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Miners on the move:

Expellable labor, flexible intimacies, and institutional recast in West African artisanal gold mines

ABSTRACT

The expansion of gold mining in West Africa transforms miners' relations to space and time as they move frequently from one mining site to the next. Whereas labor, reproduction, and social integration are expected to be durably organized through the social institutions of marriage, mentorship, and friendship, itinerant miners recast these institutions in a compressed and nonbinding form. As evictions from illegal mines multiply, miners create a life across ephemeral spaces by turning the financial and social resources accruing in intimacy into portable anchorages. They engage in relationships that mimic institutions of village life but whose significance is detached from long-term local prospects. Thus, young men find themselves constructing adult manhood while on an indefinite journey. Despite the risks and indeterminacy that characterize their labor, they seek to regain a sense of agency and reconcile antagonist temporalities and moralities of exchange that extraction progressively disrupts. [*artisanal mining, mobility, expulsions, intimacy, placemaking, masculinity, gold, migration, West Africa*]

I met Djibril, a Malinké man from the Siguiri region of Guinea, in seven different places and four different countries. During our first encounter, in 2009, I was researching community-company relations in the gold-mining sector in Upper Guinea.¹ We then maintained regular contact during successive episodes of research over the next 10 years. Djibril, who was 29 years old when we first met, is a full-time gold miner. In contrast to the thousands of farmers who join the informal gold-mining sites seasonally during the dry season, Djibril made his living solely by mining gold across West and Central Africa. He had been doing this for 15 years. Intrigued by how he managed this intensely mobile lifestyle, I often asked him for details about his travels.

One day, Djibril paused in his narration, ducking into his *bougou* (a tent made of straw and plastic sheets) to return with a printed photo.² It showed him and a team of miners posing in front of a shaft in which they were working. He wanted to show me three people in the picture: his former *tuteur* (mentor), his girlfriend, and his best friend. They were the principal characters of his tale. It was a story about social support and affection, tinged with nostalgia for a time when he was new to mining gold. Djibril described the support he received from people who had “helped him try his luck” at working in a gold mine, where he first arrived as a complete stranger with nothing else, in his story, but “the clothes [he] was wearing and a *kalayan*”—the long wooden pickaxe that miners use to excavate tunnels and after which they name themselves *kalayantigiw*, or ax bearers.

In discussions over the years during encounters in Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal, I was struck by the fact that, every time we met, Djibril had temporarily rooted himself in what I thought of as “parakinship” relations (Newell 2016). These

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parakin ties were similar to regionally common types of kinship relations, but they had systematically different configurations. In every new place, Djibril lived as a couple with yet another woman, worked, shared most of his time with another “best friend,” and depended on another *tuteur*, even though he had a *tuteur*, a wife, and a best friend at home as well. In this region, these three socially recognized forms of kinship regulate durable relations to place through long-term nurturing. Although such relationships do not imply exclusivity, each represents stability: of host-guest relations (*diatiguia*; mentoring), of family life (*furu*; marriage), and of social integration (*dugnoka*; friendship). The very terms are imbued with ideals of permanence. This pattern of intimate relations—clearly so essential to support Djibril’s mobile lifestyle—was replicated with striking similarity in every mining settlement where he temporarily stayed. I wondered how relationships that, foundationally, stand for and enact continuity and spatial stability could be recomposed in fundamentally ephemeral places like mining sites.

How do artisanal miners accommodate their mobile lives to places prone to appear and disappear within just a few days? Research on extractive industries (e.g., Gardner 2012; Nash 1993; Taussig 1980) shows that mining, overall, creates a distinctive kind of territoriality, one that shapes the lifeworlds of those who are caught up in the work of extraction or who simply live in its surroundings. More broadly, across entire regions, the expansion of mineral extraction induces deep social, economic, and cultural changes that overlap with the long-running deagrarianization of everyday social and economic structures. Terms such as “mineralization” (Bryceson et al. 2013) or “mining timescapes” (Lanzano 2018) capture these large-scale processes in Africa, most evident in the boom of informal artisanal gold mines.

Because gold serves as both hedge and haven in global finance, its price saw unprecedented spikes after the 2008 global economic downturn, and then again in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. Simultaneously, consumer demand for gold in India and China has continued to rise since 2005. Meanwhile, structural adjustment policies have led to mounting unemployment and economic hardship in West Africa. Altogether, these factors have fueled the region’s massive expansion of artisanal mines (Hilson 2016). Such mines are now estimated to directly employ at least 2.2 million people. They constitute the second-largest source of income in the region (Hilson 2016), and each mine can temporarily host thousands of people. The gold these miners extract then travels globally across complex production and trading networks that crisscross the boundaries of the licit and the illicit (Bolay 2021; Bolay and Schulz 2022), and ends up “consumed” as jewelry, investment products, or industrial components. Although artisanal mines are invisible on maps and official records, these sites rival industrial mines in terms of volume of gold production.

Governments in Guinea, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, and Senegal have oscillated between tolerating the booming informal artisanal gold mines and implementing policies to formalize this labor sector to generate tax revenues. Formalization, or rather its “lack,” from the state’s perspective, often justifies the eviction of so-called clandestine miners. It occurs when informal mines are deemed “illegal,” a fate that often befalls Djibril and his teammates. At any time, thousands of people might be evicted on short notice. These evictions especially target those mines located within the expanding licensed concessions granted to exploration firms and industrial mines, entities whose investments quadrupled from 2000 to 2010 (Edwards et al. 2014). Evictions also occur outside the very few “corridors” legally dedicated to artisanal mining. With this increase of foreign investments in mining projects and the ensuing struggles for land (Prause and Le Billon 2021), the places where artisanal mining operations are now growing can be characterized as spaces of “expulsions” (Sassen 2014).

Although these moments of expulsion deserve analysis (e.g., Bolay 2016; Dessertine and Nôus 2021; Geenen 2014), so too do the intervals between these disruptions. What does it mean to live, work, and have relationships on the move, across places under the continuous threat of removal? As scholars have shown, mobility across West Africa is often regulated by manipulating the region’s fluid and negotiable idioms of kinship (McGovern 2012; Stoller 2002; Whitehouse 2012). Yet the conditions in places that are entirely temporary—where no one has durable prospects—are something altogether different. The ephemerality of the places that miners like Djibril live in present an empirical challenge to our understanding of the relation between locality and mobility (Dahinden 2010), or place and movement (i.e., Ingold 2011).

