



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, January 2023

Japa, or to flee or to run: Nigerian youth and the urgency of departure

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Abstract

'*Japa*', a Yoruba term for 'to run' or 'to flee', has become part of the everyday vernacular of Nigerian youth since seizing the national imagination in 2020. While migration has always been a part of Nigerian culture, this paper asks, how did it become charged with such urgency? Casting migration as an act of 'fleeing' implies its necessity for survival. Why has this imagery, more readily associated with refugees or asylum seekers, been taken up by middle-class youth to express their desires to leave? Drawing on a series of interviews with Nigerian youth who are planning to leave or have left the country as education migrants, this paper traces the political, economic, and social configurations that weave urgency through the social-cultural phenomenon of *japa*.

Theme

Reproduction Migration

Keywords

Nigeria, youth, education, migration, *japa*

To be quoted as:

Liu, Jing Jing. 2023. *Japa, or to flee or to run: Nigerian youth and the urgency of departure*. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Doi: 10.48509/MoLab.6432

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‘*Japa*’,² a Yoruba term for ‘to run’ or ‘to flee’, has become synonymous with the idea of leaving Nigeria. Since seizing the popular imagination in 2020, it has been typically used to describe the desperation of middle-class youth to leave the country.³ With *japa*, it is fleeing which is important – the destination is secondary. This use of the term traces back to Naira Marley’s 2018 song of the same name.⁴ Although Marley sings about running from the police, and not about migration per se (the video suggests he is in the UK or Europe), the point is clear: anywhere will do, he just has to get away, and quickly. As Marley sings in the chorus: *japa* to Canada, America, or Africa.

When I asked Michael, a journalist in his 20s who works in Lagos, why *japa* had come to be *the* term for international migration, he corrected me, insisting that “*japa* doesn’t mean to migrate; it means to run for your life.” Pressed for clarification, Michael wryly explained that although “it [has long been] the Nigerian dream to leave Nigeria,” a different feeling had taken hold today: “There wasn’t the desperation...when I was growing up. People around me, they speak about leaving, [but] it wasn’t that they need to run, that my life is in danger, shit I need to leave.” Today, desperation is at the heart of talk about migration. As Aisha, a student in her 20s in Ibadan further clarified: “[*Japa*] means I’m done. I’m not doing this anymore. I am running away. I can’t cope.”

How did migration become so urgent? Casting migration as an act of ‘fleeing’ implies its necessity for survival. Why has this imagery, more readily associated with refugees or asylum seekers facing physical danger, been adopted by the Nigerian middle class to express their desires to leave? Why are they no longer capable of coping? What dangers are they running from? Speaking with Nigerian youth who have left or are planning to leave the country as education migrants, this entry traces the contours of the urgency that animates *japa* today.

Education as a way out

The country’s public universities have been hit by nine extended strikes in the past 13 years.⁵ Indeed, the sense of urgency has been compounded by such delays. For these former and current students, *japa* is deemed the only means of recouping time stolen, or avoiding time being wasted in the future. Aisha, who was in the sixth year of a four-year degree, was more infuriated and demoralised than excited about resuming studies in November of 2022 after an eight-month strike at the University of Ibadan.⁶ She had already been affected by a nine-month strike in 2020 and believed that another strike was inevitable. The

² The original Yoruba expression is “já pa”.

³ As defined by Nigeria’s Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, “youth” refers to people under 34 years of age. Available online at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-abidjan/---ilo-abuja/documents/publication/wcms_819111.pdf. Last accessed 25 November 2022.

⁴ Marley, Naira. 2018. *Japa*. *YouTube*. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0ok_o_zLCM. Last accessed 25 November 2022.

⁵ The tertiary education system in Nigeria has experienced 17 strikes in 23 years. Ashiru, Dele. 2022. 17 strikes in 23 years: a unionist explains why Nigeria’s university lecturers won’t back down. *The Conversation*. 8 September 2022. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/17-strikes-in-23-years-a-unionist-explains-why-nigerias-university-lecturers-wont-back-down-190170>. Last accessed on 25 November 2022; Orjinmo, Nduka. 2022. Nigeria’s ASUU university strike: ‘Wasted eight months of my life.’ *BBC*. 14 October 2022. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-63234558>. Last accessed on 25 November 2022.

