

Running to Labor:  
Ethiopian Women Distance Runners in Networks of Capital  
by

Hannah Borenstein

Department of Cultural Anthropology  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Orin Starn, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Charles Piot

\_\_\_\_\_  
Anne Allison

\_\_\_\_\_  
Louise Meintjes

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School  
of Duke University

2022

ABSTRACT

Running to Labor:  
Ethiopian Women Distance Runners in Networks of Capital  
by

Hannah Borenstein

Department of Cultural Anthropology  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Orin Starn, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Charles Piot

\_\_\_\_\_  
Anne Allison

\_\_\_\_\_  
Louise Meintjes

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Department of  
Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School of  
Duke University

2022

Copyright by  
Hannah Borenstein  
2022

## Abstract

Perhaps second only to coffee, Ethiopia is best known worldwide for its long-distance runners. Since the 1960s, the country has indeed won countless Olympic medals and major marathons. However, the persisting explanatory rhetoric for East African running dominance relies on deterministic understandings of race, genetics, and environment. Little attention has been paid to the dimensions of labor, culture, and gender at work. This dissertation is the first in-depth ethnographic study of young Ethiopian women seeking a career in long distance running.

Based on two years of fieldwork in Addis Ababa and surrounding areas, domestic trips to competitions and training camps around Ethiopia, an internship at an international sports agency based in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and travel to competitions around the world, the dissertation investigates the transnational networks of people and corporations that female runners move within and across as they navigate a global athletics market. Foregrounding gender, body politics, and global capitalism, my project revises the biology-centered concept of “running economy” into a multi-faceted sociocultural analytic for exploring how aspiring runners strive to make monetary value. How, I ask, can we look at running economy more holistically?

In underlining the social and cultural dimensions of running economy and centering the perspectives of women who exist within the transnational economy of running, we can see how Ethiopian women contest commonsense understandings of how this global athletics economy functions – and make their own moral judgements about what a more just economy would look like. Even as some of them drastically improve their lives by running, and remain hopeful while reaching for success, they find ways to cause frictions and disrupt hegemonic flows of ideas and money. By listening to how they politicize their training as labor, and by hearing their demands and desires, I argue that Ethiopian women runners

expose many of the failed opportunities that capitalist structures and ideology espouse and urge us to rethink how we could better structure transnational economies.

## Dedication

ለኢትዮጵያውያን ቤተሰቦቼ።

# Contents

Abstract .....	iv
List of Figures.....	xi
Acknowledgements .....	xii
1. Introduction: Where and When? .....	1
1.1 The Bell Lap .....	2
1.2 What is Running Economy? .....	6
1.3 The Continued Denial of Coevalness.....	12
1.4 New Methods to Understand Running Economy .....	18
1.4.1 Considering Running as Work .....	18
1.5 Structures of Hegemony in the Transnational Economy of Running .....	29
1.6 From Gebere Lijoch to Ruachoch: Encountered and Cultivated Networks .....	36
1.7 Toward a New Running Economy .....	38
2. Whose Dying Muscles? Tensions Between the State and Capital .....	40
2.1 Context and Conflict .....	42
2.2 Free Labor and Fair Play in the Free Market.....	47
2.2.1 Economies of Energy .....	49
2.3 Ethiopian Forays into Global Sport and Commerce .....	54
2.3.1 Modernity, Statehood, and Concessionary Politics .....	54
2.3.2. African Rise, Amateur Decline, Commercial Explosion .....	60
2.3.3. The Ethiopian <i>Derg</i> and the Cold War.....	65
2.4 Queen Derartu.....	68

3. The Business of Selling Shoes .....	73
3.1 It's Gotta be the Shoes .....	79
3.1.1 Nike and the Beginnings of Controversies .....	81
3.2 The Commodity Shoe Fetish .....	83
3.3 Nike comes to Addis .....	86
3.3.1 Group Tiers .....	88
3.3.2 The Shoe Ruling .....	90
3.3.3 <i>Lemegzat weis lemesbet?</i> (To buy or to sell?) .....	94
3.4 Gendered Employment .....	96
3.4.1 <i>Chama New</i> (It's gotta be the shoes) .....	99
3.4.2 Distribution .....	101
3.5 Speeding up Speed .....	103
4. Mere Managers.....	111
4.1 Strained Interdependence .....	112
4.2 Fighting for Every Penny.....	116
4.2.1 Guardians of Production .....	116
4.2.2 Scouting real talent.....	121
4.2.3 Navigating the "Meat Market" .....	125
4.2.4 Binding Contracts .....	127
4.3 Negotiating Value .....	132
4.3.1 Understanding Market Changes .....	135
4.3.2 Integral Translators.....	137



4.4 Kinship Capitalism .....	139
4.4.1 More than Management.....	139
4.4.2 Familial Ties.....	142
4.5 “Show [Them] the Money” .....	144
5. Bodies at Work .....	146
5.1 Production and Reproduction.....	148
5.1.1 Social Reproduction Theory.....	150
5.2 Running Between the Lines .....	152
5.2.1 Fulfilling Basic Needs .....	155
5.2.3 Who sets the pace?.....	158
5.2.4 No love is pure .....	160
5.3 Embedded in Tension .....	163
5.4 “Outside” Hazards .....	166
5.4.1 From Athlete to Asylum Seeker .....	168
5.5 Productive Advantages of a Pandemic .....	175
5.5.1 When becoming fat is Unproductive.....	178
5.6 Bodies at Home .....	182
6. Strained Solidarity .....	184
6.1 Social Lives of Iddir.....	187
6.2 Consumptive Change.....	191
6.2.1 Classed Transformation .....	193
6.2.2 Threats of Regression .....	196

6.3 Transnational Class and Solidarity.....	199
6.3.1 Floating Classes .....	202
6.4 Yesetoch Wure .....	204
6.5 Witchcraft and Class .....	207
6.5.1 The Evil Eye.....	209
6.5.2 Stolen Energy .....	213
6.6 Min Yshalal? .....	219
7. <i>Finishing</i> .....	222
References .....	225
Biography .....	237

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Screenshot of Pitsiladis' Ted Talk. ....	15
Figure 2: Screenshot of Pitsiladis' Ted Talk focusing on regional density of Ethiopian runners. ....	16
Figure 3: Photos from Étienne-Jules Marey's research on measuring economies of energy. ....	51
Figure 4: Still from National Geographic Documentary <i>Breaking2</i> measuring Eliud Kipchoge's running economy. ....	53
Figure 5: Nike Alphafly .....	74
Figure 6: Abebe Bikila en route to his Olympic Victory. ....	75
Figure 7: Vibram FiveFingers Bikila Running Shoes. ....	76
Figure 8: "It's Gotta Be the Shoes" Print Ad. ....	79
Figure 9: Service Bus we often took to training sessions. ....	87
Figure 10: Flat training section in Akaki. ....	88
Figure 11: Top tier contract athletes, with fill facility and early edition of Nike supershoes. ....	89
Figure 12: Men running and working at the Ineos 1:59 Challenge. ....	109
Figure 13: Competition at 2018 Junior Championships in Asella. ....	122
Figure 14: Finish Line at 2018 Junior Championships in Asella .....	123

## Acknowledgements

If it were appropriate, I could write an acknowledgements section of a length similar to this dissertation. There are simply too many people who have been an integral part of this research and writing, and I can only hope in the years that have passed and the years to come I can express my gratitude for their help along the way.

In Ethiopia, dozens of people have opened their minds, doors, and arms to me, and enabled my 19-year-old curiosities to grow and expand, but three women stand out. Banchi, Yeshi, and Frie have shown me patience and hospitality over the years, enabling me to live comfortably in Ethiopia. Being able to wholeheartedly trust these women and their families, have several homes I feel welcomed in, and have people I can ask questions at every turn, are elements of my life in Ethiopia that made this project nourishing in every sense. They have brought levity to my research while laughing as I try to make jokes in Amharic with spectacular grammatical flaws, taught me idioms and phrases that make me the life of the party, patiently allow me to botch standard recipes, welcomed me to ceremonies, gifted me the freshest of spices, and taught me, in addition to a lot about running, so much about humanity. The accumulated lessons I learn every visit continue to sustain my growth no matter where I am in the world. This dissertation is dedicated to them and their families.

