INTERVENTIONS

Vashambadzi

The Coast Walkers

David Schoenbrun

A Deeper History of Mobility for Afropolitanism

It is conventional to think people other than Africans explored and named the edged, continental place we know today as Africa. The financial, cultural, political, and familial interests of such "explorers" entered a dynamic interplay with African interests as Africans resisted, evaded, or cocreated them.[1] In the course of responding, Africans' understandings of their continent took shape. The implications of the forced migrations to involuntary slavery for the creation of African diasporas dominates this view. Historians understand the underlying political and economic dynamics behind forced migrations into slavery overseas to have emerged from sources outside the continent, even if African states were indispensable to the workings of that system. Those outside forces prompted erudite and transformational diasporic imaginings of African homelands.[2] A similar dynamic could be sketched for the effects of oceanic (Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean), imperial and colonial processes on histories of African self-awareness and self-fashioning.[3] Africans cocreated, resisted, and evaded imperial violence and colonial rule, shaping them in the process. But those were responses to forces issuing from historical dynamics rooted in other places. The "Africa" these historical processes produced necessarily derives from them, leaving Africans in a reactive position with respect to their understanding of "home."

Radical History Review
Issue 144 (October 2022) DOI 10.1215/01636545-9847872

Considering mobility in maritime geographies resists a simple directionality in the discovery of a continental home. Paul Gilroy's black Atlantic is a zone of multidirectional movements of Black people and ideas to and from many locations on the sea's landward boundaries.[4] Although he said little about African continental historical processes, Gilroy's approach set aside Melville J. Herskovits's one-way links running from West Africa to the Caribbean, and Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's "cognitive orientations" and "creolization," but presaged J. Lorand Matory's "dialogues" connecting many sides of an Atlantic world upended by the violent mix of slavery and commodification and its afterlives.[5]

Recent scholarship has reframed these issues, largely in their landward forms.[6] But the hegemony of the paradigm just mentioned mutes the impacts of that scholarship, which engages themes handed to us from that very paradigm—state formation, commercial life, religions of the book, even race. Afropolitanism, in part, synthesizes and updates such struggles over naming and framing "Africa," shifting the subject to varieties of urban, literate, and mobile living, and exploring the ways in which race, gender, identity, and moral belonging inform a lexicon of Africa.[7] It is an overwhelmingly—at times explicitly—modernist project, hugely valuable for decentering without dissolving the burdens of naming and framing by foregrounding a blend of urbanism, literacy, and mobility, precisely what slavery, imperialism, and colonialism would deny Africans.[8]

The mobility binding enslavement and modernity has an earlier history. Before the fifteenth century, people crossed an array of boundaries exceeding the coastal, not driven by the commodification of people. Their movement altered the content of moral belonging, the forms inclusion and exclusion might take, to make the future better than the present. This deep history of unstable belonging and shifting geography refuses a presentist imagination in which continental and national geographies are the referents for modernist citizenships and belonging.

With such a narrative at hand, later instances of learning about, intruding into, and struggling over social, political, economic, and intellectual space look different. Afropolitan stories might sample such a narrative. Samples bring the past into the present, inviting listeners to reflect on their current salience.[9] Samples point to "narrative hinterlands" where the curious will find material for debating and assessing the sample's possible meanings in the present.[10] Afropolitan stories that sample past practices of mobility can revise the idea that Africa became an imaginary category only through its often, but not always or permanently, racialized continental edges.[11]

A few narratives exist of earlier mobile West African individuals—pilgrims, traders, miners—constructing and debating historical geographies of belonging in landscapes, prompted by places.[12] There are also very different narratives of Africans discovering a continent before it became the medievalist's, the early modernist's, the modernist's, or the Afropolitan's continent. They are stories of language

dispersals, told in technical terms. Because many of these narratives sprawl over such vast tableaux of time and geography, many historians balk at the continuity of the assumptions driving the narrative.[13] The whole we need now—ordinary individual actors, whose lives are enmeshed in multigenerational relationships—is too often absent from earlier African history's archives.

It is time for another approach: a historical account, told as creative nonfiction, which translates abundant academic findings about the dynamics and concrete politics of mobility in shaping African life before the fifteenth century.[14] Mobility unfolded in rhythmed scales. Shifting agriculture, transhumant pastoralism, hunting itineraries, and seasonal fish work were durable examples. Tighter rhythms included travel to markets (regular and permanent), to shrines (evanescent and emplaced), into battle, to regular (seasonal rebuilding events) or impromptu (installations of political figures, mourning events) occasions hosted by élites in central places. Farmers seeking new land to work moved incrementally but not always contiguously. Traders, herders, hunters, and fishers tended toward the routinized out-and-back, balloon or loop routes. A newly married person traveled to their spouse's natal area along a route that grew familiar. Travel into conflict risked the loss of control over one's itinerary.

Control lies at the core of mobility's importance. Loss or gain of control prompts memory work or history thinking—as in the disarticulations of diasporas. The dynamic interplay of movement, memory, and knowledge constitutes the core of "discovery." This essay explores contextual factors that converted rhythmed mobility—where the traveler largely determines the directionality and the timing of movement, summed up in the Shona word *vashambadzi*—into the one-way route of an enslaved person with no control over direction or timing.[15]

The stories blend historically specific forms of mobility, groupwork, and the creativity and discipline of labor. Seating mobility within groupwork and labor clarifies similarities and differences with other regions. Groupwork invites people to imagine they share common history but does not require they distinguish it from the history of other regions or groups.[16] Artisanal and other kinds of labor nourish mobility and groupwork, giving embodied, emplaced, and educational form to the values, practices, and intellectual orientations in a lexicon of living. Forced migrations, or the loss of control over one's movements, attach the pain of loss to the challenges of self-making and groupwork. Bringing them to life in the time before Atlantic worlds opened, through a moving story of named individuals in the fourteenth century, lends depth to Black Atlantic, imperial, colonial, and anthropocenic mobilities.

Is This Scholarship?

The stories bring existing knowledge—built from unconventional sources and amplified by affective novelistic prose concerning ordinary named individuals and

threads of subjectivity—to a bigger scholarly audience for early African history. Footnoting tethers the historical imagination in the prose to formal source criticism applied to unusual archives like archaeological site reports, studies of rock art, or vocabulary items reconstructed through the comparative study of a set of related languages. Notes point readers to the "narrative hinterlands" found in those unusual archives, where they may refuse or revise the story's imaginative components by checking sources. The cited sources foster historical argument and restrain readers from simply projecting their own worlds into the distant past.

The dynamic interplay of racial slavery, violent mercantilism, imperialism, and statecraft largely omits subaltern lives from conventional archives. Bringing these lives into the present promises to disrupt dominant narratives formed without centering subaltern action and experience. That desire to conjure the absent provokes literary moves such as Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation" and "narrative restraint."[17] Stories are built with a sequence of events. Taken as a whole, that sequence is a story's fabula. Events have causes. People act, prices change, rain fails to fall. Hartman uses critical fabulation "to jeopardize the status of the event," to make counter-narratives that "displace the received or authorized account."[18] Hartman's practice makes "visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history)" by listening "for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity." Her approach gives us a story of "the time of slavery as our present." In that spirit, this essay engages an altogether different set of archives: traces of the ordinary lives of small-scale farmers, hunters, ceramicists, weavers, healers, and so forth.[19] Such people discovered Africa. Telling a story of their discoveries displaces accounts that understand discovery as literally originating in fundamental ways from beyond the continent or as being driven by interests ("causes") originating from beyond the continent. The new account draws on a rich set of causal factors and moral imaginations with local and regional roots deeper than European involvement and sometimes crossing continental edges.

Hartman's counter-narratives are restrained by a "refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure" and by "the imperative to respect black noise." Closure allows one to depart the experience cleanly, as if the entailments of a story do not continue. Yet the afterlives of displacement and mobility live with us today. Likewise, the "noise" Hartman calls on us to respect are "aspirations" that fall outside of or refuse hegemonic systems of their time or our present. For Hartman, those include capitalism and humanism. In this essay, I practice narrative restraint by leaving endings out of the stories, favoring strings of various departures. That choice respects a counter-hegemonic "noise"—the persistence of movement—which embraces and promotes moral imaginations usually examined in the settled life of village and town. Self-control, hard work, cultivation of skill, cooperation, families, participation, and accountability live on the road as they do in a village or a town. Africans on the move do not contradict settled Africans.