⁶ Reuters. 2022. Nigeria’s public university lecturers suspend strike after eight months. *Reuters*. 14 October 2022. Available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerias-public-university-lecturers-suspend-strike-after-eight-months-2022-10-14/>. Last accessed on 25 November 2022.

delays had already been torturous – and for her, and others like her, they harden the resolve to leave. In this context, she envied the first-year students whose parents had pulled them out of her university and sent them to a private university in Nigeria or to study abroad.

The strikes, and their accompanying interruptions, also reveal rifts and disjunctures in the broadly self-identified category of the middle class and the kinds of education a family can afford, or at least consider for their children. Moreover, who becomes delayed and who can slip through the series of disruptions unscathed intensifies the arbitrariness of timing. Aisha reflected on the emotional toll of her situation: “The number of times I get really depressed because I see my mates in private school, or abroad, and they are done. And I am still stuck here.” Seeing further labour action as likely, Aisha was planning to *japa*. “I cannot do graduate school in Nigeria. A master’s program in Nigeria should just be one or one and a half years. I have a close friend and he is in his second or third year of his masters. You are supposed to be done with this long ago.”

While graduate school was the primary motivator for Aisha to *japa*, she confessed that the pursuit of education was not usually the end goal for other youth planning to leave: “Many think the best way out is academia, even if they don’t have passion for it.” David, an engineer in his 30s who studied and who works in the UK, outlined the pragmatics of his *japa* journey: “It wasn’t about getting into an ivy or a top five university. I just wanted to leave the country and get a job. It was more of a route to leave the country – look forward and never backward.” David’s case further illustrates how education is more than a means of short-term escape – it also becomes a way to find employment abroad. This route is especially attractive, as unemployment rates among new graduates in Nigeria are continually reaching new heights.⁷

Nigerians typically view education as the ‘easiest’ path to migration. And in recent years, the number of Nigerian students enrolled in universities abroad has skyrocketed. Although they charge the highest university fees, the UK, Canada and the US are widely considered the top-tier destinations. The UK government reported that the number of Nigerians granted study visas has increased by over 500 percent in the past two years.⁸ Today, the post-Brexit labour market trains to fill skilled and low-skilled positions and has resorted to skimming from the talent pools of its former colonies like Nigeria, India and Pakistan.⁹

Other Nigerians who *japa* opt for alternatives in what they consider to be second-tier, non-English-speaking countries like Germany, Finland and Norway. In those countries, fees are lower, and international students are permitted to work part time. Still others move to other destinations like China

⁷ *The Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan 2021-24* (2021) produced by the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development reported on unemployment and underemployment rates: “As of 2020 (Q2), youth unemployment (15-34 years old) stood at 35 per cent. A further 28 per cent of young people in the labour force were considered underemployed (working 20-39 hours a week) and 37 per cent were working full time (40 or more hours per week).” Available online at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-abidjan/---ilo-abuja/documents/publication/wcms_819111.pdf. Last accessed on 25 November 2022.

⁸ Ojoko, Israel. 2022. ‘Japa’: The trending time bomb we are ignoring. *The Cable*. 11 October 2022. Available online at: <https://www.thecable.ng/japa-the-trending-time-bomb-we-are-ignoring>. Last accessed 30 October 2022.

⁹ Milliken, David. 2022. Galvanisers wanted: post-Brexit worker shortages strain UK employers. *Reuters*. 4 July 2022. Available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/galvanisers-wanted-post-brexit-worker-shortages-strain-uk-employers-2022-07-04/>. Last accessed 25 October 2022.

and Northern Cyprus,¹⁰ which are easier to access in terms of visa and university entry requirements, but where international students are not legally entitled to work. Any work undertaken is strictly paid under-the-table. These second-tier countries act as stepping-stones to the top-tier. What emerges then is a ‘territorialisation’ of geopolitical entities, whereby trajectories of global mobility in turn naturalise a particular valuation and partitioning of the world.

