we all want the same thing, right?” both prior to this meeting and in later interactions with Azanian Achievers whom he hoped were his peers. Through this, he appeared to suggest that they are equals in the interaction, in so far as they were all English-speaking, educated “global leaders.” The reception of JP’s position within the group, however, was another matter altogether. CK responded to JP’s “language gap” observation, attempting to expound on his own analysis:

1 CK: Yeah, because a lot of people . . .

2

JP: [starts talking over CK]

3

until you get in a

4 CK: [directs himself at

5 Gabriel] People in other

6 cities say “in Beijing

7

JP: cab, you’re like oh shit.

8

[stops talking]

9

Gabriel: [immediately leans in

10

To listen, nodding visibly and

11

intently at CK]

In this exchange, CK begins by addressing himself to JP, who then cuts him off and starts addressing the group as a whole. CK, however, reasserts himself by speaking to Gabriel, who is seated next to him. Meanwhile, JP’s imposition has not gone unnoticed and an alignment with CK begins to form where everyone in the group turns to direct themselves toward CK. This is picked up on by JP, who tails off and stops talking. It is more or less at this moment that CK begins to slow down and enunciate, almost in a burlesque, using a posh British accent. The group

uptake of the switch from a Tswana- to posh English accent—with its measured phrasing—is marked in what follows:

- |    |                                  |                                |
|----|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1  |                                  | JP: [ . . . Looks offended and |
| 2  |                                  | keeps quiet]                   |
| 3  | CK: and Shanghai . . . you'll be |                                |
| 4  | okay," but when you get here     |                                |
| 5  | no . . . 'cause                  |                                |
| 6  | Gabriel: you'll be okay . . .    |                                |
| 7  | CK: from the airport             |                                |
| 8  | it's like the first              |                                |
| 9  | person you see                   |                                |
| 10 | Miriam: doesn't speak            |                                |
| 11 | Palesa: doesn't speak            |                                |
| 12 | CK: and it's difficult.          |                                |
| 13 | Miriam: English                  |                                |
| 14 | Palesa: English!                 |                                |

Facilitated by CK's change of rhythm and emphasis, the black members of group intensify their alignment by anticipating what he will say next, endorsing him through a chorus-like voicing of the phrases "you'll be okay" and "doesn't speak English." The result of this interaction is that JP is effectively excluded from the participation framework from this point onward. CK as the oldest black male in the group quickly establishes his seniority through the assistance of Gabriel (at twenty-five, the youngest person in the focus group). Meanwhile, Miriam and Palesa participate in the conversation having been demoted to attentive praise singers of CK's performance.

Not only should this interaction be taken as an exemplar of a discourse pattern that pervaded the interactional gender dynamics of elite Anglophone African students in Beijing, it was also an interactional dynamic within which Miriam and other black women in this community were acutely aware of. Miriam and I discussed the problems of patriarchy fairly regularly—as an almost mundane topic of discussion among younger African female students as well as older women (like Miriam) with a certain English educational status and background. On one occasion, I asked how she dealt with it as a leader in this community. She explained that her status as a black woman in China already placed her on the back foot outside of the African community, and that dealing with "strong" African men who ultimately needed her network to survive, was comparatively easier to manage "because it's familiar." When I asked about other younger black women and the obstacles of patriarchy, she noted that they would have to find their own way like she did: "It's not easy, but if you can make yourself indispensable, and make it so that others need to depend on you, then you're in with a chance."

I ventured: “Make yourself the best Purple Cow you can be?”

“That’s it,” Miriam noted with a sagely nod, but then realizing that I was perhaps not being entirely sincere, added: “*I’m* not joking.”

Among men in the community, there was a similar degree of awareness, but significantly different responses to it. While some felt that it was a pervasive social problem that needed to be addressed and that there should be greater gender equality among Africans, as I note in the following chapter, there was also an outright hostility against young women who were critical of patriarchy. One unusual response emerged in an interview of a former Azanian Achiever—Zakes Mbuli—who seethed at his frequent exclusion from this group, holding Miriam accountable for being ostracized: “That woman is a *sangoma* [‘witch’ or ‘witch doctor’]. She pretends like she wants to help you to your face and then sends a *tokoloshe* [‘witch’s familiar’ or ‘demon pet’] to get you later . . . she likes to keep everyone close and under control but doesn’t like it if you talk too much. I just had enough of the mind games and decided to make my own *guanxi*.”