Traces of their lives include the patterning of material culture and spatial practice archaeologists unearth and interpret.[20] Or the sequences by which people speaking a language introduced new meanings into a given semantic domain, and made them stick, which historical linguists reconstruct.[21] Or the exegetical communities who, in debating the meanings of oral material, simultaneously altered them and made them stick in traditions with the "out-thereness" of written texts.[22] Art historians return social contexts to the objects and drawings made and used on the continent to understand what their makers and users did with them. Historical ecologists and landscape historians bring to life mutual influences of shifts in climate; animal (including human), fish, plant, and insect life; and what people did in the past.[23] Historians face distinct challenges of chronology and context when working with each of these sources. From climate ecology to art history, each kind of trace connects varying scales of historical action, from the region to the individual maker of an object or its beholder. The historical actors sent missing by modernity's founding violence, or overly abstracted from documents like a ship captain's log or a bill of lading, turn up in other archives, such as the archaeology of food production or reconstructed vocabulary for agriculture. Intentionally or otherwise, ordinary people used the things archaeologists unearth, and the ideas reconstructed vocabulary represents, as media to create and curate historical-geographical knowledge. Ordinary actors are ubiquitous in these archives, lending them a republican grain missing from archives of documents.

But historians must still address the absences and silences in this information that gender, status, and generational frictions exert. It is often impossible to gloss the vocabulary, material culture, and sociological dynamics of exegetical communities with the necessary grays of individual standing and intentionality. People argue over the meanings of story performances, reshaping or reinforcing their content. Often such exegetical communities were exclusive.[24]

Everyone uses language, if under different conditions of possibility. Yet the impact of a person's speech depended on the conventions of standing and biases of authority in place when they spoke. Everyone's living leaves traces on the landscape, patterned materially, if under different conditions of consequence. Yet the uneven effects of biochemical processes on the preservation of ancient objects favors some kinds of materiality (work in metals, building in stone or adobe) over others (wooden tools and buildings). Everyone interacts mutually with other-than-human beings, from water to termites, under different conditions of desire. Yet the assumptions of archaeologists and palaeoecologists about what is worth recognizing, as well as the uneven preservation of some life forms and not others, may erase key relationships (with termites or trees), privilege others (domestic animals or plants), and leave still other relationships (with fish) frustratingly undifferentiated. Exclusions, defeats, and vagueness of meaning in the past guarantee that historians need critical fabulation, practiced with narrative restraint, to create counter-narratives. The

present case explores the *varieties* of mobility ordinary lives embodied, a variety often effaced by the interests and blind spots of the authors of documents.

A fourteenth-century story can explore regional historical-geographical practices in different parts of Africa. Recent work questions the influence of a supposed desire for exotic goods on the contours of Zambezian and Kalahari political economies. Scholars increasingly locate regional domestication of exotics inside older, more expansive economies of taste and standing. They paint a picture of a more participatory and mobile political culture than the one implied by framing exotics as prestige goods controlled by political elites who limited access to them to actors willing to assist in promoting elite interests.[25] People planned and acted with logics of value, place, and time rooted in far-flung but interacting communities in the interior of the continent, at a remove from the oceanic or desert edges conventionally linking Africa to elsewhere. Value emerges from tending to the dynamic interplay of individualisms and groupwork. Place uses the accumulations of the past in landscapes of groupwork—such as hilltop shrines; the fords, camps, and markets on trade routes; and the courtyards of leaders—to prompt critique, revise the value of tensions between individualisms and groupwork, and invest them with moral purpose oriented to the future. Critique and participation convert the intersections of value and emplaced assembly into media for balancing individualisms and groupwork. Time reshuffles or underscores the order of generational responsibilities to relations between value and place. Time is a social strategy constructed in part to uncover opportunities in a crisis and restore or control the flow of social life.[26] Group genealogies and heroic itineraries reflect this work. Competent speaking by hunters, spirit mediums, healers, imams, grandmothers, royals, and traders may reshuffle time—or reinvest in a particular temporal arrangement—to achieve critique and transformation. The latitude to do both creates durability. That latitude is a capacity to improvise on the contents of value, the varieties of place, and the forms of time, and to argue about their interrelations. Mobility is often a key means to accumulate that capacity.

To sum up, a scholarly journal welcomes the footnote, directing readers to the evidence restraining authorial voice in creative nonfiction. As Hartman explains, restraint lies at the core of the politics of representation.[27] Who can say what about whose inner worlds, why what they say should be taken seriously, and what saying it erases about the past—all rest on an unstable blend of authorial standing, historical evidence, and loss. Today's economies of authenticity in reckoning belonging to or exclusion from the groups touched by a creative nonfiction story such as "Vashambadzi" affect an author's standing in a reader's eyes. Current modes of belonging and exclusion based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so forth echo in the writing, helping readers project themselves into the story. But an equally weighty dimension of representation lies in what counts as evidence. In most cases, the alternative sources informing the stories given below represent traces of a more republican

cultural history than what one finds in contemporary documentary sources. Representation of past lives risks errors of omission and of emphasis, under any circumstance. While new sources disperse that risk across a broader range than the social experience and interests of the literate, they also reflect the workings of power and authority in the past. Adhering scrupulously to historical evidence should ease readers into thinking of the story as history inflected by struggle and inequality. The footnote balances the literary burdens of pointing, shading, character development, and presentism. Some notes lead readers to a cache of rich examples, some lead readers into a thicket of scholarly disagreements. Other notes stop readers to say, "This I have invented, do not take my invention and turn it into a fact, however tempting it might be to do so, in the present."

Plot, Character, Ground

Four events frame the plot. First, Bosutswe, a large town on the eastern edge of the Kalahari Desert, burns around the turn of the fourteenth century. The burning shows that random events prompt mobility. Second, the main characters, a young woman and a young man, choose to relocate to a new town, Danamombe, 250 kilometers northeast of Bosutswe. Eventually, their economic and social successes threaten a minor faction in Danamombe's political kaleidoscope. Third, they survive an accusation of blame in the death of a child from that faction. In its aftermath, they elect to leave. This shows that social events prompt mobility. One hundred kilometers east, in their new town, the ancient Great Zimbabwe, they join vashambadzi, skilled trader-travelers working routes between the northeastern edges of the Kalahari Desert and the Indian Ocean, choosing mobility. Lastly, at the coast, south of the mouth of River Nzambezi, a debt and a dip in the price of ivory leads to the woman's enslavement. As an enslaved woman, she loses control over her destination, and the bereft man has lost the way to family and standing the two of them were making together.

Mma, a young woman, and Tswan, a young man, form a romantic partnership that drives the story. Mma was born on the eastern edge of the Kalahari salt pans, one hundred kilometers northwest of Bosutswe. Tswan was born at Tsodilo Hills, five hundred kilometers northwest of Bosutswe. Both are multilingual, but their mother tongues belong to different language families. Tswan's maternal line includes an itinerant forager-hunter grandmother famed for her healing.[28] She gives Tswan some beads, a sphere made of copper at Tsodilo and an index-finger-long hank of thick ostrich eggshell disks strung on a rigid line of dried sinew she received in that form from a family from Hungorob, six hundred kilometers west, on the far side of the Kalahari.[29] His paternal line includes a famous grandfather skilled at hunting the sitatunga, an antelope of the wetlands between the Zambezi and the Okavango.[30] Mma's maternal line runs deep in the eastern Kalahari's cattle-keeping and salt-farming lands. Her mother's family used that wealth to place her mother in the

court of a trader-grandee at Bosutswe. Mma grows up there. Her court hosts belong to a social stratum that also ruled at the faded city Mapungubwe Hill, in the Shashe-Limpopo basin, some two hundred miles southeast of Bosutswe. At Bosutswe, Mma learns weaving as an apprentice to an older woman who is also a healer. Mma's father's people ran salt gardens in the Makgadikgadi Pans of the Kalahari. That easily convertible commodity made life comfortable in a village. Her father's skill at timing conversions rested in part on her mother's knowledge of the political fault lines converging at Bosutswe. Mma came to understand that economic success turned on the self-mastery required to elicit others' trust. Tswan's parents died when he was young. Mma's childhood and adolescence unfolded with less loss, giving her a sense of possibility as boundless as Tswan's but disciplined less by mastering the sting and risk of absent family. Both understood that admirable behavior nourished carefully chosen nodes in their networks.