I've travelled within Ethiopia and internationally with several athletes, most of whom I give pseudonyms in this dissertation. Countless runners, both named and not, have made this research possible. They have come to my front door at 4:30 AM to make sure I could attend training sessions unbothered by hyenas and untrustworthy actors along the way. They've aggressively held my arm and pushed me onto busses while ensuring no one took things from my pockets. They've run slow, probably slower than comfortable, to lift my spirits and ensure I don't get lost in the forest. They've paid, in many instances, for transport fare, injera, coffee, and juices, even when it meant they had

little birr left in their pockets thereafter. And most importantly, they've shared so much of their lives and experiences with a weird *ferenji* who likes running far too much.

Coaches, too, have been very welcoming to me over the years. In particular, Haji, Moges, and Kassim, let me come to training sessions on a regular basis, and never once complained when I asked to be picked up on the side of the road long after being dropped by the group. Similarly, everyone who worked at or adjacent to ESMM – Hussein, Chris, Mihret, Habibu, Mustefa, Guillaume – have enabled me incredible opportunities, been honest and forthright with how I should or shouldn't act in professional and social situations, and made this project necessarily richer in ways I could not have expected just a few years ago. Also in Ethiopia, I must mention the important role Mimmi Demise has played in my research. She was much more than an Amharic teacher, but also a friend, confidant, and multi-faceted *degafi*.

At Duke and in Durham I had so many people teach me what anthropology was and inspired me to constantly reconsider how I view theoretical applications to the world. I came to Duke intending to learn about anthropology from Orin Starn, and I did that and much more. In retrospect, I can see the delicate kind of advising Orin has managed in the midst of typical graduate student anxieties. He's both let me go down unnecessary impassioned rabbit holes and reel me back into my own research when I've gotten a bit far afield. He's also managed to completely shift my expectations of how quickly one can provide feedback on grant applications, respond to emails, and do so in an incredibly substantive way. Charlie Piot, Anne Allison, and Louise Meintjes, have provided immeasurable guidance and support in their teaching and advisement, in individual ways that complement each other in ways I will only continue to appreciate. I've turned to Charlie to both talk about kinship, magic, and humor, and also reason with administration. I like to tell people Anne "taught me how to read"; but in and beyond the classroom she's pushed me to think about how I do anthropology and, more importantly, why. From Louise, I've learned far more about the power of

rhythm in the art and act of writing and tried to emulate a benevolent and gentle way of being in the academy that comes so naturally to her.

Diane Nelson welcomed me to Duke as DGS when I was first accepted to Duke. She immediately made graduate school seem humane, a rarity in academia. Cancer took her far too quickly, and it cuts deep that I didn't have the time to send her extensive remarks about her presence as an educator, mentor, and comrade in the department. Since her death in late April I've felt more grateful to have known her every day. I hope to carry on her commitments to teaching, research, and activism in my own work. Academia can be a dark place and finding faculty at Duke to bring some light to the journey has been invaluable: Anne-Maria Makhulu, Katya Wesolowski, Harris Solomon, and Rebecca Stein all helped shaped my understanding of anthropology and scholarship both in classes and in the hallways of Friedl. Bernice Patterson, Pat Bodager, and Lillian Rodermond are unsung heroes in my story, and that of everyone in our department. Your calm and organized responses to frenzied emails are true acts of courage and patience that we all could stand to learn from.

Before Duke, scholars at NYU's Gallatin helped me believe getting a Ph.D. was possible, and without E. Frances White, Jennifer Lemberg, and Valerie Foreman, I never would have felt I was capable of an intellectual pursuit. Beyond Duke, I've had numerous professors around the world advocate on my behalf and give me bursts of confidence; Niko Besnier, Jörg Krieger, Tracie Canada, Bahru Zewde, Danyel Reiche – you are a few members of a large global cohort that have shaped the scope of this work.

Everyone who makes it through graduate school relies on other graduate students to commiserate and survive. I was also lucky enough to also come out of graduate school with deep and lasting friendships. Jake Silver and Chris Daley are two of the only people who I will stay up past midnight for, and with good reason. You've both reassured me constantly and challenged my

thinking, often after too many drinks far too late at night. I love you both and seek comfort knowing that we will continue to meet at odd hours in cities around the world. My cohort – Jieun Cho and Koffi Nomedji – in the oddest of circumstances it seems, we've waded through this process together. I would not have wanted the care of my dissertation in anyone else's hands. Can Evren, Jay Hammond, Carla Hung, Chris Webb, Derya Menten, Lauren Nareau, Sonia Nayak, Carly Boxer, Chase Gregory, John Stadler, Sophia Goodfriend, Julien Fischer, Joella Bitter, Shannan Hayes, Rachel Gelvin, Christina Tekie, Matthew Sebastian and countless others I spent time with in class, at MRG, and at Surf Club thereafter, have all pushed me to think in different ways and given me unexpected feelings of belonging.

The Duke Graduate Students' Union provided me with a sense of solidarity in early years (and Dental care later on!). I learned through DGSU about the critical applications of research and work to organizing and was fortunate to be connected with folks around the triangle to cope with the particular constraints of organizing in the south. Casey Williams took a sincere interest in my work early on, and helped me form theoretical and organizing connections, as our friendship grew. Anita Simha and Shannon Drake quickly became comrades that taught me first to listen, closely, before acting and speaking. I don't always succeed in that effort, but I've learned to try.

Outside of Duke I have several brilliant and caring friends who have believed in me much more often than I believed in myself, but also pushed me to think about communicating research effectively. They know little about how much their mere presence enabled me to embark on this path. Ben Calvert, Kristine McCormick, and Savannah Winchester have pushed me to think deeply about my politics above 10,000 feet on numerous occasions, and I love them for it. I count on Kaj Kraus regularly to do the same while convincing me to ride bikes, or push bikes, on truly treacherous terrain. Sarah Koch, Emily Rosen-Wachs, and Claire Nelson have kept me grounded throughout my travels, and kept me well looped into their lives even when they have no idea where on the planet I

am. Dana Brawer, Zoe Sayetta, Vivian Pitchik, Alex Dyzenhaus have all provided me with couches to sleep on, dogs and cats to care for, and respites from emotional and intellectual turmoil. Emma Zimmerman encouraged me to bring a sense of expertise to the world of mainstream running, and has become a friend, confidant, and asset that pushes my writing and running in a number of ways. She waded through the depths of grammatical errors in a tough time, and I am deeply grateful. Connecting with RDP in the late stages of this degree, and particularly finding running encouragement from Emma Spencer has fueled the last few miles of this dissertation, and I revel in the fact that I will continue to expand my repertoire of athletically gifted people willing to listen to me rant while I try to keep up on long runs.

One person who runs through nearly all of these aforementioned threads is Claire Ravenscroft. If the only thing I was granted from this process was our lifelong friendship, it would have been worth it. Someone with whom I can speak so much, but also not at all, and be understood on multiple levels simultaneously. I'm glad to have a fellow comrade with whom I can overanalyze anything, make obscure early 2000s cultural references with no judgment, and revert to formulaic materialist analyses in our politics and personal lives. It's *pretty cool* we've both learned to ask to seek counsel throughout this process and hold ourselves accountable. Some say we used to be attached at the hip; I like to think at the ribs is more apt.

Finally, my family – Mom, Dad, Jake, Zach, and Ana. Your blind faith has provided necessary frustration and vital encouragement. Zach's passionate pursuits have fueled me to think differently about how I can think and exist more creatively and artistically in a cruel world. Jake's ability to shift registers between utter cultural and familial absurdity and serious political discourse has provided me a unique sense of generational solidarity and a grounded sense of humor. And Ana's humility and ability to mull over her thoughts among a family of ardent interrupters has made me continuously reconsider how to be a better listener myself. My parents' belief in me was a curse and a



blessing, a pressure and an asset, an unease and a motivation. Not unlike everyone listed above, finishing this degree was a big part of making them feel proud of me, and I think the biggest gift I can give to them is now feeling that I have done that. Even when I'm not the best at showing it, I love them deeply and dearly.