As extraction—and, with it, the logics of expulsions—intensifies, configurations of dispersal and settlement are increasingly unpredictable. In response, miners engage in “social navigations” (Vigh 2009, 420), which refers to people’s tactical mobility in unstable places. Djibril himself explained what it is like: “I don’t know how long I will be able to stay [before the site gets evicted], and I don’t know where I will go next. We just work as long as it goes before figuring out where else to go.” He said this to me while working in the mine of Karakhéna (Senegal, 2014), a site then populated by thousands and claimed by a mining company registered in the Canary Islands. Just two months after telling me this, Djibril left Karakhéna along with hundreds of male and female miners, traders, and shopkeepers, anticipating that the site would soon be removed with the support of the Senegalese armed forces. As recounted by Ibrahima Thiam (2019), a journalist who covered the eviction, “bulldozers tore down everything. What was left were just remains of luggage, relics of buildings; in short, traces of a former life. More than 2,000 temporary houses

and shops have been demolished because [the company] considers this area to be part of its license.”

Mining sites and settlements are perceived as particularly precarious places in comparison to places imbued with ideals of permanence, such as the villages, towns, and cities where miners come from. They serve as precarious intersections of human trajectories, as environments where the resources being sought are prone to depletion and whose infrastructures may be abandoned swiftly under the threat of expulsion. For all the indelible marks that mining leaves on the earth, it rarely gives rise to durable places that, in geographic terminology, would qualify as localities: places that enable social and political anchorage over time and that can in turn serve as the launching point for mobilities (Cresswell 2004). While artisanal mines hardly allow for such long-term anchorages to emerge, miners nevertheless temporarily ground themselves in these places through transient relationships of work, support, dependence, and affection. To describe this process, one might use the term *being-in-place*, which has been used to describe the relationships and places that people build in making a “home” for themselves (Lems 2018). The paradox of belonging in informal mining sites is that these being-in-place relationships are not meant to make a home where they occur. To Djibril, being-in-place in the mines essentially meant securing his capacity to move across fleeting sites.

Neither “home” nor “away” are prefigured social spaces. The “home” involved a different kind of being-in-place. In Siguiri, where his family lived, Djibril built up his ties to home by being away. With Djibril’s remitting, the family compound was progressively improved, one of his brothers invested in a taxi, and another one bought mechanized farming instruments. Djibril’s role in his family fits the pattern in which circular (trans)migrants support “home” from afar by embedding themselves in specific localities abroad (Dahinden 2010). Yet the localities in which circular migrants embed themselves have their own characteristics. If “locality” is not an a priori condition but, rather, as Appadurai (1996, 42) argues, a consequence of being “produced” as a legible place in relation to other scales of belonging, then the expulsive temporality of informal mines produces a distinctive kind of locality for a circular migrant to be “away” in. To reproduce home as a stable place, miners must travel through transient social and material settings.

Viewing this peculiar mobility-locality nexus through the lens of miners’ travels, I ask a relatively simple question: How can mobility be perpetuated in the relative absence of localities? Or, to draw on Djibril’s trajectory—one marked by continuous evictions and relocations from illegal mines—how do itinerant miners ground their intensely mobile lifestyle when the existence of the places they traverse is too short or uncertain to allow them to develop the usual institutions and social networks that otherwise ground mobility? An initial answer is suggested by the repeated

pattern of Djibril’s close social circle across successive mining sites. The places where West African gold miners travel appear to be characterized by antagonistic imaginaries and temporalities: on the one hand, ideals of permanence in what is considered the homeplace, where intimate relations are deemed durable; on the other, ephemerality in the mining sites, where similar relational patterns replicate without being expected to persist. Yet these temporalities combine throughout miners’ journeys. They are partly reconciled when miners navigate the fragile webs of intimate relations that are necessary to emplace movement.

In Djibril’s patterns of parakinsip, known social forms that by definition imply permanence are remade as temporary. Elaborating on how a shared feeling of urgency contributes to recasting the social institutions of mentorship, marriage, and best friendship brings attention to how affection, personal aspirations, and the need for instrumental support cohabit in intimacy. I borrow the metaphor of “institutional recast” from the gold industry. “Recast” institutions are those whose content and functions have been transformed but that retain the same form, like an alloy cast in a semipurified ingot (*doré*) whose inner composition varies while it maintains the same appearance. By paying attention to various intimate transactions—including emotional ones—between pairs, I locate the miners’ mobility in what Cole and Groes (2016) have evocatively called “affective circuits.” This perspective allows me to propose an alternative account of mine labor that does not focus exclusively on its exploitative dimension or on what may look like the inescapable structures of “expulsions” (Sassen 2014).

My ethnographic descriptions below trace Djibril’s journeys, reflecting how I “followed” Djibril from 2009 to 2019. We were not, by any means, together all the time and everywhere. We traveled together sometimes. Most often, I joined him for periods of one to four weeks in mines where he would temporarily settle for work. Between meetings, we maintained episodic contact by phone, and we sometimes met in Siguiri. His travels geographically contributed to guide my own research: in each new place, I would observe different ways of working, moving, and dwelling, in addition to meeting and interviewing new people.³

Characterizing mobility in the artisanal gold mines

Studies of African mobility and migration often implicitly assume that people’s journeys are grounded by relatively stable localities (Amin 1995; Amselle 1976; Manchuelle 1997), such as cities, villages, oases, markets, ports, border camps, refugee camps, plantations, and so on. Whatever their form and more or less coercive features, such places support movements by providing local anchorages. To perpetuate their movements, migrants rely temporarily on the local institutions and long-established

social networks inscribed in, and arising from, these localities.

More generally, movement relies not only on spatial and infrastructural moorings but also on institutional ones that configure mobilities across places (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006, 3). In turn, places result from individuals' movements. Places exist as "knots of entwined life-lines" (Ingold 2011, 148) or "bundled space-time trajectories" (Massey 2005, 119). These interconnections gain density and become emplaced in time, in part, through institutions that bind lives in relations of kinship and affinity. The anthropological record on "place" in Africa has long stressed the mutual relationship between kinship and locality in materializing ideals of perpetuity (Gaibazzi 2015; Kuper 1982). Even in a region where mobility is often considered the normal state, placemaking is integral to being mobile: mobility makes places, and places enable mobility. But the reverse is also true. Once trajectories cease to intersect, places also disappear. With them, their infrastructural and institutional moorings, which thereby cannot be acted on to support further moves, vanish as well.