The dynamic interplay of three themes grounds the story. Developing skills and joining networks is the first theme. It turns in part on the second theme, cultivating personal comportment to win the admiration of others. Success or failure—the limits of their personal and social power—in those domains is realized at the threshold between different scales of economic structures, the third theme.

Their families accept their companionate marriage. Exchanges of baskets of gifts entailed by Mma and Tswan's relationship expand the array of people interested in the couple's future. Bosutswe's burning separated them from many of those networks. As they move away from Bosutswe, they enter new networks largely as social outsiders, dangerously atomized. They know that excellence in hunting, healing, weaving, and transacting will best allow them to choose a home on their own terms. They seek opportunities to do so in the full knowledge that events could change their plans.

In Danamombe, Mma makes a place as a weaver. Tswan joins a group of elephant hunters, as a trailer, adding to his skills and taking him far afield of Danamombe. Mma exploits the cachet her Eastern Kalahari healing skills carry in Danamombe. Her clients grow in number, thickening her knowledge of Danamombe's social realities. A Danamombe family, whose scarce granaries limit their shows of hospitality, accuse the successful newcomer, Mma, of witchcraft. The senior man of the elephant hunters comes from another Danamombe family, with ties to Great Zimbabwe, a growing town to the southeast. The senior man, Lembeni, understands the costs and benefits of healthy relations with outsiders like Tswan and Mma. They represent new networks and new skills and knowledge but can threaten existing balances of power already susceptible to the vagaries of rainfall. As Tswan's patron and leader of Danamombe's senior house, Lembeni holds a trial and finds the evidence inconclusive. Tswan's performance in the trial avoids guilt. But a disapproving audience for his performance makes self-exile better than insisting their patron continue to protect him and Mma. Rather than return to a ruined Bosutswe, they set out from Danamombe, heading for Great Zimbabwe. There they meet a crew of itinerant

traders—the vashambadzi—and walk with them to the Indian Ocean coast. Tswan knows a few of them from the elephant hunts.

Their journey ends in the town of Manyikeni, stone built in the Zimbabwe style, some one hundred kilometers southwest from the Indian Ocean coastal town of Chibuene. In Manyikeni they find a measure of stability by meeting the challenges of dislocation through skill, reputation, and reciprocal obligation. The time and place for children arrives. Mma joins an informal group of weavers in Manyikeni, some of whom are from the coast, others are from Madagascar. A few are like her, from far to the west. While they work, she translates the conceptual universe in which her healing power makes sense to weavers connected to Swahili and Malagasy towns. Her conversation with them about their homes recognizes common tropes of bigness and firstness expressing authority, precedence, and power. She marshals similar figures in whose footsteps she has walked. Their life histories of mobility express hers, explaining the circumstances of her accumulated skill in healing, which traffics in occult powers and exposes her to risks of counter-attack. She makes her healing knowledge appear both exotic and accessible, a renewable source of standing and influence. This tactic presages how she will survive the middle passage to Cairo and join communities of Africans in Cairo in the 1340s.

Up and down the coast, a glut of ivory drives down its price. They had used ivory as a down payment, with more promised, on a large quantity of cotton cloth purchased from a Manyikeni family hosting the representative of a merchant family based in Cairo, Aden, and India. The shrinking value of the ivory Tswan has planned on getting highlights the debtor part of their standing as artisanal vashambadzi.

As the social and economic circumstances turn against them, Mma and Tswan decide they should transform their cloth debt by pawning her to the merchant's representative. Tswan uses other goods, like tanned hides, to add to the ivory he scavenges in the river basin. Working under the cover of night, Mma weaves threads from the imported cloth into local cotton and sells this rewoven cloth to vashambadzi headed west. She uses the profits, realized in glass beads, to add value to Tswan's ivory. They plan to use this basket of things to redeem Mma before the dhows depart in April, ahead of the southwest monsoons.

But they are thwarted. Before they make up the difference in value between ivory and imported cotton cloth, the merchant-representative decides to convert the cloth debt into Mma's person. He thinks such a move will protect his Cairene patron from the unstable price of ivory with the stable value of Mma's weaving skill in Cairo, where a profound economic crisis has set in. Meeting local Cairene demand for a necessity like cotton cloth will ease frictions between his patron's house and others in the city. He has Mma enslaved by youths working for his host in Manyikeni. Enslaved and pregnant but possessing latitude with her skills as a weaver and a healer, Mma transits the Indian Ocean world of Kilwa, then Aden, stopping in Cairo.

The following stories sample this plot.[31]

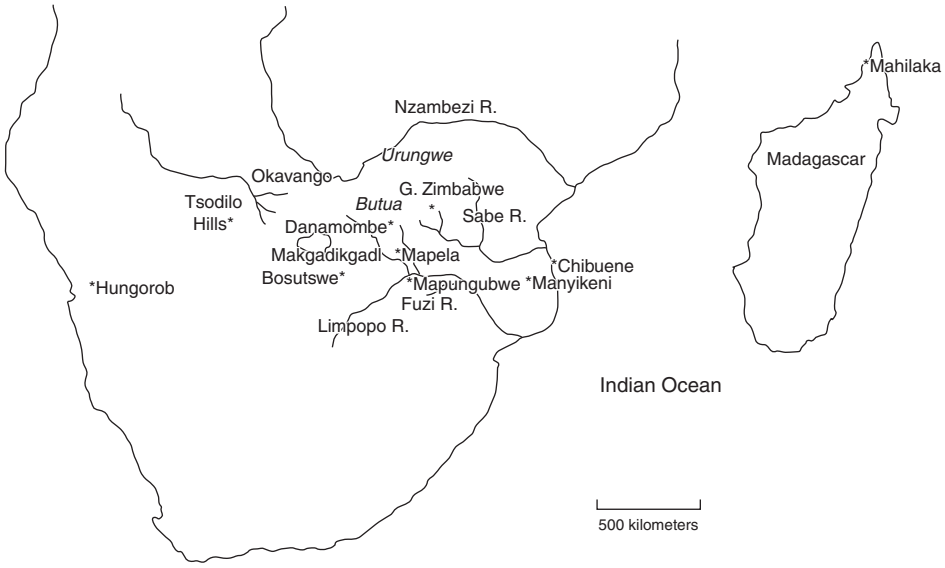

Figure 1. The Kalahari and Zambezia, the world of the Vashambadzi. Map created by the author.

Stories

Vashambadzi, the Coast Walkers

Everything happens at the same time.[32] The rest are stories, collected by a great moth who uses them to make cocoons.[33]

Bosutswe

Mma smells the burning grass behind the noisy water dropping into her calabash as she washes. She raises her head and pushes her chin out to listen. The water on her bright, round face slides down her neck.

Houses moan when they burn. The whistling air, its flecks of soot an urgent black against a grey winter sky, tells her this is a big fire.

Mma lives with her mother in one of the outer houses of the court, high on the central precinct of Bosutswe, a prominent flat-topped hill at the desert's edge. She goes out their front door, down a brief walkway hemmed in by neighbors' walls, and into the main street running atop the hill's subtle sloping spine with the sight line west. Behind her, the tall wall of the court blocks the sunrise view. Smoke from the smiths' quarter will soon reach their part of the town, just behind the fire jumping in the morning's breeze from grass-crowned house to grass-crowned house.[34]

People stand in the street, their cloths askew. Everyone thinks: time to get down to the flats.

Tswan sees the fire's glow beneath the morning cloud and knows people will soon flood into the low, open ground where his host's house sits below the hilltop

town. Mma and he had planned that if fire came, they'd meet in the mopane trees at the edge of the River Lengele's floodplain north of the hilltop town.