## 1. Introduction: Where and When?

I rose with the rest of the Ethiopian cheering contingent for the final lap. We did so every race, this time hoping that up-and-comer Alemaz Samuel could take the win for Ethiopia in the 1,500-meter final at the 2018 World U20 Championship in Finland. Would she break down? Would she be the one to break the others? Did her bodily cues – a quickening stride, controlled breathing – suggest a strong finish? I watched tensely, wondering what would happen. Each race was like this. I was always with Ethiopian athletes and their fans, and, when one of their countrymen/women competed, we sat together, then stood for the final bell lap.

I had just come to Finland from Ethiopia, where I was on one of many shorter research visits before beginning fieldwork. But this was the first time I had travelled outside of the country with athletes for a competition. In Ethiopia, just a few days earlier, it was 2010, not 2018. Ethiopia does not follow the Gregorian calendar, like the rest of the world. It has its own system, the Ge'ez calendar, based on the ancient Coptic Calendar. It is always seven to eight years behind, and is comprised of 13 months, with 12 months of 30 days and one month of five days. I'd sometime joke with my athlete friends that they shouldn't worry about being late for the next race: "It's not for seven years. You have time."

This trip to Finland was the first of several I took throughout my dissertation research, which has spanned over nine years and across the globe and focused on the lives of women runners from Ethiopia. Years earlier, I had come to learn that running in Ethiopia is *always* about, and oriented towards, eventually running *outside* ("wuch") of Ethiopia. I realized that to understand the lives of women runners when they arrive at competitions like those in Finland and elsewhere, I needed to learn about the aspects of their lives that remained in Ethiopia, but always tethered to them. But, to understand to the lives of runners within Ethiopia before they leave for the first time, I would need to understand the social, cultural, and economic worlds they seek to enter. For some, the

trip to Finland was their first time leaving Ethiopia to race, and their entry into the international world of running. But for many, since beginning their training in Ethiopian training academies, they had been preparing to formally work in this transnational economy for some time.

### ***1.1 The Bell Lap***

There is a lap counter at the finish line of track meets, indicating the laps left in the race. Officials often put fingers down near the lap counter so there are several reminders of how many laps to run. Still, even the best athletes have sometimes erred and mistaken a penultimate for a final lap. But, for those who know track and field, the sound of the bell induces a special energy in distance events, which often suffer from less attention than sprints. If you've been looking at your phone, talking to friends, or simply watching passively, the bell lap focuses you on the race at hand for the next 50-60 seconds, the time it takes to cover the final 400 meters.

Team *morale* – an English word often used by Ethiopian athletes – had been low in Finland. The athletes selected to represent Ethiopia qualified at a junior domestic competition less than two months prior in Asella, Ethiopia, a few hours south of Addis Ababa – and were not taking home the expected number of medals. The women did well in the 3,000-meters and 5,000-meters, but won no golds. Diribe Welteji had won the 800-meter final a few days earlier, but the Ethiopian contingent felt like they needed another gold to prove it was not a fluke. Many athletes have told me over the course of doing research in Ethiopia that “*werk mashenef allebachen*” (you must win gold) or no one will care. They were expected to race to the highest standard, as befit an East African powerhouse of global distance running.

Running in and for Ethiopia is more team-oriented in comparison to most countries, although many athletes and coaches fear this is changing. Before representing Ethiopia in international competitions, athletes often spend a few months training together, or at least living together, at an assigned hotel in Addis Ababa. In recent years, agents and athletes have pushed back

against this collectivist tradition to maintain more individualized training programs, through which they compete less for their clubs within Ethiopia and maintain a consistent training plan with their coaches leading up to global competitions. Still, athletes usually know each other well, even if they have different coaches and training groups. Good performances often beget better ones, as spirit and confidence (*morale*, as they say) is lifted through collective momentum. But also, athletes and coaches are invested in everyone doing well. If other athletes do well, it raises the odds that Ethiopia will be selected for other additional wildcard opportunities and more athlete opportunities; if coaches in attendance do well, they'll likely be selected to travel again. Many feared this competition was not going well.

“*She’s* being economical,” the Ethiopian team doctor said to me, midway through Alemaz’s race, contrasting her with others in Finland whom he regarded as *not* being economical.<sup>1</sup> It was as if, by displaying his expertise, he too was proving his worth to me. The doctor was referring to an embodied efficiency in Alemaz’s running; athletes are supposed to try hard to win, of course, but it is possible to labor *too* much throughout a race, being less “economical,” as he put it. In the trying endeavor of long-distance running, he was referring to “running economy” – a measure of running efficiency that takes into consideration several physiological and environmental factors. Crudely, asking about one’s running economy is akin to asking: What is your efficiency as an athlete and how much potential do you have to build speed?

Of the Ethiopian contingent in Finland for the competition – athletes, coaches, and representatives from the Ethiopian Athletics Federation (EAF), the doctor was the only one with

---

<sup>1</sup> Ethiopia uses a patronymic naming system, in which children take their father’s name as their surname, and often their grandfather’s name, as a third name. This often provides a lot of confusion for race organizers and doping control officers who see the name on their passport as listed in a different way as on athletes’ racing bibs. Indeed, there are countless images of several top athletes competing at a range of competitions with different presumed last names on their bibs. Throughout the dissertation, I refer to Ethiopian actors in the dissertation by their first name, as that is common practice within Ethiopia. Further, with the exception of referring to a few prominent athletes I cite by name, the majority of names of individuals, training groups, camps, and sponsors, are pseudonyms to protect certain individuals’ privacy.

whom I had spoken English. The rest I spoke with in Amharic. Communicating was easier in English, but it also seemed to provide the doctor with a private space, where he could share some expertise within the public crowd. None of the other Ethiopians could eavesdrop. The doctor assumed, like so many others, that running economy and embodied efficiency was of interest to me. While he was not wrong – I had come to take an interest in running economy – he, and so many others, assumed my interest had more to do how fast women could potentially become.

In reality, I was more concerned with how women understood their bodies in relation to all of the tensions and regimes of value they existed in. During my research, people often assumed I was a sports scientist, one of the several white western researchers there to pull out devices to study lactate threshold or heartrate monitors and study, scientifically, how Ethiopian runners, both men and women, had risen to the heights of the long-distance world.

Trying to understand my own subject position was a necessary and unending exercise, as it always is for ethnographers. Given that all knowledge is situated and that what often constitutes objectivity has been written by and for men in positions of power, it was continuously made evident to me that I, a woman, was an outsider to a world I had been trying to understand.<sup>2</sup> Another theory was that I was a talent scout, working for an international sports agency. Earlier, while attending the qualifying championships in Asella for the competition in Finland, many had also been disappointed to learn that I was not, in fact, there to sign athletes. I was, regrettably, just an anthropologist. Other than a bagful of used running clothes and shoes I brought every summer, I had little to offer when I started doing research in Ethiopia.

Being an anthropologist produced its own confusions, too. Few athletes I encountered knew what the English term anthropology was, and I would clarify by saying that I study “*babel*” or culture.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sandra G. Harding, *Science and Social Inequality: Feminist and Postcolonial Issues*, Race and Gender in Science Studies (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

However, the word *babel* can be misleading, because in Amharic is often understood in opposition to modern “*zemenawi*.” In Ethiopia, then *babel* was associated with tradition, something that I *was* interested in, but not as something antithetical to conceptions of modernity.

Many times this elicited excited responses like, “Oh! Ethiopia has a lot of culture! Do you know *Dinknesh*?” *Dinknesh* is the Ethiopian name for Lucy, the oldest early human ever found who lives at the National Museum in Addis Ababa. Again, to many people’s disappointment, I was not there for Lucy. I would go on, my explanation varying in levels of depth depending on who I was talking to: “I’m here to learn about women runners in Ethiopia, their histories, their experiences, the problems they face, the role running plays in their lives. Many people in America and Europe think running is easy for Ethiopians, and that they all take the same path. I want to explain the complexities.”