Here, Zakes, who still had many friends in Azanian Achievers, felt that he had not only been excluded but had to become part of an out-group and no longer had access to Miriam’s network or resources. Marking her as a *sangoma*—an initiated woman or man constituting a supernatural threat through the wielding of occult power—Zakes suggested that Miriam was able to capriciously enact unseen retribution against her victims and blessings upon her acolytes. In exiting the patronage network, Zakes imagined himself to be immune to the intersubjective witchcraft she might otherwise be able to enact upon him through mutually contingent and dependent social relations, or *guanxi*. Thus, from Zakes’s perspective, Miriam transcended the usual bonds of patriarchy that governed mere mortals, something Miriam did not seem as convinced of—however, I might have been more naïve than Zakes about Miriam’s powers.

The tension between the “equal opportunity” aspiration Miriam and Palesa endorsed before, and gender hierarchy in the conversation cited here, emerges not simply because the actors’ internalized ideologies of white heteronormative patriarchy—ultimately obviating actors’ motivation of an equal opportunity cosmopolitanism mediated through the seemingly neutral register of English. Rather, I suggest that closer attention must be paid to the social space-time of unmarked aspiration that subjects like Vivian and Miriam attempt to partially inhabit and are constantly thwarted by. Doing so necessitates attending to the intersectional horizons that unmarked English enregisters through their interactions. Here, I suggest reading the limitations of the dream of the Purple Cow from within a raciolinguistic *space* and *time* (Fanon [1952] 2008) that reveals the failure of its motivation.

## DECOLONIZING THE CHRONOTOPE

In his own formulation of Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope, Asif Agha discusses the contingencies between the intersubjective emergence of personhood and the mass-mediated space-times they depend on. Here, Agha reconfigures the chronotope as a formation "of place-time-and-personhood to which social interactants orient when they engage each other through discursive signs of any kind" (2007a, 320). In aligning themselves respectively to the text-worlds and reading publics of *Lean In* and *Purple Cow*, Vivian and Miriam's students forge and participate in chronotopes that are dialectically both of their own making, and yet must also transcend them as part of an aspirational space-time that is yet to be achieved. For Agha, time "is a semiotic isolate," thus impossible to unmoor from its dynamic contextualization in articulated assemblages of co(n)text and personhood as different, but none-the-less mass-mediated archetypes—like the interactions in which the *Purple Cow* and Sheryl Sandberg presuppose an articulated cosmopolitan contemporaneity and associated personages. This kind of space-time, however, must be mediated. As Agha suggests, time "is textually diagrammed and ideologically grasped in relation to, and through the activities of, locatable selves"—in this case, Miriam and Vivian's presence as those who index, but who do not fully inhabit, the space-times of the text objects they mediate (2007a, 320). Thus, in the motivation of any icon, and recognition of any sign, *a receiver and a space-time of reception are entailed, even if both appear to be absent*. Here, three points—a legible sign, a spatiotemporal context of reception, and a point of reception (a subject)—form a mutually contingent triangle of reception. Describing the chronotope as being "peopled by social types," Agha aligns himself with Bakhtin's view that media reception—print or otherwise—constitutes a socially contingent subject formation like that of personhood. Of course, such social types can be chimeric in their construction. In *Purple Cow* and *Rainbow Bridge* communities, implicit social types—like the white English-speaking American cosmopolitan—can become obscured by the explicit motivation of multicultural nonracial subject inhabiting the "neutral" register of English as *the* global language. Such plural, but far from equal, possibilities can be understood in relation to Bakhtin's insistence on the unfinalizability of persons and personhood. This perspective is grounded in the assumption of an indeterminacy of identity as constituted intersocially rather than autonomously and individually out of voices that can never be located or rooted fully in only one body (Bakhtin and Holquist 1993). This is articulately framed in Bakhtin's elaboration what he calls the "act of understanding": "In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space, and because they are others" (Bakhtin 2004, 7).