The fire eats most of the town's buildings by late afternoon. Mma and her mother work from memory to find their house amid the hot, puddled mud walls. They find the wooden plank shelves burned, their pots fallen into a heap of shards. The woven gourd holders—and all their gourds—have burned away. The metal things remain, on the ground, shorn of their handles and butts. Outside, in their courtyard, the grain bin is a shadow of ash on a darker ground of hard, pounded mud and straw. In a lidded pot, the cache of *phane*—dried caterpillars minus their insides that Mma had collected from mopane and marula trees on a trip back from her father's place at the edge of the pans—and the two beads her father gave her have escaped the heat.[35] They collect the *phane*, beads, knife, hoe blades and razors, wrap them in the second of the two lengths of brown cotton cloth Mma's mother grabbed before running, and turn back into the smoldering street. They are in the burned house less time than Mma took to wash her face.

. . . . .

Bosutswe grows where the desert's edge meets the rise bearing rivers to the sea, a moon-long walk toward the sunrise. It is a big town full of cattle and fancy families with ties to other big towns, the kind of place people visit from near and far. The variety of lives and wealth in Bosutswe and the obvious connections between opportunity and travel helped Mma's mother show her that a woman's life could be more than marriage, craftwork, farming, and family if she brought the wisdoms of travel to the complexities of managing a household. A person can travel on foot or with words. Both ways helped Mma's mother learn many languages, including ones that crackled like a burning, pitchy log.[36] Mma knows some, too, learned from her mother. Her father speaks a few languages, but they are all quite similar. The salt buyers who came with beads from the direction of the sunrise to her father's place at the edge of the pans spoke them, so he learned them.[37] Mma's personality, smarts, and ambition put off some people, suitors and girlfriends alike. She moves between introspection and garrulous conversation. She learns things quickly. And she wants to walk a line between home and beyond. At the court in Bosutswe, Mma found weaving suited her blend of thoughtfulness and conversation. Many of the girls and boys she grew up with were quiet or talkative as youths. Few young people feel them both at once, twins lightly tapping from within, calling her third self to choose. Mma is the kind of person that people needed.

As Tswan got to know Mma during his visits to Bosutswe, those qualities—including her languages—drew him to her. His grandmother Hande also spoke many languages, including those that crackled. She was an itinerant trance healer from the Tsodilo Hills that rise above the desert, beyond the Okavango Delta, a moon's walk from Bosutswe toward the sunset.

Mma was two seasons from her first blood when she met Tswan in Bosutswe. She got to know the young hunter in the market on the flats where she'd go to buy bushmeat, hides, or a bone to grind for an awl. He spoke the crackling tongues too. She found him at ease, which let words flow. They soon began to share their hopes for the future. Each of them wanted to see the towns of stone up east, on the plateau. They wanted to smell the salty sunrise sea they'd been told lay below and beyond the uplands. When Bosutswe burned, that cold dry season, they had already chosen Danamombe as their destination. Mma had come to know quite a bit about it while serving Lembeni's people when they visited Bosutswe from Danamombe. Tswan knew of the new town from others in the bushmeat market. Elephant hunters told of large herds in the forested, narrow headwater valleys making the River Mzingwane, which ran through Danamombe. It was a good place to hunt.

. . . . .

Mma and her mother sit in the cooler shadows, out of the sun, spinning cotton thread and discussing how Mma can use her knowledge of Bosutswe's court life to travel east and grow their family.[38]

"Lembeni's people know you're not interested, but you've got to pretend so no one's embarrassed."

"Why do you think I keep my eyes on the whorl?"

Mma's mother pinches more brown cotton onto her thread.

"They're from the old town, Mapela," her mother says, "looking for people to back their move to the new one, Danamombe."

"I'll go," Mma says to her hands, "but not as a wife."

"A wife grows powerful from experience and learning. It takes time."

Mma lets her mother's words swish around in her mind before answering. A drop of blood blooms on Mma's finger. She lost sight of the black aloe needle against the dark basket holding her thread. Working late in the day and being prone to reverie has its risks.

"So, I'll move and learn, then choose?," she replies at last. But her mother has gone inside the courtyard gate to see if the beer pots are full. Visitors will soon arrive, thirsty and hungry for food and gossip.

. . . . .

The men from Danamombe have come to Bosutswe seeking partners. Their father's brother died at Mapela two moons ago, and they recently closed his death with a proper funeral, burial, and mourning. Now their people need a new place to take their problems. They are asking for a new person to listen, receive their gifts, and choose how and when to act with them in solving problems and taking advantage. The Danamombe men need others like Mma's family at their backs. For their ambition to work with a minimum of violence they want to tie the well-spun threads of

families like Mma's into knots of power. Gathering the threads is the easy part. Each should emerge from a different place and bring a different skill to Danamombe. Tying the entangling knot is the hard part. One family's accomplishments can be another's losses. Threads that bind their pasts too tightly will close the knot of power. The trick is to knot the threads loosely enough to hold each to a common purpose without choking off the patience for listening to people's needs or the ambition to try something new to meet them.

A young girl brings another pot of sorghum beer into the courtyard. Many drinkers in the circle have slipped a clean filter onto the end of their long reed straws while waiting for the fresh supply to arrive. They poke the straw's protected end into the froth atop the new pot and pull silently.

Lembeni is the eldest of the Danamombe men, so he speaks first. Mma follows their banter from the eaves of the entryway house between the yard and the street. She just leans back into the curve of the inner room and lets her ear catch the conversation running along the wall. Adult talk interests her because of what they don't say. When she talks with the youths in the visitors' entourage, they speak less guardedly about life in Bosutswe and in the new town of Danamombe. That's how she knows that the elders leave things out of their exchanges.

"Young people should visit other towns. That way, when they settle, they'll know what's possible and can decide who to trust" Lembeni says.

"Yes, but if they go too far away or for too long, we lose them. They should move only among the towns of our House where people who know us can teach them." A thin grimace crosses Fanamanga's face as he speaks.

"Travel is fine," he continues, "but a valued person can just move on. You, you will return to Danamombe because you like solving problems. You didn't learn to like that by traveling. You discovered your skill by sitting around your father's courtyard, watching and listening."

It's a long speech for him. The subject stirs him. As a youth he loved to travel. He had been to Tsodilo and the big waters in and around Okavango. But his father and mother died just after he'd married. As the elder of their sons and someone who found peace in his obligations to others, when people asked him to stay put and learn Bosutswe's place in the world from his many uncles, he found he could not refuse.

Lembeni's people talk about their ancestors, inviting Fanamanga and other wealthy hosts at Bosutswe to join in. They create a story tying their ambitions for Danamombe to the actions of a departed ancestor both of their people have claimed to share as descendants of an ancient group patronized by a spirit who manifests today as a crocodile.[39] Today, aunts and daughters in both their families sometimes get possessed by a crocodile spirit or they encounter a crocodile at an unexpected time or place. Just three moons ago, Fanamanga's sister met a crocodile at a spring below a high jumble of boulders, in the rising hills east of Bosutswe more than a day's walk from the gathering streams of River Limpopo. For Lembeni and

Fanamanga, crocodiles out of place are ancestors asking them for something. They're both pretty sure the crocodile Fanamanga's sister met wants them to figure out how to make Danamombe a place sending power into its hinterlands. It is well known that a crocodile will jealously protect its home in a river or a stretch of shore along a lake or a swamp. Only drought—or a stronger crocodile—will make it leave.

Family representatives and their followers introduce the figures from their past, and their deeds, into the story. They argue about the past by taking for granted a minimum set of characters and actions. Ngwena, the crocodile ancestor, is one. Of the many sons claiming descent from Ngwena, Lembeni's great-great-grandfather Shoko was the son of Fanamanga's great-great-grandfather Kgabo. Fanamanga's house was closer to Ngwena; that's why when Lembeni crossed the River Limpopo to visit Fanamanga at Bosutswe, he did so as the small crocodile. If they succeed in making Danamombe stand up to rival houses from Great Zimbabwe, Lembeni will still be the small crocodile. The crocodile of his time will only lose its smallness as generations of young men go off into Danamombe's hinterlands and make families.