Listening to who and what my interlocutors thought I was, or might be connected to, was helpful in cultivating self-awareness and understanding where I could be well-positioned “study up” in the networks of power and what to focus on throughout my research.<sup>3</sup> Thus, reflexivity proved methodologically useful in mapping out how I might understand power in these relations of production. And, while I was an outsider, I was also learning Amharic, living with a family, and engaging in holidays, traditions, and ceremonies, which enabled me to critically engage how Ethiopian women, and various actors, understood their positionality in the global economy of running.

The fact that so many people assumed that I, a white researcher, was an athlete, sports scientist, or sports agent (depending on where I was and when I was there), indexed much about the transnational racialized and gendered dimensions of the running industry. A white person in the

---

<sup>3</sup> Laura Nader, “Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained From Studying Up,” in *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 284–311.

world of Ethiopian athletics was no novelty; but a young, white woman who was *not* there to test lactate thresholds, was (for the most part) detached from corporate interest, was *not* good enough at running to be a professional athlete, and most notably, who came to learn Amharic, *was* certainly an oddity.

The bell rang and Alemaz was patient, her form held together, and she approached the final gap with a half step lead over a Kenyan contender. As the last lap began, she gradually lengthened her stride and opened up her lead to secure a win. To her team, she brought back another gold medal: a display of her fantastic running economy. The team doctor gave me a wink, as if to say, “I told you so.” Her life was about to change because, as it was continuously reiterated to me, she was being economical.

## ***1.2 What is Running Economy?***

In 1985, exercise physiologist and running coach, Jack Daniels, in a now widely cited article in the journal *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, defined running economy as the “VO<sub>2</sub> [rate of Oxygen consumption] related to a particular velocity of running.”<sup>4</sup> The goal was to discover the “aerobic demand” of running different paces to maximize the relationship between running velocity and energy expenditure. Running economy, he would later write, is affected by environmental factors (temperature, altitude, running surface, footwear) and inherent bodily differences (age, weight, fitness levels), but could be changed through training and technology.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of running economy began to capture the imaginations of sports science researchers worldwide. Various studies sought to uncover the reasons why certain people had different, or better, economies than others. Daniels would later explore the differences

---

<sup>4</sup> Jack T. Daniels, “A Physiologist's View of Running Economy,” *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* 17, no. 3 (June 1985): 332-338, <https://doi.org/10.1249/00005768-198506000-00006>.

between men and women. Other physiologists sought to analyze whether East African runners had better running economies than their western counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

Already before the 1980s, many theories had been put forward about East African long distance running dominance, most of them developed by white, foreign researchers. Following Ethiopian runner, Abebe Bikila's barefooted 1960 Olympic marathon victory, one-dimensional narratives of Black African athletes possessing natural advantages from biological and environmental conditions proliferated.<sup>6</sup> These conceptions grew rapidly after the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, when Kenyan and Ethiopian men won big in the high-altitude city.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, however, the pseudo-scientific theories that seemed to prove a correlation between training environment and unfair advantage were deeply imbricated in the racial, gendered, and labor politics of the time. Historical analyses that are grounded in Black studies, science and technology studies, feminist theory, and historical materialism, have been helpful in illuminating how racist ideologies often rest on notions of racialized intellectual deficit. Anthropologist and geographer, J.M. Blaut, for instance, pointed out that the intellectual tradition of attributing conceptual foundations of human reason to Eurocentric thinkers reproduces an idea that white people have been purveyors of knowledge, truth, and science.<sup>8</sup> Often, these pseudo-scientific theories positioned white men

---

<sup>5</sup> Jack Daniels and Nancy Daniels, "Running Economy of Elite Male and Elite Female Runners;" *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* 24, no. 4 (April 1992): 483-489, <https://doi.org/10.1249/00005768-199204000-00015>; Kyle R Barnes and Andrew E Kilding, "Running Economy: Measurement, Norms, and Determining Factors," *Sports Medicine - Open* 1, no. 1 (December 2015): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-015-0007-y>. Alejandro Lucia et al., "Physiological Characteristics of the Best Eritrean Runners—Exceptional Running Economy," *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism* 31, no. 5 (October 2006): 530–40, <https://doi.org/10.1139/h06-029>.

<sup>6</sup> The Ethiopian national identity is one that is deeply tied with notions of origins. Being the place where Lucy (the putative earliest human) was found, the birthplace of coffee, and the origin of the Blue Nile, there are a number of identificatory and marketing markers for the country. This, and the fact that Ethiopia was never colonized by European imperialists mean that coming "first" in global competition carries particular symbolic and cultural strength. See: Tewodros Kassa, "Ethiopia: Why Ethiopia Is the 'Land of Origins,'" *The Ethiopian Herald*, June 23, 2017. <https://allafrica.com/stories/201706230754.html>

<sup>7</sup> Amdur, Neil. "Keino Breaks Olympic Record in 1,500-Meter Run, with Ryun of U.S. Second." *The New York Times*, October 20, 1968.

<sup>8</sup> James M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993).



as creators of “culture,” and others as purveyors of “nature,” leading to ideas that Black athletes were “naturally” gifted.<sup>9</sup> This scientific racism persists in tired tropes about the “athleticism” of black players in sports like basketball and soccer as opposed to the supposed “intelligence” and “knowledge of the game” of white ones.<sup>10</sup>

Because so much of the public understanding about Ethiopian running success is rooted in histories of scientific determinism, I feel the need to contextualize and historicize certain terms, their legacies, and how they play into cultural hegemonic formation. Something like “running economy” can also appear as a “post-racial,” mere scientific metric. But, by tracing its origins and understanding how it has come to operate in both physiology and cultural production, one sheds light on the working conditions of women athletes from Ethiopia. Using these insights, I follow many other scholars engaged in critical science and technology studies to tease out histories of scientific knowledge and practices that reproduce systems of inequality.

As I will further discuss in chapter one, athletes have long been used as test subjects to evaluate the limits of human performance. Here they have effectively served as guinea pigs for creating productive workforces, stronger militaries, and propagation of certain ideological forms. Shortly before East Africans were included in high performance sport, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, environmental determinism was a powerful paradigm of scientific scholarship and practice within and beyond sport. It used theories of “climatic energy” to make claims about European climates as more suitable for thriving human culture than the more “degenerate” tropics. For example, because Finnish runners dominated long distance running in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms.” In *Culture, ideology and social process: A reader*, eds. Tony Bennett, et al (Worcester, UK: Billing & Sons, 1981), 19-38.

<sup>10</sup> Abdul Alkalimat, *The History of Black Studies* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

century, German scientists proffered that it was their endless trails and connection to nature that enabled them great success.<sup>11</sup> The geopolitical stage of the Olympics provided fertile grounds for experiments and claims about how factors like altitude, temperature, and geographical location determined a groups' ability to labor in service of others.

In 1952, oft-considered pioneer of sports medicine, Ernst Jokl led a statistical study at the Helsinki Olympic Games where he sought to establish a basis for environmental difference in Olympic success. Jokl predicted that some deterministic models set forth by geographer Ellsworth Huntington, a geographer and widely deemed innovator of scientific racism, would be insufficient in predicting athletic performance in the future. However, his research continued to reinforce reductive paradigms that were used to explain the success of African distance runners the following decade.

Throughout the 1960s, countries from sub-Saharan Africa gained independence, and continued to claw their way into international sport, which had been dominated by the white European aristocrats of the amateur sporting establishment. Acceptance into the Olympic movement was the result of decolonizing political struggle, and winning medals struck a blow against junk science theories of Black and African inferiority, even as unspoken racist assumptions of natural physical advantage proliferated. As such, Abebe Bikila's victory in 1960, in Rome – the capital city of Ethiopia's former occupiers – was a symbolic milestone for many Africans, Black people around the world, and, of course, Ethiopians.

---

<sup>11</sup> John Bale, "Lassitude and Latitude: Observations on Sport and Environmental Determinism," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 37, no. 2 (June 2002): 147–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690202037002002>.