I am not suggesting that configurations of places and movements have ever been static. For instance, the history of educational, religious, commercial, and agricultural mobilities reflects how occupational specialization along ethnic lines served to navigate changing configurations of places and movements (De Bruijn, van Dijk, and Foeken 2001). Yet mining mobilities contrast with these other kinds of mobilities for a series of reasons. Unlike well-known forms of labor mobility driven by plantations, commercial centers, and rearing small stock, the labor mobility driven by mining sites and miners' settlements is less likely to contribute to the establishment of long-lasting routes and places of passage. Precisely because informal mining sites are precarious, routes that are regular for a time may be quickly abandoned, thus constantly recomposing miners' geography.

The formalization policies encouraged by the World Bank have given rise to the "created informality" of artisanal mining (Hilson et al. 2017). These policies converged into a shared political commitment among neighboring states to "eradicate clandestine gold digging" (Kansoum 2019) which was increasingly criminalized. Among the most tangible results of these policies, informal actors were made more vulnerable once they were placed in the realm of illegality. Along with the multiplication of bans, evictions, and mine closures, miners are rendered expellable. In Guinea military forces are increasingly sent to expel artisanal miners from informal work sites (Dessertine 2021). The trend is similar in Mali, where an estimated 70,000 people were expelled from illegal mines in 2013 (Fainke 2013). In Côte d'Ivoire, 429 illicit mining sites have been forced to close in 2016 (GCI 2016), 200 in 2018, and 222 in 2019 (MMG 2020). Mining sites and settlements usually emerge quite quickly in

response to new discoveries (Jönsson and Bryceson 2009). They are, moreover, prone to swiftly disappear after unanticipated evictions, which, under labels like *ratissage* (sweep operation), *déguerpissement* (eviction), and *politiques de remontée* (banning policies), constantly reshape these spaces.

Yet mobility in the artisanal sector is primarily interpreted from the one-sided perspective of "rushes." Attention tends to concentrate on the appearance and multiplication of mining camps rather than their speedy disappearance. Local authorities, more concerned by incoming populations than departing ones, prefer the story of "rushes" to that of "expulsions." Experience illustrates this one-sided framing of mobility. In 2012 we traveled with a friend of Djibril's to meet with him in the Mandiana region of Guinea. We were struck to find the area already crowded with thousands of mainly unemployed workers, who had been continually arriving from neighboring Mali. We quickly realized that what Guinean authorities were labeling a "rush" was mainly the consequence of the sudden closure of several mining sites across the border; this same script played out a year later in Massioko, Mali (see Figure 1). Those closures prompted the quick relocation of the expelled workers—over the Guinean border for some, further for others. Given such unpredictability, journeys are less prone to stick to preexisting sets of relations embedded in "localities."

Ephemeral mines and urgent labor

The rapidly changing geographies of the artisanal gold mines cannot be accurately represented in full by trajectories like Djibril's. Farmer-miners operating near their villages, or seasonal miners, whose annual commute to mining areas has been the dominant mobility pattern for centuries (Ki-Zerbo and Niane 1991, 195), are less concerned by ensuring their capability of continual movement. Yet the current political economy of artisanal gold mining is peculiar for producing geographies that are constantly reshaped at an extraordinarily fast pace.

When I first met Djibril in 2009 in Koumban, in Upper Guinea, three artisanal mining sites had developed around the village in less than a year. Local authorities had regular, tense discussions with supporters and opponents of the emerging mining economy. Some saw it as a threat to agriculture-based livelihoods, and to morality at large, because male miners' performances of masculinity involve conspicuous consumption practices and risky behaviors. Indeed, gold-mining sites are often described as *mamaya*, after a historical dance of the region. This metonymy of dance and enjoyment suggests places where people act unproductively, without much thought for consequences. As the environmental and social outcomes of mining deeply transform livelihoods and some of the social institutions



Figure 1. An abandoned gold miners' settlement after its residents were expelled by state forces, Massioko, Mali, 2013. (Matthieu Bolay) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

that govern them, they also raise long-term concerns about an inevitable postmine future.

Against these long-term concerns, mining intensifies and accelerates, disrupting the usual production cycles and bringing with it a feeling of urgency. Everyday worries tend to concentrate on the very short term. For instance, later in 2009, I accompanied Djibril and two of his friends from Koumban to Koundiana Koura, also in Guinea, where a junior mining company had started prospecting the area. The inhabitants claimed that, from that time forward, they had no other choice than to “dig out everything” they could “before there is nothing left.” As Smith (2011, 21) observed regarding coltan mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, resource extraction leads to “the dispossession from the capacity to produce predictable time.” In Koundiana Koura, as in many other prospected zones, this meant that the only way local inhabitants could maintain some control over time was to try to dig more and to dig faster. Gold had to be extracted before a mining company could start operations and before the price could decrease. In a very short time, an increasing number of miners from neighboring villages, regions, and countries—including Djibril and his friends—joined the inhabitants of Koundiana Koura. As elsewhere, this urgency materialized in a surge of nearby temporary settlements (see Figure 2), where hundreds of people would gather and then depart just as fast. There, recalling Walsh's (2003) account of “daring consumption” in Malagasy sapphire mines or Werthmann's (2008) depiction

of Burkinabé gold miners' “frivolous squandering,” money is earned and largely spent on-site. Everyday stories of quick gains and quick spending add to the impression that, in these ephemeral settings, nothing stays for long.

Considering, with Massey (1995, 188), that “places as depicted on maps are slices through time caught in a moment,” artisanal mines—most of which never get “caught” by mapmakers—may represent extremely thin slices of time. This raises questions for the workers who make their living traveling the mines in search of gold. Where might they find and establish sources of support—for mobility, protection, access to work, and so on—to perpetuate their mobility? What is to be gained from these itinerancies, in terms of not only securing a living but also of moving forward in life and gaining social recognition? This, again, resonates with Vigh's (2009) perspective, centered on the everyday tactics—as opposed to more durable strategies—that allow one to navigate social life in predictably unstable environments. Itinerant miners indeed develop tactics to enable their next moves, such as contacting acquaintances in other mines to evaluate their future chances. But the replication of relational patterns such as Djibril's also points to more stable and shared strategies. Through them, miners constitute a space to ground their movements. By engaging in fragile, intimate relationships, miners articulate antagonistic timescapes, long- and short-term temporal outreaches associated with different places.