Visiting back and forth, over the last years of trading and marrying between the two towns, Fanamanga and Lembeni obsessed about matters of shared—or not shared—history. Mma's mother explains that this is the work of politics. By talking about only a small number of them, you weave a shared past from the many versions of crocodile history Ngwena's numerous sons had made. Claiming particular sons of Ngwena as one's own ancestors meant taking up the responsibilities of extending their accomplishments. That way, the storytellers and the audience shared obligations to grow the families. They would share the future made possible by promoting Danamombe's preeminence against interference from Great Zimbabwe. The seniority of families, the breadth of their ties to distant places, and the variety of skills members of each possessed or were willing to learn specifies who risks, who supports, and who stands aside, in reserve. The work is tiring, even with the beer. Lembeni's people arrived more than a half moon ago and still argue over which crocodile-protected elder planted the first millet and sorghum in the flats beneath Danamombe Hill, which of her brothers brought the first cows to the edge of town, who, therefore, will be responsible for pulling the rain down should it refuse to fall next rainy season, and all of that.

Mma catches the names of all the hills and springs they mention as stopping places and the river crossings between them, as the crocodile sons, brothers, and sisters made their way to Danamombe. She knows that the weight of each stop and river ford along the way magnifies a crocodile ancestor's accomplishments. The expansive distance their travels encompassed does the same in the minds of listeners who know the places mentioned. Their journeys are like strings of different kinds of beads. The opaque blue-black glass beads come from the lands of the sunrise. The pale grey disks made from the giant land snail come from home.[40] The shiny white disks ground from ostrich eggshell belong to the sunset deserts. Whether you wore

them around the waist, for a lover, or around your neck or ankles for all to see, or you put them on a person for burial, all these pretty beads point to the far corners of the world and the layers of life it held. Where her elders worry over the symbolism of all of those stops in ancestral travels, she wants to see the actual places for herself. She wants to climb Mapela Hill, watch the cranes mass along a rain-swollen River Shashe, and feel the humidity rising as she descends to the sunrise sea.

. . . . .

The antelope fat Tswan worked into his heels in the morning is gone now, leaving thirsty cracks. On the last day of walking, fingers of stony ground began to rise more often between expanses of sand until the hard ground won. The sand made his calves ache but the stones could cut into dry soles.

Tswan naps in the deep shade pooled at the base of the mopane tree's straight bole. He wakens when he senses the two boys. They stand in the dappled sun, staring at him. Shaking the sleep off, he realizes they've come to take him up onto Bosutswe's impressive hill. Several winters have passed since his first visit with his father's people. Things have changed.

Tswan pleases his hosts with smoked sitatunga meat. The rich people living atop the hill town love the smoky flavor of the tiny antelope from the big water across the desert.[41] When they serve it, the distinctive aroma reveals the long reach of their wealth. It took Tswan nearly a moon to walk from Okavango to Bosutswe.

He has less of the game than he'd come with because he traded some for a ball of arrow-poison. Bosutswe's bushmeat market often had some of the most potent, long-lasting arrow poisons he ever used. A lump of fine, resinous poison worked into the barbs on an arrow's head could be the difference between finding the swamp antelope you'd hit or losing track of it in the maze of thin trails between patches of lily-covered open water. Tswan tucked the tiny gourd of arrow poison under his arm, at the outer edge of his ribs, and turned toward the hill to see if he could remember where the path up started.

Danamombe

Tswan and Mma recognize Danamombe's freshly cut stone platforms. Tswan had seen some stone walls in the pans, a rambling set of tentacles running from huge baobabs on a low rise down to the edge of the salt pan. Mma had heard people tell of such places when she visited her grandmother's house at Bosutswe. Danamombe fit the description, but they chose it because it was a new town.[42] Its leaders would need followers to stand up to the competition for people, animals, and things at places like Great Zimbabwe. They could help each other.

In the dim time before dawn Tswan couldn't see the details in the painting, but he figured he knew the gist of it. His grandmother had shown him a lot of them, back at Tsodilo. She had told him about such paintings on the roof walls of caves, lit

only briefly by a sun setting or rising.[43] These weren't meant for ordinary people. They communicated secrets and they communicated secretly. Others, like this one, out in the open, were about familiar things, like hunting.[44]

Youths loved to look at the paintings in the open. These paintings showed the personalities and characters from the stories their parents and grandparents told them. The paintings let you think privately about their meaning in your life. The personalities in the pictures become your comrades, your adversaries, your sense of the present collapsing into hopes for your future. The images teach a landscape of helpers and enemies, they entertain but also provoke. They remind you that people are one among many beings. That the world is rich but full of risks.

Tswan loved the paintings of flying termites, their nests, and the mushrooms that grew atop the nests, which the termites ate. He felt a clear and powerful charge from the mushroom encrusted edges of the termite nest that disgorged its winged riches. His grandmother told him those paintings made her think of life and death as a whirlpool in a river. Old people willing to talk about where they were in the pool's spiral said they'd worked their whole lives to earn the immortality of being remembered by the living. They could not control what the living would do with stories about them. After all, they themselves had argued about the fame and failings of people from before. The point was to have a place in a story of the present, not to control what the living did with their stories of the past.

The painting in front of him tells how to gather the ability to hunt, it does not show a strategy for hunting an elephant. A family of elephants is separated by a flowing river of impalas flecked with a few taller figures, with bows. The changing afternoon light infuses the scene with motion. A field of black and red and white, purpled with age, says "the herd lasts because one elephant risks standing apart."[45] A hunter's creative bravery helps larger groups of people live.

Actual elephant hunting bore only a vague similarity to the scene Tswan studies. Boredom weighs on hunters awaiting an elephant's fall into the prepared pit; it alternates with rushes of adrenalin. Running leads directly to the heavy work of finishing or butchering. Or it leads to another long wait, back at the blind. Joints grown stiff from crouching then had to carry you out into the open, racing to a fallen animal. Close, coordinated work as a team becomes a rush to reach the giant before anyone else. The winner might earn a gift from the lead hunter: a choice joint or an expanse of hide to work, or the tail's powerful hairs. If there were tusks, you might receive a hank of arm bangles, worked back at Danamombe.

This painting starts a discussion about grandmothers and grandfathers with the power to sniff out a transgressor hiding in a herd and put the animals at ease.[46] Tswan heard stories like that at Tsodilo, told by visitors from Hungorob at the far edge of the deserts, toward the sunset sea. It doesn't surprise him to hear a version here. Tswan thought that every herd hid a rebel. So, when they have an elephant, he and his companions leave filets of meat, cut from the part of the animal hit by the

arrows or spears, in thanks.[47] It is wise to give something to those who had come before in return for their knowledge.

. . . . .

"You should go with them when they try for elephant next," Mma told Tswan while she razored off the fibers dangling from an aloe's sharp tip and used an awl to make an eye in a needle. "It's not like waiting for the water antelope." She wondered what kept Tswan from Lembeni's elephant-hunting group, soon headed north toward Nzambezi, on the other side of the high country.[48]

"Yes," he says absentmindedly from across the yard bright with the late morning sun. Tswan struggles to wrap a wet, slippery sinew as tightly as he can around the haft slats at the head of a spear body. "The sitatunga taps the lily pads like a child testing the chief's drum, the elephant beats the ground like the drum's maker." His father's proverb reminds Tswan that the things beings shared in the world did not cancel their differences. Calm can turn the contrariness of the world to your purpose. That's why Tswan loves to hunt swamp antelope. It teaches him that patience is the path to a chance to outwit them. With elephant, the challenge is as much about gauging the elusive motives of other people as those of the elephants. Below Danamombe, on the River Shashe, he learns to convert his skill at waiting into the patience to navigate the large group it took to track, encircle, bring down, and butcher an elephant.[49]

Nzambezi

After walking for a half moon they are well below the Nzambezi's crashing falls. Elephants favor this place.[50] Back in Danamombe, Lembeni had chosen to use spears with heavy points and butts and a balance suited to piercing elephant skin. From their camp, smaller groups scouted various elephant families, choosing the ones to stalk considering promising terrain for encirclement and the number of tuskers. Over a period of days, the hunters learned the paths the elephants preferred as they moved between forest and river. They prepared the medicines to give their dogs, to wear themselves, and to put on their spears. Now it was time to give something to the spirits of the hunting place, the ones who had brought the elephants. So far from home, this was a risky proposition.

Tswan's ambition to work with brave patience weakened his lingering doubts about hunting so far from home. Success meant the wealth of the elephant and the stories his colleagues would tell back at Danamombe. With both, he and Mma could hope for Lembeni's gift of land in Danamombe, where they could stay and start their family.

