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Charles Piot and Kodjo Nicolas Batema, *The Fixer: Visa Lottery Chronicles*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. Pp. 212. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0304-5 (Print).

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In *The Fixer: Visa Lottery Chronicles*, Charles Piot examines the United States' Diversity Visa program, examining the inconsistent and capricious ways in which it is administered and regulated. Piot also describes the human costs of the Diversity Visa program— its effects on applicants, their families, and “fixers”, the individuals who guide them through the process, often exploiting loopholes in the system to their clients' advantage. The main character, Kodjo Nicolas Batema, is one of the most successful fixers in the Togolese capital Lome (and in the subregion of Togo, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Benin and the Ivory Coast in general). Kodjo's story, along with interviews of U.S. Embassy personnel and Togolese applicants, demonstrates the flaws and inconsistencies of the Diversity Visa as both policy and program, as well as the ways in which the performance of “American-ness” and cross-cultural (mis)understanding factor into the process.

In the course of recounting Kodjo's notable successes and failures as a fixer, Piot provides an overview of the development of the Diversity Visa, which is compelling in and of itself. As he informs the reader, primary motivating factors for the establishment of the Diversity Visa came from the unintended consequences of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which de-emphasized the importance of race, ethnicity and national origin in the decision-making process, considerations that favored individuals from Western Europe over all others, particularly applicants from Asia. However, to mitigate the effects of these changes and maintain Western Europeans' advantage, the framers of the Act included what they assumed would be a “safety valve” that would continue overrepresentation of Western European immigrants; this safety valve took the form of a preference system that highly valued work skills and family reunification.

The Immigration and Nationality Act's “safety valve” created a result opposite what was intended; immigration from Asia and Latin America increased significantly, as applicants from these regions were better able to make cases vis-à-vis family reunification and preferred work experience; Western European immigration rates remained constant. In fact, most Irish applicants could not meet the new Visa requirements, which impeded immigration.. In their attempt to preserve a favored position for Western European applicants, politicians had designed a system that accomplished what they had sought to prevent: tremendous growth in the numbers of non-European immigrants and a decline in the numbers of Western Europeans as a proportion of the new immigrant population.

Legislators' desire to craft a system by which allowances could be made for an increased Western European (especially Irish) ¹ presence, led to the addition of a “diversity” category in the

¹ Ted Kennedy, Tip O'Neill and Daniel Patrick Moynihan were among the influential legislators of Irish descent who championed the inclusion of the “diversity” category, due in no small measure to the difficulties many Irish applicants experienced trying to obtain visas in the 1980s.

1990 Immigration Act; Africa was included as a traditionally underrepresented area, and thus as a target for the allotment of more visas (in addition to Europe, the true area of concern). One reason for Africa being labeled as an underrepresented area was to insulate the Act from charges of favoritism toward Europeans. Once again, this legislation yielded an unintended consequence: the increased presence of Africans as visa applicants and recipients. The lottery as a means of selecting individuals from among the applicant pool appears to have emerged as a compromise for administering the Diversity Visa.² The advent of the Diversity Visa inaugurated a new period of African immigration to the United States, opening the doors to opportunity for individuals throughout the continent, and for entrepreneurs such as Kodjo who were eager to assist immigrants for the right price.

As a famous (and among Embassy personnel, notorious) fixer in Lome (whose reach extends to Northern Togo, Benin, and the Ivory Coast), Kodjo's actions are representative of the measures applicants must necessarily take to obtain a visa, and of the game of cat-and-mouse between the Embassy and "the Street." Embassy's continuously make adjustments to prevent fraud on the part of applicants, and the "the Street" works assiduously to keep one step ahead of the latest policy directives in order to provide an advantage for clients. Of particular concern to all involved parties (applicants, Embassy officials and fixers) are the ways in which the economic demands of the application process and questions about the nature (and "validity") of applicants' marriages become complicating factors. More than any other factors, questions relating to these two often interrelated concerns figure heavily in the application and interview processes, generating a myriad creative, complex, and, depending on one's perspective, quasi-legal/fraudulent responses from the fixers.

Among the many issues applicants face, economic concerns are often the most pressing, informing and influencing much of the activity undertaken by applicants and fixers throughout the process. The sheer cost of an application and the medical exam, both of which must be purchased prior to the interview, is prohibitive even without taking into account the eventual cost of airfare. This fundamental reality – that most Togolese applicants cannot afford to pay for the opportunity they desire – has led to a variety of responses from Kodjo and his colleagues, complex financing schemes involving Togolese at home and (for Kodjo's clients) throughout the Diaspora. A frequent feature of these financing schemes is the marriage of convenience marriages, called "pop-up marriages" in embassies, which have generated a strong and consistently negative response. This negative response is rooted in perceptions that are indicative of the cultural divide between the Embassy and Togolese society.

Marriages of convenience, which are often contracted between a cash-strapped Diversity Visa lottery winner and someone with the means to cover the expenses associated with the process, facilitate the emigration of both parties.³ For the lottery winner, his/her spouse, and any other involved parties (family, friends, financier[s], fixer), such marriages are a creative solution to a problem, from which the benefits redound to all. For embassy officials, they are examples of

² Piot, 11.