Figure 2. A *bougoufe* (lit. “tent city”), home to migrant gold miners, Kokoyo, Mali, 2012. (Matthieu Bolay) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Even in disrupted environments, these relationships affect strategies for stabilizing a sense of place and enabling mobility, which not only include responsive tactics but also recast long-standing institutions. They demand a certain ethical space for maneuver, in which people can adopt alternative age and gender roles among intimate pairs, but in which they can do so without publicly questioning the mines’ dominant, masculine values, like courage and endurance (e.g., Cros and Mégret 2009; Cuvelier 2014).

Masculine wanderings in search of permanence

In the West African context, the stories and trajectories of many young men are often rhetorically underpinned by narratives of adventurism (Bredeloup 2008). It is unsurprising that most *kalayantigiw* say they went to the gold mines because they “had no job” and because they “were just wandering around.” Djibril, too, never planned to be a miner: he said he “started by chance” while he was “wandering in Côte d’Ivoire.” His mobility can hardly be separated from culturally prescribed performances of masculinity at determined phases of life. These performances are ultimately acknowledged in the *fabara*—that is, the homeplace or, literally, “father’s place.” The homeplace is where people perform and reproduce lineage genealogies, where they ultimately achieve social personhood, and where they enact ideals of permanence through physical presence, visits, and remittances, as well as, more generally, through maintaining social bonds (Dessertine 2021; Gaibazzi 2015; Whitehouse 2012).

In fact, the sense of permanence attached to the *fabara* has historically relied strongly on outside mobilities that

support local livelihoods, mobilities that are institutionalized in the agrarian ideology and in conceptions of the social person. According to Brand (2001), Malians see *mogo cè* (manhood) as the outcome of relations within collective processes. It represents an apprehension of young men’s aspirations in relation to how they position themselves within their webs of significant others, especially family elders and classificatory brothers of the same age-group. Such a structure can create ethical tensions. On the one hand, young men are pressured to behave as expected by society. On the other, they are expected to fulfill their own aspirations, including those drawn from competing imaginaries, like those evoked by the gold mines and their abundant markets. For instance, when recalling his first travels, Djibril would complain about his position in the family. “I am the elder in the family,” he said. “This is why my parents did not want me to leave. They preferred to see me sitting in the courtyard while I could just go to the mines and earn enough for a motorbike.”

Such continually performed tensions are well captured by the twin concepts of *fadenya* and *badenya* (lit. “father-childness” and “mother-childness”). Drawing on the figure of the Mandé hero, these concepts replicate beyond the realm of biological kinship the typical relations between classificatory brothers born to different mothers. Be it in arts (Kouyaté 2017) or in everyday talk (Jansen 1996), they are used to qualify and attribute different values to behaviors and actions. The *fadenya*, because of the competition between collateral brothers, is associated to “centrifugal forces of disequilibrium” such as competition, self-promotion, or anything driving the actor out of his established social force field (Bird and Kendall 1980, 15). In

contrast, the *badenya* is associated with “centripetal forces of society,” such as submission to authority, stability, or cooperation, which are qualities that evoke obedience to norms (15). They recall what Douglas (1991, 287) more generally called the “tyranny of the home,” the place of scrutiny and incommensurable rights and duties that young people seek to be free of. One of the major “dangers of home,” Geschiere (2013, 1) adds, is that intimate relationships, such as those relationships encapsulated in the *fadenya-badenya* dichotomy, can lock family members in double binds. Rather than taken as essentializing *explanantia*, the *fadenya* and *badenya* can serve as heuristic devices to approach two of the facets of masculinity, each imposing apparently contradictory moral principles, spaces, and temporalities of action.

These conceptualizations of masculinity suggest that mining journeys can be seen as *fadenya*-oriented: they fabricate male personhood by replicating the cultural script of adventure and autonomy from the social structures of the “homeplace.” Simultaneously, they can also be seen as *badenya*-oriented: they help the individual fulfill filial duties by providing the central household with additional income. Ultimately, such mobilities enable social reproduction and a sense of permanence “at home.” Yet long-established age-related phases of mobility, as described, for example, by Manchuelle (1997), have been largely disrupted. While deagrarianization and unemployment have weakened agricultural livelihoods, their mobile counterparts, like work migrations, are also increasingly considered dead ends. Young Guineans, for example, migrate to Senegal, where they gain no opportunities but instead perform striving behaviors expected “back home” (Fioratta 2015).

Travel to the gold mines, initially recognized among older generations as a short-term, *fadenya* interlude of youth, has increasingly become a long-term, *badenya*-oriented livelihood. For instance, from a sample of 54 artisanal miners with whom I conducted network interviews on their mobility supports, 83 percent had maintained artisanal mining as their primary occupation for more than four years, and 63 percent had traveled outside their country of residence to mine gold.⁴ Mining increasingly implies long journeys across many mining sites in many West African countries. From an exchange perspective (cf. Douglas 1991; Parry and Bloch 1989), the mobilities of *kalayantigiw* miners across the antagonist timescapes of the mines and their homes illustrate efforts to accommodate different temporalities and moralities of exchange.

In the Mandé agrarian political economy, movers and nonmovers are usually integrated locally along institutions of kinship and friendship, the spheres of which often overlap. The roles of *tuteurs*, spouses, and best friends, which were so important to Djibril, typically support integrative norms of citizenship (between locals and strangers), of gender (between men and women), and of age (between elders

and youngsters). Since an in-depth analysis of these institutions has been thoroughly done elsewhere (e.g., Chauveau et al. 2006; McGovern 2012; Whitehouse 2012), I limit myself to a succinct summary of their main traits.