Lembeni and his hunting group had decided to hunt here, far from Danamombe, to dip into the trade running again along River Nzambezi's famed elephant hunting grounds, drawing copper ingots onto the Zimbabwe plateau. The ingots are

easier than ivory to carry—their makers shaped them into crosses so that the weight spread evenly over one's back. Their rarity made them easier than ivory to convert. These qualities of copper bars drove elephant-hunting teams in one region to compete against those of another region to create a market for trade in elephant products with towns in Urungwe, Butua, beyond the Shashe-Limpopo.[51] Success means choices in conversion, once the leading house got its tusk. Tswan plans to trade his part of the hide for one of the copper cross ingots that Urungwe's smiths make.

Ordeal

"Are you sleeping, Mma, or can't you move?" Chana broke the silence.

Sunrise lit the tallest hump of treeless granite above Mma's place in the line of women waiting to fill their water gourds from the spring.[52] Even on the coldest mornings, the water line was a lively place to share news and enjoy the salty taste of a fresh rumor. Mma, her hand at her sternum, absent-mindedly fingered the two beads from Bosutswe hanging there. No one but Chana had dared engage Mma even a month after the drama at Lembeni's court.

She and Tswan avoided Vadzvi's jealousy because Lembeni had not cut a judgment about Vadzvi's accusation that Mma's Kalahari medicines had caused the sudden death of Vadzvi's daughter.[53] Instead of a public stand on the question, Lembeni had chosen to test whether or not they'd been involved in that sad death by having Tswan drink the poison ordeal on their behalf. The narcotic brew made Tswan stumble toward the rope strung between the two cut tree branches that one of Lembeni's sons had dug into the soil. When Tswan cleared the rope, the crowd had mostly stamped their feet in approval at the innocence his steps proclaimed. Vadzvi's family and friends stood by, heads downcast, feet frozen to the earth.

Despite having lived in Danamombe for less than two farming seasons, Mma and Tswan have friends. It impresses Lembeni. But friendship has limits. Even in the glow of release from suspicion, Mma and Tswan each know that their time in the city has ended. Vadzvi's people will come at them again. How long could good stories, a healing hand, help in the chase, and patience with the spinning whorl, aloe needle, and handloom keep them from the bottomless well of an ambitious family's insecurities?

Great Zimbabwe

Katete, last son of the man Ndoro and the woman Tsitsi, was the first ruler to live in the western parts of the Great Enclosure, from the 1280s to 1300. Katete's open ears, sharp eyes, and generosity brought them a rich network of knowledge and wealth. Tsitsi's wit and shrewdness brought her own followers to the courtyard in the complex of buildings they called home. Skilled masons expressed their respect

for his and her standing by building out the massive walls of the Great Enclosure in a striking new style of stonework. Not only did they cut each granite block to fine, squared edges, they fitted them together into interlocking courses, shrinking their widths incrementally as they laid one course on top of the other. This arrangement dispersed the granite weight downward in an even flow, stabilizing the wall and increasing its life span.[54]

Katete's many daughters with Anodiwa had been part of his success; they had drawn the threads that spun in-laws into networks of tight knots that Katete and Anodiwa could tie and untie as they saw fit. Though he had sons of his own, none was a man whom others wanted to serve and support. Rusvinga's ears were closed. He took no counsel. Mucheri soon tired of balancing contentious requests and too often relieved his boredom by choosing to cultivate the respect of disloyal people. Katete's daughters had grown a vast network of allies. But neither Rusvinga nor Mucheri could make knots of respect and wisdom, like Lembeni, out of the houses living at the town. They could not retain Katete's followers, let alone draw new ones committed to his rule. Tswan and Mma saw the new stone wall on their way to the camp outside town and suspected a big house might be trying hard to keep its walls standing. If so, they knew the period of tension that followed, as other houses positioned themselves to tie a new knot of rule with their family's threads of power, meant openings for them. Contending houses needed all the followers they could get. Two well-traveled young adults, skilled in making things people needed, would have some choices if they learned who was who.

The heart of the town lay between the high hill, where the founders had lived, and a growing clutch of homes in the Great Enclosure of stone in the valley below. When Tswan and Mma arrived, they saw masons working on the ellipse's massive walls, three times the height of a man and as thick across as a well-fed man's sleeping form.[55] In each neighborhood, walls connected the six or seven houses belonging to an extended family and their dependents.

New neighborhoods were being built down the gentle slope of the valley, toward the sunrise. Beyond that, the valley tightened and dipped off the plateau, making the start of River Chiredzi. They knew from stories that one could follow that river to River Runde, then River Sabe, all the way to the endless sunrise water of salt. The feeling of a great gate that opened on to the unknown intoxicated them both with the possibilities. It filled them with fear as well, for they knew the basket of people whose love kept them ahead of life's risks would shrink to the two of them, even in a group of vashambadzi—coast walkers—who would have them.

In Lembeni's town, you kept your words from an unintended ear by whispering or lighting a crackling fire or putting the door into the house's doorway. Here, in the great *muzinda* of Zimbabwe, stone walls separated inside from the outside.[56] Many ruling houses were here. It was an important place, on the lips of others. Mma had heard of it at Bosutswe. Wealth and power were on full display here. Poor rulers

lived alongside ordinary people grown rich in metals, cloth, and beads that they attracted by hard work and ingenuity. Proximity was a good reason for privacy.

Opportunities for wealth and standing attracted vashambadzi, the men and women who walked great distances, trading.[57] Ordinary people clustered their skills in a great *muzinda* like this, their homes of stone built among the treeless humps of granite and spread across the open flats nearby. Their sinuous lines mimicked the round forms of rock that made the hills above. Duties of rule clung to individual houses, drawing outsiders to those families to seek entrance by marriage. Commoner houses enjoyed the latitude afforded them by their ordinary standing. Mma and Tswan, set loose on the land by twists of fortune, envy, and jealousy, could find in this *muzinda* a way to keep their ambitions alive.

"Let's find some of Lembeni's people and see if they're expecting us."

"It's a start," said Mma, "but I think we were faster on the road than his messenger."

"If you're right, Lembeni's people here will only have gossip about the ordeal."

"They're probably down at the end of the valley, where the newer houses stand."

They walked through dust kicked up by a herd of cattle returning from a day's grazing beyond the town and headed down the valley. They could get some sense there of where they stood.

Vashambadzi

Hot and tired from the road, Mma and Tswan say little as they think of preparing an ephemeral camp at the end of the day. A few others head into the floodplain below the ridgeline they have walked all morning. Mma goes down with them, looking for the promise of water offered by a baobab tree. After a quarter moon of walking, she was tired of the road and anxious to begin finding a place in a city where she knew no one.

"Where's Dzandzi? I haven't seen him since morning," says a familiar voice from behind her. Shende, the group's leader and guide, asked no one in particular. Dzandzi, a youth about the same age as Mma's youngest brother, had latched on to them at Pafuzi, a village of cattle keepers and hunters where River Fuzi joined River Limpopo.[58] Mma and Tswan left the busy dusty town of Great Zimbabwe with a group of traders. They followed a road into the headwaters of River Chiredzi, which gathered, an hour of walking away from the city, at the edge of the plateau. The road descended into the warmer, drier world below the plateau, which they reached at midday the second day out. Dzandzi was a son of Shende's mother's people. Dzandzi's parents had asked Shende to take him along so he could learn how to travel, make friends, and trade safely as an adult. His calm, helpful way boded well for a future with vashambadzi, the coast walkers.

On her way to the spring, Mma notices Dzandzi, facing a large boulder, his back turned to the baobab and the otherwise thin forest. The unmistakable motions of eating draw her eye. Crouching, pulling at something, studying the bit taken, then jabbing it toward his mouth, a small woven bag at his feet. He is an unassuming member of their group. Food has been scarce on the way down from the high country to the sea, but not so scarce as to eat alone, she thought.

Plashing water pushes thoughts of food from Mma's mind as she swings the gourd from her back to her belly, runs her hand up its leather strap and passes the gourd over her head as she kneels at the base of a stream of water falling from a lip of stone. The gourd's fluted mouth catches most of the spray the river's warm breath combs into the steady rill of water. The solitude of this spring reminds her of the noisy gatherings of neighbors at Bosutswe's spring, toward sunset, far away on the other side of the hills where River Limpopo starts. If someone told stories of travel while they all waited their turns for water, everyone listened. She wonders now, just a few days out from the Great Zimbabwe, if she can cultivate a similar audience at Manyikeni, when she hears the shouts.