Thus, chronotopes and the persons they diagram into being, and vice-versa, form mutually dependent dialogically emergent formations. This is the case because a dialogical outlook points to reception as the emergent site of a sign's meaning, value, and material efficacy. This suggests a fundamentally distributed account of meaning-making, complicating easy readings of flat-footed identity politics on the one hand, and supposedly radical anti-identity and anti-political claims on the other. Instead, emerging asymmetries arise multidirectionally—simultaneously bottom-up, top-down, and perhaps even sideways in the case of the sign configuration, “third world” in its original sense. However, they are far from relative or absent formations.

This insight was not lost on Frantz Fanon, another thinker who pointed to a similar relationship between space-time and personhood. For him, the political stakes of these intersectional asymmetries mattered profoundly. In his *Black Skins, White Masks* ([1952] 2008) Fanon explicitly notes the role of spatiotemporal contextualization in providing the weight that grounds signifiers and allows for a distillation of their resulting essentialisms. In his critique of Octave Mannoni's (1950) *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, Fanon provokes the analyst—of dreams or political economy—to attend to the material conditions within which the signs of memory and alienation unfold. Decrying Mannoni's misinterpretation of the traumatic dreams of Malagasies, Fanon writes: “We must put the dream *in its time*, and this time is the period during which 80,000 natives were killed, i.e., one inhabitant out of fifty; and *in its place*, and the place is an island with a population of 4 million among whom no real relationship can be established, where clashes break out on all sides, where lies and demagoguery are the sole masters. In some circumstances, we must recall, the *socius* is more important than the individual” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 84–85 emphasis in original).

Fanon's spatiotemporalized “socius” emerges as a trans-historical chronotope that persistently materializes the colonial consciousness in the decolonizing present. It is not the repetition of history, but the reiteration of it in a dynamic dialectical historicity that continues to animate the intersocial space-time of the still colonized postcolonial subject. The implication here is that chronotopes are both not equal and emerge relationally vis-à-vis other chronotopes. To be sure, Lean In and Purple Cow may, on one level, imbricate very different reading publics or chronotopes, and here every reader co-constitutes their fractal Lean In or Purple Cow chronotope within it. On another level, Purple Cow and Lean In also diagram a cosmopolitan, English-speaking horizon of aspiration to Miriam and Vivian's social projects. The seemingly equivalent, and relative, potentialities of all of these chronotopes, however, are quickly unsettled when it emerges that African and Chinese subjects are less easily able to inhabit such space-times of personhood compared to the white English subjects these chronotopes implicitly presuppose. This becomes particularly apparent when the seeming persistence of a colonial chronotope burdens postcolonial subjects in ways that white subjects do

not appear to experience beyond narcissistic guilt or denial. In Miriam and Palesa's compromised relationship with the Purple Cow, and to a certain extent in the limits of Ally's projection of Sheryl Sandberg onto Vivian, important challenges to any claim of language arbitrariness emerges, thus making chronotopic construction and imagination a consistently politicized domain. In the case of Azanian Achievers and Rainbow Bridge, this is particularly explicit in the ways their attempts at legibility unfold within the unmarked (perhaps white), still-Anglocentric space-time in which the Purple Cow and Sheryl Sandberg are mere tokens.

This space-time thus suggests a contradiction between constraint and liberation, but from and in relation to what? In the following section, I will conclude with a transhistorical contextualization of the hierarchies of mobility that complicate the emergence of postintersectional personhood. In doing so, I will propose that the compromised commitment to Purple Cow imbricates a dialectical history of race and gender relations that are very much part of a legacy of apartheid and colonial political economy of labor migrancy in the interactional reiteration of a third-world space-time.