The 1968 Mexico City Olympics saw global racial politics displayed front and center at the Olympic Games through the protests of John Carlos, Tommie Smith, and Wyomia Tyus, as debates of apartheid-era South Africa’s participation flooded newspaper headlines. The medical commission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) grew concerned, even obsessed, with interest in gender verification, doping testing, and their overlaps with amateurism and professionalism, and questions of fairness in sport led many to latch onto the environmentalist scientific paradigm to explain the victories of many athletes, chief among them long-distance runners from East Africa. In particular, they took an interest in the high altitude setting and how the conditions would favor athletes from particular countries.<sup>12</sup>

*New York Times* journalist, Neil Amdurs wrote of the East African performances:

Thus, the week-long track and field carnival ended with the United States having reaffirmed its artistic superiority and with one unmistakable physiological fact—namely, that in long-distance, high-altitude races, all an athletes training and acclimatization cannot replace the opportunity of breathing the same light air day after day.<sup>13</sup>

Although altitude may have played some role (and white U.S. runners by now indeed often train in the Rockies and other higher elevations where lower oxygen levels intensify training), Amdurs’ language laid the foundation for a discourse that played into commonplace environmental determinism within and beyond sport. With a perspective defensive of the United States’ “artistic superiority,” Amdurs situated American athletes at a clear disadvantage, having not been used to “breathing the same light air day after day.” Because the United States had to “reaffirm” this

---

<sup>12</sup> Jörg Krieger, *Power and Politics in World Athletics: A Critical History*, Routledge Critical Studies in Sport (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021); Matthew P. Llewellyn and John Gleaves, *The Rise and Fall of Olympic Amateurism*, Sport and Society (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Alison M. Wrynn, “‘A Debt Was Paid off in Tears’: Science, IOC Politics and the Debate about High Altitude in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 23, no. 7 (November 2006): 1152–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523360600832429>.

<sup>13</sup> Neil Amdurs. “Keino Breaks Olympic Record in 1,500-Meter Run, with Ryun of U.S. Second.” *The New York Times*, October 20, 1968.

superiority helps us to understand the fact that it was being threatened. And because the “unmistakable physiological fact” was the difference of natural living conditions, it took away questions of skill, dedication, and preparation that would have played into the success of Ethiopian and Kenyan runners.

The discourse emphasizing the notion that East African athletes had advantages – whether genetic or environmental – took root and began to shape a discourse that has taken shape as a social fact within the international running world. Many people know almost nothing about Ethiopia or Kenya, *except* that these two countries have some of the world’s best distance runners. This knowledge not only reifies falsehoods, but in situating their success in distance running *due to* environmental and genetic advantage, it often ignores the hard work that goes into training.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when “running economy” grew in validity and stature, Ethiopian women (and women, generally) were also beginning to make their mark in the running world. Up until the 1980s, women had been clawing their way up to gaining equal participation in running over long-distance events, and the first women’s Olympic marathon was held in 1984. Historians of women’s sport, Kathleen McCrone and Jaime Schultz, noted that researchers and decision makers previously banned women from participation in long-distance running because they believed intense physical efforts might damage women’s reproductive organs and that their musculature would make them unattractive to men.<sup>14</sup> Many key developments occurred simultaneously; when Ethiopian women were set to enter the international athletics world, and most scientists were receptive to the fact that women could train and excel, most sports scientists were ready to receive them, too, as athletes naturally gifted to outperform their white counterparts.

---

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen E. McCrone, *Playing the Game: Sport and the Physical Emancipation of English Women, 1870-1914* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1988); Jaime Schultz, *Qualifying Times: Points of Change in U.S. Women’s Sport*, Sport and Society (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

Because of Cold War era boycotts during Ethiopia's communist *Derg* era, Ethiopian athletes did not compete at the Olympics or many international competitions between 1980 and 1992, when Jack Daniels was publishing his findings about running economy based on research in the United States. When the *Derg* – Ethiopia's Marxist regime that ruled from 1974-1991 – faltered and Ethiopia re-entered international sport, many running pundits predicted that Ethiopian athletes' "natural athletic ability" would lead to extraordinary results. In 1992, for instance, a *New York Times* reporter traveled to Ethiopia in anticipation of the Barcelona Olympics and noted that "Ethiopian runners are endowed with a fortuitous mix: natural athletic ability, dedicated coaches and a high-altitude environment."<sup>15</sup> Although here, as well as in most scientific articles that proliferated in the 2000s, there is reference to culture and structure, such references are offered as tertiary components at best, with most focus laid on physiology, genetics, and early childhood development. EAF coach Nigussie Robe tried, in this same article to underline that "to be at a high altitude is [not] enough. You have to have a well-prepared training program," and later noted that his athletes "have more discipline than in the United States or Britain," but in the years to come, his insights were not considered explanatory of success.

### ***1.3 The Continued Denial of Coevalness***

While sports scientists then and now may not intend to reify racial and gendered stereotypes and determinist logics, they often do so nonetheless, given that their research endeavors have too often been built on flawed methodology and presumptions. The reproduction of this logic extends beyond sporting realms too, as Ethiopia, Kenya, and often "Africa" writ large are depicted by and through sports science paradigms as situated spatially and temporally far off, *behind*, and importantly, unchanging in evolutionary schema.

---

<sup>15</sup> Jane Perlez, "Ethiopian Runners Gain Olympic Purpose," *The New York Times*, March 17, 1992  
<https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/17/sports/running-ethiopian-runners-regain-olympic-purpose.html>.

A survey of the sports science literature beginning in the 1990s, and well into the 2000s, shows that the emphasis on environmental and genetic factors has continued to steer the discourse of East African running success. An exhaustive critique of this literature would require a book-length project, but countless scientists sought out to answer the question of “why” East Africans were so dominant by exploring different facets of running economy. Some articles focused on having smaller bodily extremities, notably lower legs; others on anthropometrics and body composition.<sup>16</sup> Often the conclusion was something along the lines of an excerpt from this *Human Kinetics Journal* article in 2016:

East African runners appear to have a very high level of RE most likely associated, at least partly, with anthropometric characteristics rather than with any specific metabolic property of the working muscle. That is, evidence suggest that anthropometrics and body composition might have important parameters as determinants of superior performance of East African distance runners.<sup>17</sup>

The sports scientist most closely associated with exploring East African running dominance is probably Yannis Pitsiladis, who has pushed aggressively for a mode of analysis that explores the genomics and biological makeup of African runners as related to their dominance. His 2012 article entitled “Kenyan and Ethiopian distance runners: what makes them so good?” and other articles invested in genotyping athletes eventually led to the creation of the Athlome Project Consortium, chaired by Pitsiladis. The Consortium aims to study “genotype and phenotype data currently available on elite athletes.”<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Carl Foster and Alejandro Lucia, “Running Economy: The Forgotten Factor in Elite Performance,” *Sports Medicine* 37, no. 4 (2007): 316–19, <https://doi.org/10.2165/00007256-200737040-00011>.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Mooses and Anthony C. Hackney, “Anthropometrics and Body Composition in East African Runners: Potential Impact on Performance,” *International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance* 12, no. 4 (April 2017): 422–30, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsspp.2016-0408>.

<sup>18</sup> “The Athlete Project Consortium,” <http://www.athlomeconsortium.org/about/>.

Most of Pitsiladis' research has taken place in Ethiopia and Kenya, and may have some scientific merit, but his presentation, while focused on genetic factors, presents inaccurate and out of date sociological factors. To give one example, he assumed that runners grow up running to and from school (often barefoot), have cattle raiding backgrounds, and all come from a particular region. In 2016, for instance, Pitsiladis gave a Ted Talk entitled "Why White Men Can't Run: Scientific Evidence?" He opened up the talk of a video of his son saying, "White men can run, but black men are just better," before bringing up a list of men's world records, and then detailing what he perceived to be the explanations: superior genetics, solid foundations built over many years of running to school, socio-economic and cultural factors (like stealing wives), high altitude training, and the "African diet."<sup>19</sup> Pitsiladis then went on to cite the "brilliant work" of famed eugenicist, Sir Francis Galton, for paving the way of sports scientist, Per-Olof Astrant, whose quote "to become an Olympic athlete, choose your parents well" inspired Pitsiladis to study the genetic advantages of athletes. However, after taking lots of saliva samples of Kenyan and Ethiopian athletes, Pitsiladis noted that there was actual genetic diversity, rather than homogeneity. Then he surmised, as many did in the early 2000s, that Kenyan runners belonging to Nandi and Kalenjin tribes were some of the most dominant in the world.