³ Depending on the circumstances, fixers may also attach children to the lottery winner's application prior to the interview, effectively transforming the single opportunity granted to the winner into an endowment to be shared by a group of his/her choosing (guided by the wishes of the individual[s] financing the process).

blatant fraud, marriages contracted for the sole purpose of enabling opportunistic, unscrupulous individuals to relocate to the U.S. on the backs of others, and considerable effort is directed toward ferreting out such “fake” marriages.

In response, fixers have adopted a number of countermeasures, including paying local officials to “back-date” wedding ceremonies (to a date prior to the application for a Diversity Visa), coaching interviewees in preparation for potentially hostile interviews/interrogations at the hands of Embassy personnel, and concocting elaborate backstories for couples. The success of applicant couples depends on their ability to present themselves as a loving couple, but in a manner that resonates with middle-class, “American” sensibilities to interviewers for whom these sensibilities are the markers of genuine love. As such, fixers like Kodjo must understand both the outer trappings of such relationships, and then prepare their clients to reproduce them in a manner that interviewers will read as authentic; they must prepare applicants to perform aspects of “American-ness” in order to secure passage to the United States.

The success of fixers, Kodjo in particular, in coaching applicants through entire process, which may include some level of deception vis-à-vis the interview, is a source of consternation for Embassy personnel, who task themselves with distinguishing between “honest”, “deserving” and “dishonest”, “undeserving” applicants, employing a variety of tactics in the vetting process. Couples are often separated and then interviewed to detect any inconsistency between the two accounts; interviewers lying to extract “confessions” (generally of participating in “pop-up marriages”) are also commonplace. Togolese Embassy personnel may also conduct impromptu visits to applicants’ places of residence (especially in the case of couples) and/or employment, or attempt to engage applicants in conversation in public venues (e.g. local bars, restaurants, etc.), where they may attempt to use the relaxed setting to extract compromising information, or demand “favors” (financial or sexual) in exchange for advancing their application. In an ironic twist, these measures do not privilege honest applicants, but rather reward those who are more practiced in the arts of deceptions, those better able to “perform” honesty in a manner recognizable to Embassy officials. Moreover, despite their persistent attempts to uncover malfeasance on the part of applicants, Embassy officials appear unwilling to acknowledge and address the underlying cause of much of the activity they find so abhorrent: the financial burden imposed by the process,⁴ which is the driving force behind many of the most creative (and potentially problematic) solutions. As Piot reminds us, these problems are created by the policies enacted with the Diversity Visa process.

However, the true protagonists of *The Fixer* are not fixers such as Kodjo, or the Embassy personnel with whom they match wits, but the applicants themselves, whose lives are affected in profound ways by the decisions of the aforementioned parties. The extended game of one-upmanship between personnel and fixers is a contest in which applicants’ very futures often hang in the balance; (perceived) futures of prosperity abroad in the United States, or of continued financial uncertainty in Togo. By examining the ways in which the application, interview and eventual decision impact individual and collective lives, *The Fixer* offers its most poignant insights. Piot exposes the psychological (and at times, physical) toll of preparation (marshalling resources, anticipating ruses likely to be employed by interviewers, etc.) on applicants and their

⁴ Diversity visas are often far more expensive than other types of visas. Moreover, all applicants must pay the same fee regardless of location; both German and Togolese applicants must pay the same price, regardless of the strength of the local currency relative to the dollar.

families, a cost that has become part of the application and interview process. In particular, the capricious and inconsistent nature of the process itself – the exorbitant prices of the application and medical examination, the lack of a consistent standard on the part of interviewers and the refusal of Embassy officials to explain their decisions⁵ – and the effects of this prolonged period of uncertainty on applicants is made clear for readers.

Perhaps the most compelling part of Piot's discussion on the Diversity Visa application process's harmful toll deals with recipients' experiences in the United States, and the extent to which their expectations correlate with reality. Most have been disappointed with life in the United States – particularly the cultural and social aspects – and keenly feel the absence of family and friends. Paradoxically, the greatest immediate benefits of living and working abroad have accrued for them in Togo: prosperity, elevated status amongst their peers, and opportunities to improve the lives of loved ones by sponsoring their immigration to the United States. Ironically, it is during visits home that Togolese expatriates are able to perform “American-ness” (success, wealth) in the form of ostentatious displays of largesse for family and friends. These types of performances of “American-ness” call to mind applicants' performances of “American-ness” – as “honest” individuals or as “authentic” couples. The fact that these performances all take place abroad leaves one to wonder whether “American-ness” can *only* be performed outside of the United States.

The true genius of *The Fixer* is the way in which it situates the reader's perspective of the Diversity Visa through the fixer. Told from the applicants' perspective, many seemingly uninteresting but potentially significant aspects of the process might have been overlooked while constructing a narrative of accomplishment against insurmountable odds. Telling the story of the Diversity Visa from the perspective of an Embassy official could obscure the applicants' humanity in order to create a narrative of justice where intrepid functionaries root out “unsavory elements” (among the applicants and fixers). While far from perfect, the fixers' perspective acknowledges the aspirations of the applicants *and* Embassy officials as part of the process and finds a way to satisfy both parties: visas granted to “deserving” applicants. It is this comprehensive understanding of the Diversity Visa as both a policy and a method for individuals to dramatically and meaningfully alter their lives that enables successful fixers to guide applicants through the visa application process. And it is through the story of one of these underacknowledged participants in that readers are afforded real insight into the constantly evolving drama that is the Diversity Visa in theory and application.

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⁵ Applicants are not provided an explanation for the denial of their application.