Concerning local citizenship, the institution of *diatiguia* (mentorship; French: *tutorat*) encapsulates norms of reciprocity: “locals” are expected to provide land and support to “strangers” in exchange for their allegiance. The idea is that the respective roles, of host and of stranger, are interchangeable either in time or in space. The institution of *furu* (marriage) installs a gendered division of labor based on sex, in which women, as wives, locally sustain productive and reproductive labor while men are more prone to move for work. In mining areas, this division of labor is spoken about as “taking care of the sauce” (in reference to women cultivating cash-crop gardens in the village) or “taking care of the grain” (in reference to men traveling to agricultural hamlets to provision subsistence for the entire year; Panella 2005). Finally, age-based *koroya* (seniority) draws on the obedience of young people to their elders; certain young people being themselves senior to others. These norms are relational, social, and symbolic. *Koroya*, for instance, discursively organizes relations between relative youngsters seeking experience abroad and their masters or mentors—playing the role of elders—in different places of work, including in contexts of overseas migration, as illustrated by Stoller’s (2002) account of West African immigrants in New York City.

All three institutions attribute roles and statuses in certain contexts. They are also malleable and negotiable, especially when they foster supportive relationships away from home (McGovern 2012; Stoller 2002; Whitehouse 2012). They rely on individuals’ capacity to engage in and maintain intimate relations, which are considered pillars of village life and conditions of its perpetuity. So they do not just articulate the mobility of some with the (relative) immobility of others in the making of place. Being deeply interwoven into the moral economies of kinship and friendship, the various circuits of exchange and distribution within those relationships are also transformed where the locality grip fades away.

Transactional mobilities and recast intimacies

Mining journeys rarely fulfill the promise of striking it rich. In mining sites and settlements, however, money of various currencies circulates intensively. According to Zelizer (2005), intimate social relations are eminently transactional. Money transfers normally depend on social relations, relations that such transfers conversely contribute to defining. Intimate transactions thus question the commonsense boundaries that separate money from intimacy. While the exploitative aspects of artisanal mining should be acknowledged, this approach helps avoid pitfalls of the

labor lens, which can implicitly reproduce commonsense categories—husbands and wives, clients and prostitutes, masters and slaves.

To recognize the affective exchanges and meanings at stake in miners' social relations along their journeys, I explore the intimate relationships by which Djibril turns ephemeral mines into temporarily stabilized places. I consider three recurring social institutions—*female mentorship*, *small marriages*, and *mine best-friendship*—that miners may participate in to perpetuate their mobile livelihoods. These forms of relationships involve redefining the intimate exchange channels characteristic of social institutions of mentorship, marriage, and friendship. In the ephemeral contexts of the mines, the institutional recast that I describe is not just a tactical response to contexts of “certain uncertainty” (Vigh 2009, 422) or to the exploitative structures of “expulsions” (Sassen 2014). It is invested with affects and the search for social recognition.

Female mentorship

In the picture that Djibril showed me, the first person was his *tuteur* (*diatigui*), a male member of the Camara family, the principal clan in the neighboring village. *Diatiguia* is a male-headed institution that confers power and manhood in village life—the greater the capacity to host strangers, the greater the reputation of the male head of household. In artisanal mining contexts, however, women often play an important role as *tutrices* (female host person), a neologism that has no equivalent usage in villages, towns, and cities.

Sekouba, another miner and a friend of Djibril's, recalls how he had first been directed to the wife of an imam from a nearby village. She had “taken [him] home and put [him] to work.” During his stay with her, Sekouba relied on his host for all kinds of instrumental support. He worked on her behalf and, in compensation, gave her a part of his earnings in gold. Usually, male heads of household are not supposed to accept any monetary compensation for hosting guests. In the contexts of the mines, however, women who manage everyday expenses and lead the “hearthhold,” the mother-child units within larger households, explicitly monetize hosting in relatively standardized arrangements, and they have no qualms disclosing the charge. Instead of relying on the support of male *tuteurs*, as is the norm in material reciprocities integrated into the masculine sphere of farm labor, women in the mines get direct access to the income generated from their hospitality. *Tutrices*, usually elder women, support miners' journeys by providing them shelter, by performing domestic work, and, at times, by sponsoring their operations.

One of our hosts close to Kouroussa, in Guinea, combined the roles of *tutrice* and shaft owner, controlling a consistent workforce. Her husband, a town dignitary who was often away, would publicly insist that the mining business

in which his wife was so intensely engaged did not at all interest him. He especially stressed the questionable moral legacy of the fast money generated by the mines. Nevertheless, his wife acted as owner (*nyado*) of many mining shafts on his behalf. She spent most of her time in the neighboring mining sites, “taking care” of the miners, mostly young men, whom she called her *petits* (little ones). Young men would regularly present themselves in her courtyard, asking to join one of her ongoing operations. Each morning, she had food prepared and distributed among the teams she supported.

A similar monetization of mentoring relationships has been observed elsewhere, notably along migratory routes to Europe. For instance, in Senegal, male *diatiguiw* (mentors) provided paid smuggling services to aspiring emigrants (Pian 2008). Gold-mining areas, however, differ for their gendered recast. Mobility patterns in mining areas offer the possibility of moving across predefined age and gender roles, thus redefining the money channels woven into social relations. The exchanges in which *tutrices* engage with miners—offering a hearthhold with food, shelter, and emotional support, in exchange for shares of raw ore—symbolically resemble those of people playing a maternal role. Yet, through the monetization of domestic work—contrary to their unpaid work in male-headed *diatiguia*—*tutrices* create rents on miners' circulation. Young male miners, to sustain their *fadenya*-oriented lifestyle—that is, a lifestyle that is individualistic and adventurer—may have to engage in intimate relations of patronage and high dependency with *tutrices*, relations that would be viewed poorly back home.

Small marriages

The second important character in Djibril's picture was his girlfriend. As I would observe later, each time we met in one or another mining settlement, Djibril had a girlfriend whom he had met en route. In practice, these relationships involved cohabitation, which included sexual and economic exchanges based on domestic services. The partnerships were described with another neologism specific to mining contexts: *furukuruni* (lit. “small marriage”). The term suggests more duties and obligations than toward an ordinary girlfriend, yet such duties were limited in scope and time span. Narrating his early experiences in the gold mines, Djibril described how he had first been part of such an arrangement when he stayed for almost a year with a woman who was, in his words, “just like my wife”:

She fed me, she bought me clothes. We lived together. When I would win something, we would divide it between us two. We could have married, but for me that was not the thing to do because, in my mind, I would turn back when I had enough money. It would make me sad, but I knew I would leave. So even though I was

working and coming back to sleep at her place every night, it was only for the time being there.