---

<sup>19</sup> "Why white men can't run: Scientific Evidence?" February 15, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DArINCbsjTE>.



**Figure 1: Screenshot of Pitsiladis' Ted Talk.**

On Pitsiladis' next slide, he brought up a map of Ethiopia, and noted, "If you look at where the athletes come from, it's predominantly one area, and that's the area of Arsi," emphasizing the Oromo dominance in running. This superiority, he claimed, was because athletes in this area mostly run several kilometers to school at altitude. Then, he went out to study children with an "objective method" – "accelerometry." One of Pitsiladis' conclusions was that children were far more active in the "Developed World." The major takeaway he wanted to emphasize was this:

the unique African way of life, the ancestral way of life, the way that all of us would have lived 130,000 years ago, that primes those – with the right genetics however, and I'm stressing that – to excel in distance running. And that's why this phenomenon will continue. Because the mismatch with biology and the environment is getting bigger and bigger in the developed world.

Pitsiladis then took a bizarre turn to close out the Ted Talk, suggesting that those of us in the "developed world" start using our urban environments to exercise by participating in Parkour.

The talk abounded in historical and cultural inaccuracies. First, while Arsi is home to some of the *earliest* Ethiopia running champions, it was no longer home to the majority. Some of Ethiopia's



first champions are from Arsi, which led to the beginning of the Ethiopian running structures, institutions, and investing into traveling to the Arsi province, meaning that early crops of Ethiopian runners came from mostly Oromia. However, now many of Ethiopia's top talents are from all around the country. Most of the women's distance Olympic team at the 2021 Olympic in Tokyo happened to come from Tigray, whereas the men were mostly from the southern regions. Selemon Barega, slated to become the next icon, is from the Gurage region. Letesenbet Gidey, who broke most of Tirunesh Dibaba's world records last year on the track, is from Tigray.



**Figure 2: Screenshot of Pitsiladis' Ted Talk focusing on regional density of Ethiopian runners.**

As we will see, most athletes I have met and spoken to did not run to school on a regular basis, either. Many did walk long distances and would run if they were going to be late, but I've spent many weeks in Arsi and have never seen children running to school on a regular basis. Moreover, I have spent time with countless top athletes who never mention running to school as a part of their origin story. Most talk about running *in* school (physical education classes) as their foray. Also, Pitsiladis contrasts African running life in the countryside with the stringent demands of living an urban life, which is further at odds with the current athletics structure in Ethiopia. In Kenya, many of

the athletes still center their training in the countryside, however the set up in Ethiopia is completely different. Most athletes do come to Addis Ababa from the countryside but spend a great deal of their careers in the city. And others, like Ethiopian great Meseret Defar, are from the city, too.

I want to emphasize, however, not just the specific fallacies Pitsiladis leans on; more problematic is how he contributes to what Johannes Fabian has called “a denial of coevalness.”<sup>20</sup> Pitsiladis does what anthropologists in the past frequently did and were criticized for: write and speak about research participants as spatially and temporally apart from the researcher. Throughout his Ted Talk he conflates the two countries’ runners and reproduces a unitary logic of modernity in which Africans are seen as “behind.” James Ferguson has been helpful in critiquing the universal *telos* of modernity in which a spatialized global hierarchy could easily morph into a temporalized one.<sup>21</sup> Pitsiladis’ conclusion that “the unique African way of life, the ancestral way of life... with the right genetics, however,” is contradictory in his own terms, and frames Africa, and the athletics infrastructure, as stuck in a time of the past. By depicting Africans as existing in a different evolutionary era, while claiming to use an analytic that takes sociological factors into consideration, he ends up just reifying environmental and biological deterministic logics.

Pitsiladis is not alone. The ghost of racist, sexist, and colonial ideologies continues to haunt sports studies, despite increased efforts to get more diverse scientists into lab coats. In addition to using historical and analytical insights to critique the usage of problematic sports science concepts to depict Kenyan and Ethiopian runners, I attempt to reframe how scholars, journalists, and running experts engage with the athletic labor of women from Ethiopia. In the process, I aim to provide a new analytic for understanding women’s athletic

---

<sup>20</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2006).

labors around the world. To put it simply, I want to ask: how can we look at running economy more holistically?

## ***1.4 New Methods to Understand Running Economy***

### **1.4.1 Considering Running as Work**

Women runners in Ethiopia taught me that being able to run fast is crucial; this was proven to me nearly every single morning, on runs when my leg muscles reminded me that they were using their absolute last bits of oxygen. But they also urged me to see that being able to survive and thrive in a system built on racialized and gendered exploitation mattered most.

In underlining the social and cultural dimensions of running economy and centering the perspectives of women who exist within the transnational economy of running, we can see how Ethiopian women contest common sense understandings of how this global athletics economy functions and should function. Even as some of them drastically improve their lives by running, they find ways to cause frictions and disrupt hegemonic flows of ideas and money. They are not naïvely hopeful about their career possibilities; they are more realistic than, as Lauren Berlant might have it, cruelly optimistic about their chances of success. By listening to how they politicize their training as labor, and by hearing their demands and desires, Ethiopian women runners can expose many of the failed opportunities that capitalist structures and ideology espouse and urge us to rethink how we could better structure transnational economies.

The competition in Finland was the first time I was situated in a locale where the referencing of “running economy” played an important role in highly contested transnational negotiations of value. Then, I knew little about what those negotiations looked like and how they were carried out. But I would come to understand that an ethnographic approach to studying competing conceptions of value would need to center around a lesson I learned during my first trip to Ethiopia in 2013 – that young women considered running to be work.

An aspiring 19-year-old researcher and runner, I learned right from the start, that running was work in Ethiopia – a deeply professionalized, sometimes celebrated, life-changing *job*. In my first week in Ethiopia, Tigist, my oldest friend and collaborator in Ethiopia who I met on this trip (and who is a key figure actor in the dissertation), began to connect. Communication had been limited, and I was exhausted from being confused every day. The morning after I arrived, Tigist knocked on my door at 5:50 AM, telling me to get dressed and run. I threw on my clothes and shoes and met the group outside to see Tigist staring at my outfit, mouth wide open. Pointing at my bare knees she said, “bad for training.” I later learned that shorts were only, if ever, to be worn at specific speed training sessions, since keeping the knees warm was vital for success.

Woefully unprepared, I always found it hard to keep up with the women I was living with, as we ran over roots and zig-zagged between eucalyptus trees in the Entoto Mountain foothills. I was also surprised to learn that the women did not talk very much while running, in contrast to American runners who often use easy runs for deep discussion as well as random debate. It was a silent, single-filed endeavor, that required my total mental and physical capacity.

After polishing off our oats one morning, Tigist and I began playing catch with a clove of garlic. I had committed so many cultural faux pas (way more than I realized at the time) and remained quite shy. Perhaps it was the post-run endorphins, or so much pent-up embarrassment by and for me, but as we both desperately tried to launch a clove of garlic into a cup, we burst out in laughter. Others walked by confused about what we thought was funny, and Tigist eventually put her hand on my shoulder.

“Hannichu, to enjoy is good” she said. That was the first time she used that nickname, and she has never called me Hannah since. Then she continued in English, “Always running, always

training, hard work. It's difficult work. Sometimes, to enjoy is good." This was also the first time I was told running was work, and have been reminded of this fact, ever since.

Before this trip I assumed running would have been an exciting life path for women from a country that had so much global success. And in a way it is and was. But it was also not what I expected. Running was not primarily about cultural or national pride or enjoyment in the ways that my American teammates and myself had envisioned. It was much more pragmatic. It was a difficult occupation, markedly different from other options available for women, in that it could lead to dramatic economic and social transformation. I also learned that summer, however, that a running career could also lead women down paths of abuse – sexual, physical, emotional – as much as it could expand life trajectories. I would learn more in the future, but when I returned to the U.S. after those initial two months, the greatest takeaway was this: running is work.