#EndSARS and politics of mobilisation

The government’s growing disregard for youth aspirations for education has been further compounded by its use of violence. While leaving the country had long been a simmering desire amongst youth, the urgency to do so has become increasingly acute in recent years. A decade of perceived political decline reached its nadir with the shock of the Lekki massacre on 20 October 2020. In Lekki, Nigerian Army officers opened fire on unarmed civilian protestors, most of whom were youth. Across the country, protests erupted to denounce the brutality of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigerian Police Force founded in 1992 and charged with combating a spate of armed robberies and kidnappings. Since then, the unit had degenerated into an instrument for extrajudicial violence. For many youth, the Lekki massacre laid bare the unbearableness of being in Nigeria. Powered by social media, and especially Twitter, the #EndSARS protests signified a political flash point that galvanised the festering personal discontent of the past decade.



Figure 1: Lekki Protests, Source: Kaizenify, CC BY-SA 4.0. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons.

¹⁰ Liu, Jing Jing. 2022. Africans in China are on the move. *This is Africa*. 7 June 2022. Available online at: <https://africasacountry.com/2022/06/africans-in-china-are-on-the-move>. Last accessed 1 February 2023; Liu, Jing Jing. 2022. The “alternative” money economy of Nigerian students. *This is Africa*. 28 June 2022. Available online at: <https://africasacountry.com/2022/06/the-alternative-money-economy-of-nigerian-students>. Last accessed 1 February 2023.

For some, the massacre was a tipping point. As Chioma, a woman in her 30s currently preparing her documents to *japa*, fumed, “We saw the leadership for what it is.”¹¹ Another woman, who has since moved to Belgium, recounted her trauma, “I suddenly couldn’t stand the state. Every day I woke up, I wanted to scream. It was like being in Nigeria was making my skin crawl.”¹² The protests appeared to signal something else significant: that individual dissatisfaction with life in Nigeria was insufficient to end one’s tolerance – that is, the ability ‘to cope’. Before the massacre, there was no shortage of complaints about life in Nigeria.¹³ These complaints were frequently coupled with personal stories of unfulfilled dreams of leaving, of failed university applications, of rejected visa applications. Undeniably, a readiness to leave lay dormant in the psychic recess and physical constitution of a Nigerian middle-class subjectivity.¹⁴ This ‘readiness’ was to be found as a stubborn discomfort, as something latent, something just under the skin. Until, of course, it found expression and made the “skin crawl.” Not necessarily causal but certainly contextual, it was in the aftermath of #EndSARS and the urgency of *japa* that loose desires were marshalled, half-hearted inquiries revived, dusty applications dug-out, and vague plans became concrete attempts to flee. “A lot of people were remaking plans after 2020,” Chioma said, reflecting on the friends who had left, “most youth lost faith.”

It is worth reiterating that migration has always been a part of the Nigerian imaginary – from rural to urban journeys, travel along regional trade networks, and education migration to the colonial metropole. A dearth of local prospects and a desire for individual prosperity motivated these trajectories. Today, these reasons merge with a palpable sense of national despair, something which is not new either. In 1984, the fictitious television character “Andrew” was “derided as being unpatriotic” for yearning to leave Nigeria, as he was “tired of no water, no light and no good roads”.¹⁵ Contrast this evaluation with citizens departing today; they are no longer derided for leaving, but rather, eminent Nigerian figures plead for them to remain.¹⁶

¹¹ For example, a spate of repressive policies gripped the protest organisers, including the blockage of donations into their bank accounts to finance the #EndSARS protests. In response, donations increased in droves through the decentralised cryptocurrency, Bitcoin. This effort was endorsed by the co-founder of Twitter, Jack Dorsey; Kazeem, Yomi. 2020. How bitcoin powered the largest Nigerian protests in a generation. *Quartz Africa*. October 2020. Available online at: <https://qz.com/africa/1922466/how-bitcoin-powered-nigerias-endsars-protests>. Last accessed 3 May 2022.