Djibril insisted that being in a couple allowed him and his partner to have all their “little needs together instead of spending it elsewhere.” This echoes a recurring trope among male miners, who often worried that their relations with women would have bad consequences, including unnecessary spending and losing money. At the same time, sexual conquests reinforced miners’ status as male “adventurers.” *Furukuruni*, however, differs from casual or paid sex because it involves a mutualization of financial and social resources between partners while they are together, yet it maintains the principle of separated economies. Supposedly, each party is free, at any moment, to leave with his or her earnings for another mining site or to return home, where a regular, formal spouse often awaits.

As Werthmann’s (2010) term “heterotopias” suggests, mines tend to allow for everyday ethics based on alternative norms and hierarchies. One famous example is Moodie and Ndatshé’s (1994) depiction of “mine marriage” between men in South African mining compounds. *Furukuruniw* can also be seen in light of alternative moral economies. “Little marriages” are based on a seemingly functional concept of spouses as partners in an “economic-sexual exchange” (Tabet 2014). The temporary couples live together and exchange care, sex, and earnings, but they do not plan to raise a family together. The relative tolerance with which many such partnerships are treated, and the ambiguity that they present, undermine the belief that single women in mining areas are necessarily isolated from their husbands or families. Rather, in some cases, people tacitly accept the eventuality that wives or female family members will enter into *furukuruniw*.

Such an ambiguous agreement was illustrated in a discussion Djibril and I had with Toumba, a Guinean woman whom we met in a mining site close to Misseni in southeastern Mali. Toumba described her relationship with her current “friend,” a Malian man with whom she had been living and traveling for more than a year, as that of a “couple.” During this time, while traveling and working with her male friend, Toumba regularly visited her husband’s village. These visits suggest a sort of consensus between the two of them, a topic that proved difficult to discuss, since Toumba’s mobile partnering contradicted dominant gender norms and role attribution. As she would insist, her husband had “given [her] permission”:

When there is a need for money, I ask him first and then I go. My cowife looks after the children when I am away. [...] I am the one who knows about the mines. I learned with my mother. My husband, he doesn’t. He is a tailor.

Toumba was suggesting that there is room to maneuver and tolerance among spouses, as long as both contribute to the general livelihood of the homeplace. This agreement was further indicated by Toumba’s professed view that her husband failed to carry out his “masculine” responsibilities, including providing enough subsistence. Her endeavors in the mines manifested considerable efforts to maintain the ties of formal marriage, epitomizing reproduction and ideals of permanence. To her, *furukuruniw* fulfilled emotional and material needs on the move that may be interrupted at any moment according to each partner’s plans and obligations.

So *furukuruniw* are more than an effect of economic insecurity, which might force isolated women to secure independent sources of income and protection to compensate for the risks inherent to the adelphic kinship. In transient settings like the mines, they more broadly respond to the need of both men and women to constantly seek supportive relationships in the absence of existing support networks. These relationships illustrate alternative circuits of exchange and distribution, in contexts where continual mobility is the norm.

Mine best-friendship

Third on Djibril’s picture was Daouda. Djibril described him first as his *petit*, but also as his “best friend” at the mine. In the discussion that followed, Djibril made clear that he was, at that time, in a precarious situation. This precariousness partly explained why he would accept support from someone he considered of inferior status.

I stayed with them [Kono people] in their *bougouuw* [tents] and I ate with this *petit* because I really had nothing. He is the one who really helped me out. Then he helped me find work so that I would earn something as well. He was really my best friend during all the time I stayed there.

While the vocabulary of friendship (*dugnoka*) stresses horizontality, the terminology of *koroya* (seniority) manifests hierarchies imbricated in relationships of power and dependence. By extension, such rules of seniority are also deployed in friendship relations. The exchanges between Djibril and Daouda show that, without preexisting ties on which one may extend one’s own network, friendships will likely develop despite conventional social hierarchies—at least for a time. Entering such forms of friendly patronage involves intimate exchanges of material and nonmaterial things in the realm of intimacy. To do so, miners often take on roles that they would not be associated with outside their mining journeys, by virtue of age, ethnicity, or clan affiliation. Indeed, though Djibril would regularly qualify his relationship with Daouda as a “sincere friendship,” he

could not accept, in the long term, the inadequacy he felt regarding Daouda's status.

Investigating the intimate transactions on which friendships are built may illuminate their dynamic, non-linear content in the ephemeral context of the mines. In other words, friendships do not always match the idealistic vision of solidarities that would extend in time and space (Guichard, Grätz, and Diallo 2014). Rather, they are prone to be interrupted (sometimes quite abruptly), transformed, and recast by modifications of the content and channels of the intimate transactions that underlie them.

This point is illustrated by another episode of Djibril's trajectory. When I joined him in Mali in 2013, I was surprised not to see him with his alleged "best friend," Moussa, with whom he had traveled for two years. Djibril insisted that he had really "loved" Moussa, and that Moussa had "left" him. This choice saddened Djibril, even though he understood it. He had tried to persuade his friend to stay with him by proposing material advantages, including managing his own shafts with Djibril's sponsorship. But Moussa refused: he had other plans back at his homeplace.

One year later, we met again in Senegal. This time, Djibril was spending lots of time with a new friend, Abou, from Ghana. Their relationship illustrates highly multiplex relations between *prima facie* distant individuals. Djibril and Abou had met in Senegal. Abou had arrived from Ghana, after traveling through mining sites in Burkina Faso and Mali, from which he had just been evicted. He spoke broken Maninkakan and, other than Djibril, had very few connections in the mine. Djibril had provided the Ghanaian with most of the support he needed, considering that he had taken him on for work. He provided Abou with food in the first weeks, and now that Abou was ill, put aside his shares from the shaft so that he would still receive an income. Each spoke about the other as a friend. Their friendship was attested to by Abou's being part of the evening *attaya* (green tea and endless discussions) at Djibril's tent, to which most of the other coworkers were not invited. Thus, they were friends, but also engaged in a sort of client-patron relationship in which Abou was very much indebted to Djibril, albeit not financially.