### INTERSECTIONAL (IM)MOBILITIES

In viewing the deferment of Vivian and Miriam's *motivated* aspirational horizons, it might appear that the gender-emancipatory possibilities of a cosmopolitan space-time are being short-circuited by a patriarchal backlash: on the part of the male members of Purple Cow or the white male professors in liberal American universities. Instead, I propose that the history being drawn from and the ideological context that sustains the elusive aspiration toward the Purple Cow are suggestive of another intersectional tension, one that concerns the postcolonial politics of (im)mobility.

Anthropologist Julie Chu (2010) has evocatively captured a contemporary tension between mobility and immobility as equally traumatic conditions in the lives of Fuzhounese subjects in China, among whom she identifies a complex, intergenerational mobile imaginary. Not only do contemporary Fuzhounese migrants value mobility as a capacity that stratifies different mobile or immobile subjects, the same anxieties also animate and sustain relationships between the living and the dead. Crucial in mediating these various kinds of mobility are two forms of currency that appear fairly prominently among her informants. The first is paper money that looks suspiciously like American dollars, the second is debt converted into a form of Mausean gift, where the capacity to pay off debt after having been in debt becomes a mode of sustaining intersocial ties—what will be discussed in chapter 5 as *renqing*. Both of these forms of currency ultimately come to commensurate the same “compulsion” toward mobility and index “America” as almost metaphysical destination: where subjects have always been arriving even if they've never left Fuzhou. Perhaps this dialectical contradiction emerges precisely in

relation to the ideological backdrop that imbricates late capitalist mobilities, manifesting in the infrastructural projects Chu's subjects are witnessing in Fuzhou.

There is a difference between the mobility desire described in the Lean In and Purple Cow discussions earlier and the compulsion to mobility that emerges in Chu's discussion. Here, I do not feel this difference arises purely out of the (so-called) subjective nature of ethnographic observation and various ethnographers' emplacements. Instead, I suggest that the difference reveals an important distinction between educational and other forms of migrancy—Chinese traders in Africa or African traders in China, for instance. In my work, as has also been explored in Lisa Rofel's (2007) work, desire is animated by the imagined capacity to transform into a more ideal or cosmopolitan subject. If one travels for education, there is a guaranteed transformation that those both abroad and at home come to count on. In less desire-driven forms of migrancy, one must travel in the hope of a transformation (of social or economic status) that is far from guaranteed. In the first case, mobility is a desirable and transformative capacity. In the second, a compulsion to move—whether desired or achieved—is one's only option. Neither subject, however, is necessarily more precarious than the other, and in both cases, failure to maintain mobility may result in (a perhaps terminal) stasis—as demonstrated in Damien's example in the preceding chapter. Describing similar precarities in the context of white racist uptake of non-white immigrant mobility in contemporary Australia, Ghassan Hage uses the term “stuckedness” to get at this failure.

For Hage, stuckedness emerges precisely out of a sense of existential mobility as a basic human pursuit shared by many of his respective Australian informants: particularly between white racists and perceived-to-be non-white immigrants:

Existential mobility is this type of imagined/felt movement. . . . This differs from the physical movement of tourists, for instance, whose physical mobility (travel) is part of their accumulation of existential mobility. In a sense, we can say that people migrate because they are looking for a space that constitutes a suitable launching pad for their social and existential self. They are looking for a space and a life where they feel they are going somewhere as opposed to nowhere, or at least, a space where the quality of their “going-ness” is better than what it is in the space they are leaving behind. (Hage 2009, 2)

As non-white elites with a lot to lose, we can also see something like Hage's existential mobility at play in *motivating* actors like Miriam's and Vivian's respective cosmopolitan projects. However, in their case it is the pursuit of existential mobility that comes to generate the intersectional stratifications that sustain their very own conditions of stuckedness. Additionally, we can understand icons of personhood—like Sheryl Sandberg, cowboys, giraffes, or Purple Cows that orient the “remarkable selves” under construction here—as generating omissions that (perhaps fetishistically) occlude the possibilities of inverted, dystopian chronotopes



of stuckedness interrupting the smooth textures of the cosmopolitan lives being pursued—regardless of their compromises. Such dystopian archetypes might be spatiotemporally proximate and yet negated. For instance, contemporary migrant women, like Meimei, whom Vivian and Ally certainly do not want to be. They can also be historically remote, and yet painfully present—the conditions of industrial colonialism and apartheid that exploited the limited choices of Miriam’s and Palesa’s mothers and grandmothers up until a few decades ago.