¹² Odunlami, David. 2021. I can’t move to the US with my family, so I’m in Belgium. *Zikoko*. October 8. Available online at: <https://www.zikoko.com/citizen/i-cant-move-to-the-us-with-my-family-so-im-in-belgium-abroad-life/>. Last accessed 1 November 2022.

¹³ Odunlami, David. 2021. I left Nigeria because of #EndSARS. *Zikoko*. 1 October 2021. Available online at: <https://www.zikoko.com/citizen/i-left-nigeria-because-of-endsars-abroad-life/>. Last accessed 10 October 2022.

¹⁴ I see Nigerian migrants as inhabiting a disposition similar to the “diasporic condition” described by Ghassan Hage (2021). Hage, Ghassan. 2021. *The diasporic condition: Ethnographic explorations of the Lebanese in the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁵ Enahoro, Eugene. 2022. “Japa” and “House Negro” Syndrome. *Daily Trust*. 18 October 2022. Available online at: <https://dailytrust.com/japa-and-house-negro-syndrome>. Last accessed 1 November 2022.

¹⁶ Falola, Toyin. 2022. Japa!, By Toyin Falola. *Premium Times*. 2 September 2022. Available online at: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/551986-japa-by-toyin-falola.html>. Last accessed 2 November 2022.



Figure 2: Man at Murtala Muhammed International Airport, Lagos, Nigeria. Source: Comradeayobami, CC BY-SA 4.0. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons.

Economic discontent

Faith then has not solely been eroded by what the government has done, but also by what it has not done – it has not salvaged the economy, has not reined in inflation (between eight and 17 percent per year since 2010), has not tempered the rising cost of living, has not quelled panic over the fact that a 9-5 salary is no longer enough to take care of oneself and one’s extended family.¹⁷ The sense of urgency surges when one’s Nigerian income becomes inadequate to live in Nigeria – not for lack of effort, but for lack of effect. *Japa* stresses the inability to survive in an environment in which one’s own personal efforts are constantly undermined by political and economic effects. This urgency has, no doubt, been hastened by the alarming depreciation of the currency – the naira. In December 2015, the naira was

¹⁷ Nigeria Inflation Rate 1960-2022. www.Macrotrends.net. Available online at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/NGA/nigeria/inflation-rate-cpi>. Last accessed 15 December 2022.

trading at N230/1USD on the parallel market, where most people are effectively forced to convert currency.¹⁸ By October 2022, it was trading at N800/1USD – a 248 per cent depreciation in value in seven years.¹⁹ The situation has worsened further over the past two years, with new lows being reached every few months. In this context, the affective potency of this ‘unprecedented’ has become symbol of the country’s decline. Meanwhile, on the official market which few can access, the naira traded at N443/\$1 in October 2022, further underscoring a quantitative incongruence that magnifies the qualitative disparity in Nigeria itself.²⁰



Figure 3: Nigerian money. Source: Photo by Ismail Seghosime.
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/currency-in-nigeria-5671470/>, via Pexels.

The prospect of earning foreign currency to counteract the rising cost of living has been a powerful motivating factor in the urgency to *japa*. For students in part-time or full-time employment overseas, it has become clear that their incomes are increasingly important for families back home. At the same time, inflation in Nigeria is counteracting the strength of converted wages and pushing people to their limits.²¹ When David wanted his parents to come to the UK for a visit, he had to accept that they would prefer him to send money instead. “That money would make a lot more of an impact,” he agreed, “the food

¹⁸ Olanrewaju, Sulaimon. 2021. Naira depreciates by 209% in six years – CBN defends currency with \$130bn, rolls out tens of policies. *Nigerian Tribune*. 20 September 2021. Available online at: <https://tribuneonlineng.com/naira-depreciates-by-209-in-six-years/>. Last accessed on 29 November 2022; Oyekanmi, Sameul. 2022. Buying frenzy as naira hoarders drive exchange rate past N800/\$1 at FX black market. *Nairametrics*. 31 October 2022. Available online at: <https://nairametrics.com/2022/10/31/buying-frenzy-as-naira-hoarders-drive-exchange-rate-past-n800-1-at-fx-black-market/>. Last accessed 4 November 2022.