In the winter and spring of 2014, I wrote an undergraduate senior thesis based on this research. Most of the actual writing took place on buses to and from track meets and during the mornings in hotel rooms while I waited my turn to race on indoor tracks around Boston. Tigist told me when I left Ethiopia that despite all my struggling in training, I could win in America. In fact, I won a conference championship that winter. I made sure to get a photo to bring back as soon as possible to share with her.

Eventually, all my running and training combined with schoolwork demands culminated in the first of several long-term injuries. If being the living embodiment of the difficulty of training like a full-time athlete while doing another job didn't crystallize then, it certainly did throughout the years of doing fieldwork. In Ethiopia between running and doing research, I'm often constantly exhausted. Athletes I train with always tell me that I do too much besides running. I don't recovery properly. I could be a champion, they said, but not if I didn't take it seriously. I don't view rest as productive. To be good I would need, my Ethiopian friends said, to consider running as my work.

### **1.4.2. Tensions in Disembedding**

That first trip and my thesis eventually led to Ph.D. program applications, then summers spent trudging through the thick mud of Ethiopian forests following athletes; two years of fieldwork in Addis Ababa and surrounding areas; domestic trips to competitions and training camps around Ethiopia; an internship at an international sports agency based in West Chester, Pennsylvania; 5-star hotels in Singapore; doctor's visits in Germany; archives in Switzerland; sports performance labs in Eugene, Oregon, and more, at least until a raging global pandemic shut down much travel.

I tracked the experiences of women athletes at various stages. Early on, I lived with young women in their first or second training camp in Sululta, where we shared rooms with paper thin walls – they slept on bunk beds (but insisted I have a private room) – and had only a few changes of clothes, which meant daily post-run washing took longer than the workouts themselves. My first trip to Ethiopia was during the rainy season, and I only brought a single pair of running shoes. Weeks two through eight were characterized by me slipping into damp shoes twice a day; and even after working through a nice array of blisters, I've never been as consistently uncomfortable as I was those two months. My shoes, however, fit me properly, and did not yet have holes like so many athletes I knew. I also had no idea how cold it was in Sululta late at night. Like late fall camping in Colorado, it would take an extra thirty minutes after getting into my sleeping bag to just be warm enough to fall asleep. All of us would delay returning to our rooms after dinner, huddling instead around a coal stove.

These young women moved to sleep under the camp's corrugated tin rooves, often at the behest of family members and friends, to pursue the sport. Often this necessitated a process that overlaps with what anthropologist Jennifer Cole has called “disembedding” from one's social matrix, which refers to the “slow, uneven, and multidirectional ways people can become divorced from old

attachments and form new ones.”<sup>22</sup> Like new Tamatavian urbanites that Cole describes, when women moved to camps and new locales they would need to learn new type of sociality where different ideas about the power of money and wealth shave new value-laden spheres of life, while retaining ties to social spheres back at home. This disembedding built a network of actors – athletes, coaches, and sporting officials – that would reconfigure understandings and relations with people of other ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

More than 30 million Ethiopian speak Amharic, the native tongue of that group, but Ethiopia is still linguistically quite diverse, and incredibly political. There are over 90 active languages, and with the Oromo ethnic group being the biggest in population, Oromiffa is widely spoken in and around Addis Ababa and throughout the region. Amharic’s place in Ethiopian history is a fraught one, which I discuss more in the first chapter, but one of the ways that Amhara Imperial rulers established control over other ethnic groups was by imposing Amharic in schools and institutions. Now, the situation is more complicated. Many children are not required to learn Amharic in primary school, but federal workplaces primarily use Amharic. Even though many EAF staff and athletes are Oromo, most of the language of track and field in Ethiopia is conducted in Amharic. Some athletes, too, do not speak Amharic at all. Ethnicity figures in the organization of training groups, but there is also a lot of ethnic diversity in the running world, sometimes becoming a source of tension.

For instance, when I returned to Sululta in 2014 to live at the same camp with a different group of runners, a fight broke out between two women. As I was ostensibly a neutral observer, one of them came to ask me to reduce the tension. As I tried to understand what had happened in my extremely limited Amharic, one of the women explained that two of the other women were talking in Oromiffa and she and her friend could not understand. So, they got frustrated and told them, “This isn’t fair. If we’re all going to live together and be a team, you need to speak Amharic.” One Oromo

---

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Cole, *Sex and Salvation: Imagining the Future in Madagascar* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 50.

woman than joked that Amhara women had small brains and could not learn two languages, provoking a screaming match. I kept hearing *zereгна! Zereгна nat!* – the first time I heard the learned the Amharic term for racism. *Zereгна* can mean different things in different contexts. Usually, within Ethiopia, it is understood in ethnic terms. Highlander Ethiopians, the majority of runners, do not consider themselves black. They often use the color *kai* (red, in Amharic) to describe their skin color and when they use the term racism, within Ethiopia, it is usually about ethnic-based discrimination.<sup>23</sup>

I heard more discrimination accusations during the summers when I trained with a grassroots club in Addis Ababa. These runners were hoping to get noticed by a government club, which meant a basic monthly stipend, some meals, and progress in the sport. Rather than having an official club, they met three times weekly, gave the coaches about 10 birr/month each, and paid their own transport fees. At this time, I rented a room in Kebena, right beside Jan Meda – a recreation area in the center of the city – where we often met for training. Here, too, I met many women who had come from around the countryside, literally having run away from their homes, in hopes of running towards something much greater.

As my Amharic enabled me to listen in on more conversations, I heard athletes trying to learn, through rumor and gossip, how athletes found agents and opportunities to race abroad. They often asked me for assistance in getting paperwork, connecting to agents, and finding competitions. One day, after a morning training session, a young woman, Meskerem, invited me to her home in Saris for breakfast. We travelled on three different minibuses to get to her home, which was when I began to learn that long, grueling bus rides through snarled traffic were part of an aspiring runner's

---

<sup>23</sup> Adom Getachew and Michael Girma Kebede have written about an “exceptional non-blackness” that many Ethiopians espouse, in particular as it pertains to the pride and experience of having never been colonized (Michael Girma Kebede, “Beyond Exception and Supremacy: Adwa in the Black Radical Imaginary,” *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities* 17, no. 1 (March 3, 2022): 23–49, <https://doi.org/10.4314/ejossah.v17i1.3>.) That said, I’ve spoken to many athletes about being labeled and knowing themselves as “Black” in international contexts. And, while some people have negative conceptions of Black Americans as ill-behaved, they also recognize that there are implicit ways they are discriminated against in foreign contexts often based on appearance.



life. We met at 7 in the morning in Jan Meda, which means that she must have left her house at around 6.

We traveled back with her friend, whose family home they were both staying at, around 11 AM, and ate scrambled eggs with tomato, and *berbere* – a Ethiopian spice mix in nearly every dish – poured over spaghetti. Meskerem had told me she came from the South. She was from the Sidama region, and left home to run in Addis, but lived at her friend’s aunt’s house (where we were eating) because her family was unhappy with her decision.<sup>24</sup> “Do you know anyone in Europe for races?” her friend abruptly asked me, “I need races in Europe.”

Knowing little about the international dynamics of the sport at the time, I told her I did not know any agents or anyone that could be helpful. It turned out that she had been abroad, to India, and made barely enough money from winning a half marathon to cover expenses. “The payment was nothing after the flight and the food. The rupees are bad. Also, it was too hot and the food was bad.”

“Can the federation help?” I asked, naïvely.

“They don’t like people from the south,” Meskerem interjected. They both agreed that the federation was run by Oromos who only sought to help Oromo athletes. They were *zeregnoch* (racists). They wanted chances to run abroad, but also not anywhere. As both women would experience new registers of disembedding from where they had come from, different forms of discrimination would structure their experiences. The Ethiopian fixer who worked with an Indian agent turned out to be no good (the details of how this came about to me were quite murky) but was still the best offer she had at the time. Again, she was trying, through unconventional means, to forge a relationship with someone “outside.”