#### HISTORICAL (IM)MOBILITIES, COLONIAL MODERNITIES

Once again, my invocation of history does not suggest a linear, deterministic relationship between past and present. Instead, what is at play is reiteration rather than recursion of the dynamics of a colonial-capitalist past in the context of contemporary Sino-African Beijing. The demand for labor in industrializing African urban centers in this region during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was predominantly fueled by mining booms in gold, copper, and diamonds, leading to the development of cities like Johannesburg, which due to its size and continued prosperity became a quintessential African metropole. In the work of sociologists and historians Christopher Ballantine (2000), Charles van Onselen (1982), and Laura Longmore (1966), a number of important features about labor migrancy and its social transformations around Johannesburg become apparent. It created a disconnect between men coming to labor in urban areas and women who were expected to manage rural homesteads that white farmers and the colonial state were increasingly expropriating. In both cases, Black South African men and women were transformed from land-owning-collectives—mediated through complex “cattle bridewealth” and kinship-based hierarchical systems—to bare labor. Black South African subjects were either struggling to maintain household and kinship relations on shrinking land where neither cattle nor grazing was sufficient to do so, or were selling their domestic, mining, and industrial labor in urban centers, unable to afford to participate in the kinship-property system. Many men became inscribed in what van Onselen (1982) calls the prison-mine complex, where African men finding themselves in colonial-commercial centers like Johannesburg were either interpolated into the industrial labor system—which was dangerous and exploitative, but ultimately more economically viable than a shrinking homestead or a white farm—or forced to find alternatives at the margins of a predominantly male, urban world. The alternatives were certainly criminal given the ways in which the black African males’ movements and capacities to live near urban areas were severely curtailed by a set of laws that simultaneously forced and curtailed their mobility. These were called pass-laws and were a kind of domestic passport offered to African migrant laborers allowing them to travel to find work. At the same time pass-laws allowed very limited movement for black men and women, whereby curfews were placed on those working within white

urban areas. A property could not be owned, and only certain kinds of residences adjacent to urban areas could be maintained. These adjacent areas were called “locations” and their existence along with the other pass-law constraints aided the “compartmentalization” (Fanon [1952] 2008) of white and black chronotopes within the same urban areas.

The worlds that opened up in the obvious cracks within this overtly constraining system took on a variety of forms. In van Onselen’s (1982) work, such constraints were the condition of possibility for the emergence of an elaborate criminal class and urban culture in Johannesburg, while for Ballantine (2000), the resulting condition of labor migrancy resulted in a highly gendered music and media landscape that, in its gritty glamorization of urban life, set the tone for cosmopolitan aspirations of not only black South Africans, but black migrant labor coming from Zimbabwe and Botswana to work in or around the goldfields of the Witwatersrand. Such transbordering subjects came to see Johannesburg as a regional nexus point for their aspirations—a stepping-stone metropolis. For Longmore (1966), Hunter (2010), and to some extent Ballantine, this “cosmopolitan” urban domain emerged as an appealing “opportunity” to many African women, many of whom were no longer content with trying to maintain homesteads, where often they were at the mercy of fairly repressive in-laws. Add to this the rapidly deteriorating conditions on the homestead as a result of land expropriation and the power vacuums left by a mass male exodus to the mines, and one can understand the fairly strong motivations to leave for cities like Johannesburg. Upon coming to the city, many found niches—legally or illegally—taking up domestic labor in white residences, opening taverns that would serve beer and food as well as provide entertainment for laboring black men, or engage in various forms of compensated male companionship ranging from “romantic” or “provider-love” (Hunter 2010) to prostitution (Longmore 1966; Ballantine 2000). Ballantine, in particular, emphasizes the ways in which black labor migrancy—while providing new theaters for female labor—ultimately exacerbated or engendered less-equal relationships between black men and women in Southern Africa. In all these discussions, male roles were reduced to activities motivating the circulation of colonial-commodity forms—through mining, industrial, and even musical labor. Female roles, by contrast, had to further conform to the fulfillment of male desire, be it as maintainers of the homesteads and family affairs, or as the providers of companion labor in the urban centers as sexually commoditized subjects.