¹⁹ Calculations are made based on reported parallel market rates: 1N=0.00435 USD in December 2015 and 1N=0.00125 USD in October 2022, using the formula $((0.00125-0.00435)/(0.00125) \times 100)$. Formula. Available online at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/calculating-rate-foreign-currency-depreciation-o-blessing-jd-%E5%A5%A5%E5%88%A9%E7%BB%B4%E4%BA%9A-/>

²⁰ Mojeed, Abdulkareem. 2022. Naira crosses N800 against dollar at parallel market. *Premium Times*. 1 November 2022. Available online at: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/562748-naira-crosses-n800-against-dollar-at-parallel-market.html>. Last accessed 5 November 2022.

²¹ Olawoyin, Oladeinde. 2022. Nigeria inflation hits 17-year high of 20.8% amid soaring food prices. *Premium Times*. 17 October 2022. Available online at: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/business/business-news/560119-nigeria-inflation-hits-17-year-high-of-20-8-amid-soaring-food-prices.html>. Last accessed 2 November 2022.

inflation is so high – the amount of money I send home is not enough to do anything meaningful [anymore], only to buy food. We are living on the edge; my family is depending on me in a big way.” Femi, a master’s student in Germany, shared a similar experience. His father, a government employee, was not paid for over four months, and Femi became responsible for patching up the financial shortfall. The stark decline of the naira augments Femi’s relative earning power by exchange rate alone (rather than through more hours or higher wages). Like most Nigerians abroad, for Femi, quoting the exchange rate is habit. Femi recalled in October 2022 that “one euro was about 400 naira when I came three years ago. If [you] send one euro now, it’s 726. I was okay at 500, 600...but it’s just been three years.” In Femi’s calculation, there was a certain degree of acceptable depreciation, along with a certain disbelief that the naira was already far weaker than was previously imaginable. With the naira, there is a kind of delirium around the unending uncertainty about its path, and the upending of precedent after precedent: But is this the uncertainty of not knowing when currency depreciation will end? Or rather, is it knowing full well that it will not end – that is, the certainty of ongoing uncertainty?

Affective afterlives

Migration can be expected to alter social relationships, but by what means and into what forms is less predictable. For Nigerians who *japa*, kinship bonds and boundaries shorten and shrink from extended affiliations into the morphological unit of the nuclear family – to parents and siblings. Most friendships succumb to distance and crumble under the weight of relocation. Adding to these existing strains is the secrecy of *japa*. Few people share their *japa* plans beforehand, ensuring that the initial shock of discovery reverberates long after their abrupt departure. Close friends go to a party together one evening, and the next day, one shares a photo from the airport on social media. Friendship without disclosure is often interpreted as an act of betrayal. Were you really friends, if you did not know about their *japa* plans?²² Those who remain are left to scrutinise the substance of these intimacies – can one’s entire friendship be negated by one secret? Or one can sink further, questioning what friendship itself is – is it distinguished by consistency, trust, and revelations over time? Or by companionship, co-presence, and a respect for “the opacity of other’s minds”?²³ Departure puts the value of friendships, and indeed the meaning of friendship itself, into question.

Such secrecy surrounding *japa* has spawned semi-satirical articles like, “If your friend is doing any of these 10 things, they’re going to *japa* without telling you.”²⁴ While social media and news reports sensationalise the occultism of “village people” and the dangers of witchcraft, with girlfriends, uncles, pastors, and friends all portrayed as potential liabilities prior to departure, my informants highlighted the

²² Adetayo, Ayoola. 2022. Japa: Should your friends know about your relocation plans? *Pulse*. 11 October 2022. Available online at: <https://www.pulse.ng/lifestyle/food-travel/should-your-friends-know-about-your-japa-plans/p1mfe7e>. Last accessed 2 November 2022.