Djibril's "love talk" about his lost friendships suggests more than tactical calculations to obtain support. Love is used to express not only mutual support but also emotional attachments and a shared worldview, recalling forms of "vernacular cosmopolitanism" (Werbner 2006). Yet the constant simultaneity of emotional and instrumental concerns in miners' talk indicates the ambiguity of relationships that represent both emotional investment and instrumental expectations. They recall Mains's (2013, 340) observation that for young Ethiopians, "connections between affection and material support are not confined to relationships among lovers and kin."

Whereas people outside mining settings tend to downplay the possible instrumental benefits of friendship,

since such benefits are embedded in long-term community relations (e.g., Guichard, Grätz, and Diallo 2014; Mains 2013), they become more visible and elicited in ephemeral places like the mines. In these places, the ideal of friendship as a social institution—fostering stability, durability, and equity—is compressed to its shortest temporality.

Mobility across places, gender roles, and status

The dynamics I have described show how iconic institutions of placemaking—mentoring, marriage, and friendship—are transported to the gold mines mainly in name. In the mines, they mimic the form of these relationships, but their significance is detached from long-term local prospects. The openly monetized exchanges they enable depend on people's greater flexibility in adopting age- and gender-specific social roles.

Miners and their intimate pairs perpetuate their journeys by juggling age and gender norms, and the apparent ease with which they do this suggests that the rise of "portable personhoods"—that is, the transformed nature of personal identity and life strategies that characterize "mobile lives" (Elliott and Urry 2010, 3)—is not specific to the cosmopolitan elites of the Global North. As noted by social theorists of the late 20th century (e.g., Bauman 2000; Beck 1992), mobile lives in the West are characterized by flexibility and adaptability, both of which have become necessary to navigating the increasingly uncertain and precarious contexts produced by globalization. Yet, as Munck (2013, 752) recalls, the situations described by the term *precarity* tend to be the norm in the Global South.

For instance, much scholarship does not address "uncertainty" in Africa as an indicator of seizure but as a routinized experience (Cooper and Pratten 2015). It is an everyday, creative practice unfolding in localized and historical conjunctures of "emplacement and displacement" (Mbembé and Nuttall 2004, 351). Hence, it is no surprise that idioms of kinship and its extensions are maneuvered in flexible ways to create relationships in uncertain places. Those flexible intimacies indeed manifest more continuity than rupture, given how they afford some degree of predictability and security in the places where those features are most perceived to be lacking, such as in contexts of war (e.g., McGovern 2012), migration (e.g., Andrikopoulos and Duyvendak 2020), and homelessness (e.g., Margaretten 2015).

What is at stake in miners' institutional recast is more the social and material dissolution of one's environment than the well-established navigability of kinship and its extensions. In this context of urgency, people ascribe meanings to intimate relationships and the norms of exchange among pairs, meanings that are transformed to help itinerant miners navigate institutional frames across force fields

of acceleration and compression. Icons of placemaking institutions are recast in a compressed form that reduces the time and efforts to establish reciprocities. They allow quick arrangements to be concluded and abandoned, just as long as mutual interests at the mine converge, notwithstanding the emotional troubles caused by the unpredictable breaking of ties.

In terms of intimate and transactional content, pairs do not consider themselves elder or younger relations, spouses, or best friends, since they would be outside the mines. Invariably, comparative indexes accompany the terms, in such expressions as “*like my wife*” and “*best friend at the mine*.” These terminological artifacts turn the mutualization of financial and social resources accruing in intimate relations into reliable and portable anchorages for miners along their travels. The form of this terminology builds on the affordances of the social institutions of mentoring, marriage, and friendship as relational patterns of placemaking. Through these patterns, miners’ bodily, affective, and financial exchanges become enmeshed so as to facilitate support and guidance, notwithstanding forms of patronage and dependence.

Values in and of uncertainty

Miners maintain relationships that they themselves consider distinct from what those relationships are called. This suggests a pragmatic and necessary project of crafting institutions that suit their imperative for mobility. Itinerant miners empty these institutions of their “home” indexes and their locality-based content. In doing so, they also partly protect themselves from the dangers of intimacy, and the tensions between security and constraints entailed by that intimacy (Geschiere 2013). Labor relations are indeed much more “constrained” in contexts of more permanent “fixed work,” such as in the open shafts of the diamond sector (D’Angelo 2018) or in the semimechanized gold mines that increasingly rely on cyanidation infrastructures (Verbrugge, Lanzano, and Libassi 2021). In these settings, where a sense of locality is also more prone to emerge, workers are more likely to be controlled and immobilized through mechanisms oscillating between bonded and wage labor. By contrast, the fragile arrangements I have described are rather open and flexible.

According to many scholars (e.g., Berthomé, Bonhomme, and Delaplace 2012), uncertainty generates open-ended relationships. In line with this thesis, miners experience recast placemaking institutions as “more free” than those that govern intimacy, work, and distribution in other segments of the mining sector and their homeplace, with respect to which they constantly position themselves. Issa, one of Djibril’s younger friends in Karakhéna, explained why he had no intention to return home at the moment. As he incisively put it,

I love mining. I felt strongly about it when I came back home for the first time. I didn’t stay there even for a whole month before going out again. Every time I returned to the village, I felt more and more discouraged. I got connected with gold mining from the start. Here, I am free like the wind in the desert.

Issa’s celebration of work in an exhausting, dangerous, and uncertain sector is hard to make sense of without relating it to representations of the producing order in rural homes. It calls on scholars to reformulate the question of labor arrangements, not only in terms of the exclusion and marginality that accompany highly precarious situations, but also in terms of what Calvão (2016, 461) calls “the ethical problem of practicing freedom.” In their journeys miners navigate the ambiguous relation between freedom and uncertainty, and this makes apparent an underappreciated effect of everyday precariousness: it imposes the recrafting of social values. Though miners can, at any time, be expelled from where they work, get injured, or die in a shaft collapse, they emphasize their feeling of “freedom” gained from these environments, a feeling that aligns with the performance of *fadenya*-oriented behaviors expected of young men.