After days of birdsong, animal calls, and the sounds of their own voices, the shout raining down from the cliff above the river scares the travelers. The shouter is too far away to understand, and he and his comrades quickly back away from the cliff edge. By drawing attention to themselves they signal they are not to be feared. Tswan and a few others make their way into the floodplain and head for a promontory at one of the river's bends. They wait there to see what will happen next. Mma and the rest of their group stay on the road, under a huge baobab tree, out of the sun, grateful for a chance to cool down and rest. Now that they're close to the sunrise sea, the air has become humid.

"Take the ridge top the rest of the way. Down the road from here, until the road to Manyikeni, it is not safe." A wiry man with a scrim of gray hairs on his chin and upper lip, leans on a long walking pole, with one leg bent at the knee, the foot resting inside the other leg's knee. He stops talking, stretches his neck out slowly and spits a stream of juice from between a gap in his front teeth.

"Many elephants are in the river's valley."

Chamai, one of Tswan's group of travelers who is older and from Great Zimbabwe, knows the spitter and calls him by name across the low roar of the river. They have traveled together on this road before.

"Dunje, did you start from Manyikeni or Chibuene?"

"Manyikeni. In Chibuene the big families are squabbling over who will host which of the visitors from the ships. The winds began to change last month. Already people from the north are arriving in their boats."[59]

Dunje spits again. He seems uncomfortable speaking so loudly in order to be heard over the flowing water.

"Thank you." Chamai says.

"Do you need food?" The muscles along Dunje's jawline work.

"We have dried meat and phane. Thank you. Do you need food?"

Dunje drops his bent leg, turns, and says no as he walks into the trees away from the river. Chamai thinks it's odd to be generous and rude at the same time. Then he realizes that the offer of food could have been a trick to see if the group was hungry and vulnerable at the close of a long journey. Might get the better of any exchange.

Manyikeni

Mma finishes her story about the tall healer who could cross open desert with short-statured people in the traveling group.[60] A woman weaver, from the big Island, asks a question in the coast language.

"Do short friends help because you give them something? Or do they help so you will give them something?"

"It depends. Like here it is good to share when we can because we can't always share. Friendship helps us keep things moving."

Silence drops on the veranda where they work. Each woman thinks to herself what she's given up on the way here, what she'll give up to stay or go. None allows their feelings to show on their face. They keep their eyes on their work or they look off down the lane toward the sea.

They know the risk of accepting such a large amount of cloth for what's left of the ivory Tswan scavenged on the road from Great Zimbabwe. His ivory represents only a portion of the value of the cloth. They must make up the remainder before Khassim sails in a moon's time or less. But it is a good risk. Mma can unweave the cloth to get the colored threads and reweave them with the brown and tan thread she can spin from African cotton. This will multiply the value of her cloth up River Sabe and beyond. Time is not the only thing pressing them. Ivory has become common recently. It buys less, making Tswan's plan harder.

"In Mahilaka, my home, ivory no longer buys you anything you want. Now, ivory is common."

The Merchant Changes the Terms

"I don't want the tusks. I want the weaver woman," Khassim says to himself. "She knows how to make cloth and that will provide reliable income in Al-Qahira. I can't trust ivory. Abou will be pleased."

Khassim cannot go to Manyikeni, but Maawo, his patron, and Maawo's people can. They know the way. They know the leading houses in the town. They want his patron to return in the future and accept their hospitality.

They work together across these thresholds. Khassim keeps Abou's counsel. Maawo keeps Khassim's counsel. The houses of Manyikeni keep their counsel. It is the young men who move between them, carrying and kidnapping for them and

marrying for themselves, who might pass on what they overhear in one courtyard. In the street you hear a lot of things. Dzandzi knows he must trust Maawo's nephew. It is a good way into his house.

Khassim wonders if he's making the right choice. He eases his doubts by remembering the unforgiving fall in what ivory will buy in each of the ports he visited on the way from Aden. The glut has affected the entire western sea showing no signs of relenting. Abou will know this, too, from his other representatives in Aden. It is no secret.

Tswan and Mma Plan

"I can find more," Tswan says. "I can go back up into the river's floodplain to scavenge. If I work alone, I won't have to share what I find." If he succeeds quickly enough, they can stay ahead of the debt.

"I can add the threads in a length of Khassim's cloth to threads I spin from my cotton and make Khassim's cloth go a very long way trading from Manyikeni to River Sabe and the great towns on the high country."

Each has doubts. But they discuss only one option. Can they take roads other than the ones between Tsodilo and Chibuene? What about the big island? What about this place called Kilwa? Their hearts are not in such possibilities. It would take too long to weave friendships and patronage. And the child will not wait. Their plans have brought them here, now, in this home. The cloth debt is the lump of risk they had to eat.

Now it is just work.

Taken

Twice in the night, Mma's dreams of Bosutswe awaken her with doubts about their plan. She talks herself back to sleep after the first dream by revisiting the logic in the plan. If they work fast, they can stay ahead. The second time, she realizes she needs to work rather than sleep. So she slips out of her cloth coverlet and wraps herself in its second piece against the cold of early morning. She splashes water into a wooden bowl, puts down the ladle, and comes all the way into consciousness with several palmfuls of water thrown over her head.

She goes to the veranda to work. A lamp of sheep's fat burns on a windowsill above her seated form. She works alone in the small pool of light. Bent over the piece she started two days earlier, Mma doesn't see the three young men until they are upon her. As soon as she senses their presence, she knows what will happen, and she screams very loudly. One knocks the awl from her hand. Another tries to pin her arms against her side. The third throws a loop of rough rope awkwardly over her head. She sees, then, that Dzandzi, now a grown man, has thrown the rope and holds it now. A part of the loop catches on her shoulder, and the rest of it falls down her left side toward her waist, held up by the other two men's arms pinning hers. Before she

can struggle out of their grasp, one pulls the remainder of the loop off her shoulder and the third man pulls it taut around her still-seated figure. She is caught, but her screams have drawn people's attention. A small crowd gathers.

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Notes

1. Thornton, *Africa and Africans*; Cooper, *Africa in the World*; Green, *Fistful of Shells*.
2. Home need not be in Africa or conceived of through a metaphor of family and descent; see Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity." As a lexeme touching Africa, *diaspora* has a history that opens after World War II; see Edwards, "Uses of Diaspora." As a simile likening African dispersions to those of Jews and as a component of Pan-Africanist thought, *diaspora* has a history that opens in the later nineteenth century; see Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 205–12; Shepperson, "African Diaspora"; Hanretta, "River of Salvation." For forced movements within Africa as diasporic, see Larson, *History and Memory*; and Ede, "Afropolitan Genealogies."
3. For critique, see Sweet, "Reimagining the African-Atlantic Archive," 147–99. On the Atlantic world from North America, see Cohen, "Amerindian Atlantic?"; and Weaver, *Red Atlantic*, 1–34.
4. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 15–17; Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*. On a Malagasy Afro-Indian Ocean, see Larson, *Ocean of Letters*.
5. Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*; Mintz and Price, *Birth of African-American Culture*; Bastide, *African Religions of Brazil*. Recent scholars show people moving back and forth between both sides of the Atlantic, cocreating its modernities; Verger, *Flux et reflux*; Thornton, *Africa and Africans*; Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*; Apter, *Oduduwa's Chain*. Historical archaeologists of the Atlantic World have pursued similar ends; see Monroe and Ogundiran, *Power and Landscape*; and Ogundiran and Saunders, *Materialities of Ritual*.
6. Ware, *Walking Qur'an*; Fauvelle, *Golden Rhinoceros*; Gomez, *African Dominion*; Ogundiran, *The Yorùbá*; Chirikure, *Great Zimbabwe*; Bennett, *African Kings and Black Slaves*; d'Avignon, *Ritual Geology*.
7. Eze, "Rethinking African Culture and Identity," 234–47.
8. Achille Mbembe mentions ongoing African discoveries of geography, but Africans move in an already edged continent; Mbembe, "Afropolitanism," 26–30; Mbembe and Balakrishnan, "Pan-African Legacies," 31.
9. Barber, *I Could Speak until Tomorrow*, 25–34.
10. Barber, *Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, 84.
11. Lewis and Wigen, *Myth of Continents*, 120–23. See also Pearson, "Littoral Society,"; Land, "Tidal Waves"; and Lovejoy et al., "Defining Regions of Pre-colonial Africa."
12. Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions*; Gomez, *African Dominion*, 38–39, 92–143; d'Avignon, *Ritual Geology*, chapter 2.
13. For a vast example, see Bantu language expansions; Grollemund, Schoenbrun, and Vansina, "Moving Histories." More modest scales accommodate the play of contingency;

see Stephens, *African Motherhood*, 20–26; de Luna, *Collecting Food*, 41–60; and Ogundiran, *The Yorùbá*, 31–62.