²³ Matthew Carey (2017) discusses the idea of “the opacity of other’s minds” put forth by Joel Robbins and Josh Rumsey (2008) in formulating friendship that is based on the right to individual autonomy, and thus allowing for inconsistency, circumspection, and mistrust in friendship. Carey argues that understanding companionship and copresence as friendship expands our current (mis)conception of friendship, firmly rooted in an Aristotelian virtue of unselfishness and the Enlightenment idea of sympathy (50). Carey, Matthew. 2017. *Mistrust: An Ethnographic Theory*. Chicago, IL: Hau Books.

²⁴ Esekheigbe, Itohan. 2022. If your friend is doing any of these 10 things, they’re going to *japa* without telling you. *Zikoko*. 11 October 2022. Available online at: <https://www.zikoko.com/life/if-your-friend-is-doing-any-of-these-10-things-theyre-going-to-japa-without-telling-you/>. Last accessed 20 October 2022.

importance of (in)security in keeping secret their plans to *japa*.²⁵ Kidnapping and extortion were seen as real possibilities once others know you can afford to leave. Chuks, a 31-year-old who trained as a doctor in China and who now works in Tanzania, explained, “before you *japa* you must provide proof of funds to your university and embassy. In a country with increasing insecurity, poverty level on another scale, inflation, is it reasonable to let people know you have that money in a bank?”

Friendship constitutes an arena of chosen intimacy in a way that kinship does not, and its abrupt rifts often appear particularly harsh to youth. Its terms of estrangement continue to haunt those who have left, and those who remain behind. Dola, who is in her 20s and living in Canada, bore the pain of resentment for leaving. The “bad energy” she received from her friends on a daily basis pushed her to consider deleting WhatsApp, at least temporarily. Chioma, who was still in Nigeria, recounted how “losing” two friends to *japa* shattered their vision of intergenerational closeness. “We were all supposed to grow old together,” she lamented, “and have kids that are friends with each other. Now we all are in three different time zones.” From a social modelling perspective, Chioma’s reference to “loss” opens up an epidemiological framing which reveals the ‘spread’ of *japa* as a phenomenon.²⁶ *Japa*’s ‘virality’ incubates in those ‘left’ behind, and this ineffable experience of loss reinforces their own resolve to leave. As a consequence, entire social groups and collegial cohorts are transplanted abroad by the urgency to *japa*.

In the anthropological literature, we get a sense that prolonged suffering often settles into heroic or ordinary endurance.²⁷ Here, drawing on accounts of *japa*, I ask: What transforms endurance of life in Nigeria into intolerance? What compels people to say: “I’m not doing this anymore,” “I can’t cope,” or “I can’t stand it anymore?” And not just anyone, but the middle class, who readily give up their salaries, sacrifice their comforts, and prepare themselves for certain racism and discrimination abroad. How has the urgency to *japa* come to absorb youth across Nigeria? And with what kind of urgency? Is it the urgency that proclaims “I cannot accept state violence” and understands running away as a matter of life or death, of actual survival? Or is it an urgency that proclaims, “I am not doing this anymore”? By combing through and teasing apart what exactly *this* is, I have aimed to get to the heart of the values at stake and figure out how and when the endurable (‘I can cope’) shades into the unbearable (‘I can’t cope’). As David stresses, “Nigerians are migrating out of survival and necessity rather than choice.” And that, he says, is a “massive, massive difference.”

²⁵ Usually at their parents’ urging, Nigerian youth are advised not to share their plan to *japa* with extended family members in rural villages, citing their occult practices that could jeopardise travel plans.

²⁶ I find an epidemiological framing useful here, as its metaphorical qualities capture the essential qualities of *japa*: the speed of ‘transmission’, the social nature of ‘infection’ through ‘contact’, and the emotional tenor of ‘loss’.

²⁷ See, for example: Das, Veena. 2007. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Weiss, Hadas. 2022. “From Desire to Endurance: Hanging on in a Spanish Village.” *Cultural Anthropology* 37, no. 1: 45–68. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca37.1.07>; Kwon, June Hee. 2015. “The Work of Waiting: Love and Money in Korean Chinese Transnational Migration.” *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 3: 477–500. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.3.06>.