The increased mineralization of space does not necessarily make men more mobile than they were before. Rather, it tends to make their mobilities more tenuously connected to the *fabara* and more reliant on fragile intimate relationships. While mobile miners still aim to fulfill *badenya*-oriented moral obligations through gifting or remitting, their relative disconnection from the homeplace may also hinder the recognition of masculine performances within the networks that they create. As time passes, continual movement may indeed become an obstacle to social recognition. This is especially so when performances of *fadenya* are not accompanied by concrete (*badenya*-oriented) material improvements. This is illustrated by Ibro, a long-experienced miner:

When I first left, I started doing mining work close to my village, but I decided that I wanted more, and I started following other friends further in Mali, then to Burkina and to Ghana. I thought it wouldn’t be for more than a year. Then I gave myself three years to make things better. But it didn’t get better, so I had to keep on going. This is why I keep on going. In my mind, I thought I would come back as soon as possible when things were good, but I have lasted a long time. It is eight years now.

Spatial and social mobility are certainly not linearly correlated over time. As depicted earlier, itinerant miners must adapt to different roles to secure support and to perpetuate their lifestyle, which might undermine their position in the agrarian age- and gender-based social hierarchies of village life. This loss of status is also why some of

them purposely disconnect from their relatives' networks—as some miners say, they “disappear.” Indeed, migration scholars using a gender lens have frequently stressed the “negative dividend” of migration (Lutz 2010, 1652) for certain groups of migrant men, particularly when the role of male breadwinner (at home) implies a loss of status (away).

My conversations suggest a more ambiguous phenomenon. My interlocutors recognize that during their itinerancies they adopt roles that often contradict age and gender expectations. But rather than seeing the experience as negative, they seem to (re)gain a sense of agency in settings of “spatiotemporal inequality” (Bear 2016, 496), which their expulsable condition characterizes.

Extracting permanence out of ephemerality?

West Africans in gold-rich regions seem to have, perhaps realistically, very few expectations (e.g., “of modernity” [Ferguson 1999]) regarding what they can gain from the mineral rent other than what they themselves can dig out of the ground. Miners' long journeys serve as an ethnographic illustration of “expulsions” as a global production system (Sassen 2014). They are a form of adverse incorporation in global value chains, one that relies not only on the physical expulsion of workers from mining sites but also their progressive expulsion from agrarian moral fields of value. The recast institutions described in this article highlight how both forms of expulsion are inextricably bound together.

The lens of expulsion portrays a global system of wealth accumulation that bears the consequences of dispossession, displacement, and migrations, through which notions of place and placemaking may become particularly elusive. With the new uncertainties induced by the simultaneous expansion of extraction and expulsions, agrarian institutions indeed become increasingly disenfranchised from their binding dimension in the long term. But one of the limits of this same lens is its emphasis on the ruptures and discontinuities brought by expulsions. Albeit seeking to criticize the invisibilization of the expelled and their own “making of space” (Sassen 2014, 276), this lens partly reproduces invisibilization by masking the continuities at play in practices of placemaking after miners have been evicted.

By looking at miners' mobility from the perspective of the recast institutions of placemaking, we will tend to see, instead, continuity and transformation. We will, furthermore, consider expulsions as a process and a subjugating condition that doesn't end with the moment of eviction. This perspective thus reveals that new social spaces emerge along the trajectories of those whose embeddedness in localities seems increasingly compromised. Beyond the material infrastructures of places and movement, miners' institutional recast offers a parallel approach to the notion of “resonance” that Rosa (2019) conceives as the ways deemed “good,” or at least better than others available, of

relating to one's environment under socioeconomically determined circumstances. For instance, Simone and Pieterse (2017, 17) employ this term to designate the gathering up of existing infrastructure to collaborate “in new ways that might open up access to needed resources and concepts.” Wajsberg and Schapendonk (2021) add a mobile dimension to this notion in order to capture how infrastructures of care, support, and exchange move throughout migratory pathways, helping migrants emplace themselves in new urban settings. Complementing this focus on places and infrastructures, recast institutions suggest the possibility to observe some of the collective and sedimented effects of resonance processes in the growing spaces of expulsions driven by global extractivism.

In the case of the miners, places hardly exist as localities before their arrival, at least not as dense interconnections of movement nor of existing infrastructure. In an environment of social and material dissolution, place-making practices are less likely to be shaped by *ex ante* networks and infrastructures. Such configurations resonate with other precarious places and trajectories marked by the everyday threat of forced removal, like those of irregular migrants (Agier 2014) or of homeless people (Kaufman 2022). Paying attention to the placemaking institutions in spaces of expulsion implies paying attention to the social values upheld in these places, and relocating them in the broader systems of temporary dwellers' values, including how they resonate with imaginaries and moralities of “home” and “away.”

Paradoxically, for West African itinerant miners, the stability of the homeplace, the *fabara*, and its “traditional institutions”—including the norms and values implied by age- and gender-related social prescriptions—increasingly relies on the continuous remitting from mobile men like Djibril, who journey across ephemeral mines. In an extremely adverse economic situation, the economies of most families in rural areas have become dependent on money flowing from miners' journeys, which continue indefinitely. Yet, though their mobile lifestyles are marked by a high degree of risk and indeterminacy, Djibril and most of his fellow miners find value in uncertainty. They would prefer this lifestyle, for it allows them to reconcile contradictory moral imperatives and to build a sense of stability through new forms of relatedness that, in the increasingly mineralized economy of West Africa, can no longer be provided in agrarian age-based structures.

Notes

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1. All personal names are pseudonyms.

2. Research was conducted mainly in French and partly in Malinké. Because of my limited command of Malinké, Djibril helped me translated when needed. Sandaly Kourouma provided detailed feedback on the translations and my interpretations during the writing of this article.

3. I spent 14 months mainly in artisanal mining sites, camps, and neighboring towns and villages from 2009 to 2015, totaling hundreds of discussions and a questionnaire on mobility support networks with 54 itinerant miners. I returned twice in 2019, for short visits to Guinea and Mali, to meet again with some interlocutors with whom I had maintained contact.

4. The mix of nationalities has also been highlighted in recent studies conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2019a, 2019b, 2019c) on gold-mining sites in Senegal ($N = 221$), Guinea ($N = 705$), and Mali ($N = 436$). Large shares of the miners' population come from other West African countries (in Guinea, 42 percent of miners come from outside the country; in Senegal, 72 percent; in Mali, 52 percent).

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