14. Ashley, Antonites, and Fredriksen, "Mobility and African Archaeology," 417–34.
15. Schoenbrun, *Lexicon*, RN 224.1.
16. Schoenbrun, *Names of the Python*, 7–13.
17. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11 (critical fabulation), 12 (narrative restraint). Hartman describes this here: https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2019/saidiya-hartman.
18. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11 (quote).
19. Elite, named central Africans show up in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century documents; Thornton, *History of West Central Africa*.
20. Baumanova and Smejda, "Space as Material Culture," 82–92; Wynne-Jones, *A Material Culture*.
21. Schoenbrun, "Early African Pasts," 10–17, 25–30.
22. Barber, *Anthropology of Texts*, 100.
23. Schoenbrun, "Early African Pasts," 7–30. On "exegetical communities," see Barber, *Anthropology of Texts*, 84–97. For historical linguistic archives, see Schoenbrun, *Historical Reconstruction*, and Schoenbrun, *Lexicon*.
24. Barber, *Anthropology of Texts*, 92–102.
25. Wilmsen, "Hills and the Brilliance of Beads"; Moffett and Chirikure, "Exotica in Context"; Chirikure, "New Perspectives."
26. For other purposes, see Birth, *Time Blind*.
27. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4, 6–7, 12–14.
28. Kinahan, "The Solitary Shaman"; Eastwood, "Networks of Supernatural Potency."
29. Miller, *Tsodilo Jewelry*; Kinahan, "Ritual Assemblage," 53 (Hungorob sinew strings).
30. De Luna, *Collecting Food, Cultivating People*, 191 (sitatunga as Kalahari trade item).
31. The story follows her sons (Sehande, with Tswan, and Ghamal, with her Cairene owner) into the Saharan book trade running from the Middle Nile to Gao-Kukiya, on the River Niger in West Africa, during the 1370s. The story ends with the life of Ghamal's daughter Falaba, born in the 1380s in Gao-Kukiya. Falaba left Gao-Kukiya as a young girl and grew up in Tada, on the lower River Niger. In the first decades of the 1400s, Tada was a border town joining the Nupe state and the collapsing cultural and economic hegemony of the Yorùbá city of Ilé-Ifè.
32. Erdrich, *The Night Watchman*, 267.
33. The emperor moth (*Saturniidae*; *#-cònjá* and *#-pánè*, in S-group Bantu) is a central personality in the oral texts of Southern Africa's desert-dwelling herders, hunters, and gatherers; Schoenbrun, *Lexicon*, RN 211.1 and 211.2. Threatened adult *Saturniidae* fully open their wings, revealing a pattern that mimics the staring eyes of a much larger being, giving would-be predators pause. They fly at night, in straight lines. Their spun cocoons are long-lived and used in healing work. Their camouflage, confident night flight, and protected transformation guide people through the guesswork of living. See Kinahan, "A Ritual Assemblage," 48–57.
34. Denbow et al., "Archaeological Excavations at Bosutswe," 466 (burning event).
35. Reid and Segobye, "Politics, Society and Trade," 63 (marula nuts, phane); Klehm, "Local Dynamics," 608; Denbow et al., "Archaeological Excavations at Bosutswe," 369; Antonites, "Glass Beads," 418–19.
36. Some phonemes in Khoekhoen and Ju languages are pronounced with a variety of clicks. Bantu languages of the S-Group, like IsiZulu or AmaXhosa, and some Southwestern

Bantu languages, like Fwe, adopted some of those clicks as consonants. A second group of Bantu languages, including Northern S-Group members, has so-called marginal clicks, which don't operate at a phonemic level to distinguish lexical meaning. Still other Bantu languages in the S Group and beyond do not have clicks in their phonological inventories. In the first instance, the presence of clicks reflects the legacy of the kinds of relationships Hande lived, a high-status San-speaking woman raising children with a Southwestern Bantu-speaking man. In the second instance, the presence of clicks represents the kind of relationships Mma's mother lived, a Khoe-speaking woman raising children with a high-status speaker of northern S-Group Bantu languages; see Pakendorf et al., "Bantu-Khoisan Language Contact," 6–11, 26–29.

37. Klehm, "Local Dynamics," 608, 616 (salt and conversion).
38. Denbow et al., "Archaeological Excavations at Bosutswe," 469 (weaving); Antonites, "Fiber Spinning," 107 (weaving).
39. Landau, *Popular Politics*, 70–2.
40. Moffett, Hall, and Chirikure, "Crafting Power," 101180.
41. Denbow et al., "Archaeological Excavations at Bosutswe," 470 (sitatunga metatarsals at Bosutswe).
42. Machiridza, "Landscapes and Ethnicity," 656–62, 666.
43. Kinahan, "The Solitary Shaman," 555–57.
44. Mguni, "A New Iconographic Understanding," 38; Mguni, *Termites of the Gods*.
45. Garlake, *The Hunter's Vision*, 123–28 (elephants, hunting).
46. Wylie, *Death and Compassion*.
47. Coulson, Segadika, and Walker, "Ritual in the Hunter-Gatherer/Early Pastoralist Period," 212–13.
48. Chirikure, "New Perspectives," 157–58 (hunting specializations). Scavenging ivory from dead animals was common; Carruthers et al., "The Elephant in South Africa," 24–25; Forssman, Page, and Selier, "How Important"; Huffman, "Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe," 37–38.
49. Forssman, "An Archaeological Contribution," 25.
50. De Luna, *Collecting Food, Cultivating People*, 182, on elephant populations below Victoria Falls; de Luna, "Hunting Reputations," 279–99, on elephant hunting terms. For new dating of Ingombe Ilede, see McIntosh and Fagan, "Re-dating," 1069–77; Killick, "Ingombe Ilede's Trade Connections," 1087–88; and de Luna, "Ingombe Ilede and Its Hinterland," 1089–91.
51. De Luna, "Collecting Food, Cultivating Persons," RN 824, 594–96; and *Collecting Food, Cultivating Persons*, 211–17, here, 216 on *nkombalume* (and *sinyanga*) elephant hunter-leaders.
52. In twentieth-century Zezuru Shona, *dàná* could be glossed as "a hill without trees or rocks"; see Hannan, *Standard Shona Dictionary*, 108.
53. Feierman, "Ethnographic Regions," 185–96 (power of exotic medicines).
54. So-called Q-style walls built in this manner appear in Great Zimbabwe early in the fourteenth century. They were fresh and new when Tswan and Mma visited the city; see Chirikure and Pikirayi, "Inside and Outside."
55. Chirikure and Pikirayi, "Inside and Outside," 980.
56. Chirikure et al., "Elites and Commoners," 1072.
57. Mudenge, *Political History of Munhumutapa*; Moffett and Chirikure, "Exotica in Context," 349 (vashambadzi); Schoenbrun, *Lexicon*, RN 224.1 (*-shambadzi).

58. Plug, "Iron Age Fauna from the Limpopo Valley," 118 (location), 120 (cattle).
59. Macamo, *Privileged Places*. Chibuene was reoccupied in the fourteenth century after three centuries of senescence; the broken glass on the ground evoked a wealthy past from the seventh through the tenth centuries; see Sinclair, Ekblom, and Wood, "Trade and Society," 726.
60. Beaujard, *The Worlds of the Indian Ocean*, 412–15 (size and firstness in Imerina and Malaysia).

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