#### “WE’RE STILL GETTING FUCKED”

The resonance between this historical description of colonial labor migrancy in Southern Africa with female migrants in Beijing is deliberate. In the Chinese capital, Palesa and other female Purple Cows find themselves under pressure to conform to similar limiting possibilities between sexual objectification and the

expectation to “return home and take care of the homestead”—preferably with a comfortable job and a pension. While the next chapter will go into detail as to how such expectations are contested with equally limiting results, I will suggest that many female Azanian Achievers who quietly embrace the “equal opportunity” logic of the Purple Cow do not, in fact, express this through public “sexual freedom,” which is treated skeptically. As Lindiwe, another black South African informant, put it in an interview: “Freedom from what? We’re still the ones *getting fucked*.” Here, Lindiwe was drawing attention to both the persistence of patriarchal power dynamics as reflected in the focus-group discussion mentioned earlier, as well as the limited numbers of female African students compared to their male counterparts in Beijing. This situation leaves female Purple Cow members both outnumbered and vulnerable to power dynamics that are largely out of their control, even if their leaders are women (as seen in an earlier interaction). Instead, many commit to the Purple Cow in two ways. In the case of Palesa, they resist relationships in Beijing in the service of having a successful career “back home,” or, in the case of Miriam, represent themselves as “strictly professional” cosmopolitan subjects within Azanian Achievers, choosing to have relationships with men mostly outside of an African peer community.

Compared to Miriam and Palesa, Vivian and Ally experience vastly different kinds of limits. Indeed, most of the participants in Rainbow Bridge’s boot camp found the concept of intersectionality troubling to fathom, claiming that “all women in China experience equal discrimination,” a perspective once voiced by Ally and which drew unanimous approval from the other class participants. This confused their visiting professor, who was trying to teach them bell hooks’s (2013) critique of Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*—the two opening texts of the workshop. Indeed, the relatively privileged position of many of the workshop participants may have precluded any kind of critical engagement with black and ethnic minority women in China. However, the cracks of Beijing’s migrant underworld require little excavation to uncover intersectional strata, not unlike those of the industrial-prison complex that the Africanist historians evocatively described.

In this chapter, the constrained translation of mass icons of “personhood” revealed intersectional orders emerging in the absence of ideal “Sino-Afropolitan” cosmopolitan precedents. This contributes an important extension to both discussions of gendered enregisterment as well as theories around race-gender-sexuality intersectionalities, given the fact that the majority of these prior analyses have been staged in the context of bounded societies, nations, or language communities that have shared a long-term proximity. In a Sino-African encounter, the more spatiotemporally complex, dialectical dimensions of register formation and intersectional stratification can be observed in an interaction that is less obviously overdetermined by overt structuring processes like the nation-state and language standardization policies. To be sure, my analysis suggests that elements of these structures are still far from absent, however, in less expected modes of ordering.

Furthermore, the intersectional ordering I have identified here is contingent on an overarching spatiotemporal contextualization of meanings and associated values that engender their own dependencies—where signs of language, mobility, and race generate the space-time for the reiteration of “common sense” gender asymmetries.<sup>11</sup> In support of my discussion, I additionally provided an example of interactional analysis where the identification of “canonic poetics” empirically reveals many of the implicit participatory hierarchies that more conventional discussions of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) often effectively demonstrate in more rhetorical settings (Flores 2018). In the following chapter, I will expand on these themes, showing how the relationship between English and its associated, racialized signs of cosmopolitanism—as a kind of virtual gravity for Sino-African interactions—provides often constraining rather than liberating possibilities for a genuinely decolonized subjecthood.