---

<sup>24</sup> In Ethiopia and beyond, it is not uncommon for children circulate between non-immediate family members for a variety of reasons. I know many women who were sent to live with aunts, uncles, and close non-biological family for a variety of reasons. For example, some women I knew were sent to the city to avoid early marriage; others were sent because they had been accused of being possessed by evil spirits. Others had run away because of running-related tiffs represented here. For more on communal forms of child rearing, see: Jennifer Cole and Christian Groes, eds., *Affective Circuits: African Migrations to Europe and the Pursuit of Social Regeneration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

### 1.4.3. *Ethiopia Wuch*

Disembedding was not only necessary to socially survive within Ethiopia, but was oriented, always, toward running outside of Ethiopia: “Ethiopia *wuch*.” Athletes would always say this to me, especially in this training group. “*Wuch* competition *efellagellbu*.” I want a competition “outside.” Some did not care – any country would do – but others who had raced in India or China and made minimal money, like Meskerem’s friend, wanted to go elsewhere. Europe at least, America ideally.

Some had no intention to come back. A significant number of athletes have used running to leave Ethiopia, never to return. Many coaches and agents have developed a tiered system of trying to get athletes visas, urging them to return. Athletes often travel first to places like China, India, or Morocco, before they may have an opportunity in eastern Europe, followed by western Europe. Occasionally when they arrive at competitions, agents and coaches will even take their passports and keep a close eye on athletes, telling them not to disappear. After all this, it’s far more likely to get the highly coveted U.S. visa. How to find the correct *ferenji* (foreigner) to make these processes happen poses a whole new set of questions.

The following summer, I had grown increasingly curious about these relationships, travelling to Finland and elsewhere to deepen my understanding of the transnational conceptions of this world. Later, I interned with a sports agency in West Chester, Pennsylvania, to better understand how agents identify running economy, and then went to Ethiopia where I conducted research with their development and professional training group. Some athletes in that group were in government clubs on the cusp of being given their first chance to race abroad. These runners made steady incomes in mid-range races in Asia and Eastern Europe. Others were World Champions and major marathon winners who had several properties and private chauffeurs. Working through these groups gave me access to Nike marketing executives, major race directors, and other decision makers in the sport.

All these travels, conversations and experiences deepened my understanding of the Ethiopian running economy. Interestingly, few people seemed to view the fact that I was in so many places at once as an aberration. Many women I interviewed shared an origin story of running that begin by seeing other children running around their school, wanting to join in on the fun, and impressing a physical education teacher or local coach. At that moment, even if they lived in a far, flung out-of-way-place, they were interpellated into the global economy of running.<sup>25</sup>

I got to know many agents, officials, and others connected to the running world quite well. Although the focus is primarily on Ethiopian women runners, I resist the temptation to portray those I engaged with in positions of power as monolithic, mysterious, and evil, especially because women's relationships with these actors varied a great deal. Rather, I attempt to engage various positions and relationships in the middle and upper classes of these global networks as I saw them on dirt roads of Akaki and in press conference rooms in France.<sup>26</sup> Often (and rightly so) when studies focus on the most precarious subjects in an economic and social, those in positions of greater power can be seen as a spectral monolith. And in the lives of aspiring young runners, this is often the case. However, in studying through and studying up in these institutions, I have found a far more complicated picture. While I believe many coaches and agents could do better to question hegemonic understandings of this market more outwardly, I critically engage with how various actors throughout this network view the constraints on their individual positionalities. Thus, I can better understand what it would mean to initiate structural change.

Over my years in Ethiopia, I have seen athletes I knew as teen-agers go on to win Olympic and World Championship medals, and I keep in touch with them through track meets or family

---

<sup>25</sup> Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an out-of-the-Way Place* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Paige West, *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

connections. Others, who I knew when they were starting out, received visas to China or Europe from low grade agents, and never boarded their flights back home. Still others got married, got pregnant, and returned to the countryside to have children. And many are still toiling away each dawn, desperately hoping for a chance *outside*.

#### **1.4.4. “Lemin setoch bicha?” (Why Only Women?)**

Qualifying for a World junior competition like the one in Finland is one of the only ways to fast track a first competition *outside* for young athletes. The handful of young women who, in many cases, hardly had time to adjust to city life within Ethiopia, found themselves about to form new social networks on a global scale.

When Alemaz won the competition, I was speaking with a young man who had also represented Ethiopia in Finland. Because white people speaking Amharic is such an anomaly, I explained that my interest had to do with my studies and that I had a project about women runners in Ethiopia. “*Lemin setoch bicha?*” he asked. “Why only women?” When I introduced women runners to my research they often responded with modest smiles and agreed that this was a good idea, but questions from men about they were not included were common. My answers depended on my level of energy and willingness to engage, but I often responded, “Because I’m a woman runner.”

Like so many feminist researchers, anthropologists, and activists, I have found that critical thinking about sports writ large, and running in particular, has overwhelmingly been by, about, and for, men. Although it may be changing, sport has long been an archetypal male terrain, and a machine for the production of masculinity grounded in competitiveness, “power,” and the need to “win.” There have been a handful of books written about Kenyan running culture, most notably *Running with the Kenyans* and *More Fire*, which overwhelmingly focus on male athletes in Kenya, despite

purporting to be a glimpse into Kenyan running culture, broadly.<sup>27</sup> The book *Out of Thin Air* by anthropologist Michael Crawley, too posits itself as a study of Ethiopian running culture.<sup>28</sup> Crawley goes to great lengths to note the gendered limitations of his work, and that his position as a white man would not enable him the kind of vantage point to carry out a study of women runners, but it does not change the fact that an attention to gender in this world is overdue.

There are certainly many overlaps between the experiences of male and female Ethiopian runners, but women face several distinctive social, culture, and embodied challenges. One coach told me early on in research that he believed it was easier for women to succeed in running in Ethiopia, because the number of women pursuing the sport was fewer than that of men, and they could benefit from male training partners. This coach, however, like so many (mostly men) who worked in the world of athletics, seldom mentioned all the ways others would exploit gendered power dynamics to benefit from women athletes' very hard work. Nor that the risks involved in pursuing running, for women, could be much greater. As I reiterate several times throughout the dissertation, this is not always a conscious and malicious process (though it sometimes is); but I want to explicate how the transnational economy of running does not need to invent these inequalities for capital to readily take advantages of historically situated exploitative dynamics.

While many people I spoke to throughout my research ended up at competitions in Finland, representing Ethiopia, I also draw on the experience of the women who attempted to transform their lives through running, but fell short. Because I began going to Ethiopia in 2013, I have been able to keep in touch with many athletes whose journeys have been quite different. While later stages of my research enabled me to interact with shoe company representatives and agents, I have also stayed in

---

<sup>27</sup> Adharanand Finn, *Running with the Kenyans: Discovering the Secrets of the Fastest People on Earth* (New York: Ballantine, 2013); Toby Tanser, *More Fire: How to Run the Kenyan Way* (Yardley, Penn.: Hove: Westholme; Roundhouse [distributor], 2008).

<sup>28</sup> MICHAEL CRAWLEY, *OUT OF THIN AIR: Running Wisdom and Magic from above the Clouds in Ethiopia*. (S.I.: BLOOMSBURY SPORT, 2022).

touch with women who I met on my first trip, and who were attempting to enter into the stream of the transnational economy of running, but were never seen to have made it.

Women whose stories I delve into in later chapters, like that of Tigist's, put so much of their time and energy in developing good running economy. Calling themselves athletes, defying the wishes and dreams of family members by pursuing running, theirs are some of the stories that often get left behind in running narratives. Their careers never panned out, and they encountered a range of abusive situations by coaches seeking to take advantage of their potential at an early age. Still, I argue that they, along with the mass reserves of Ethiopian runners who don't quite make it, are a vital organ in reproducing the economy of running.

I argue that all these athletes form part of the multimillion-dollar global economy of running that celebrates champions on major city streets with races sponsored by some of the world's most powerful corporations. Journalists who write about Ethiopian running, often, only have access to agents, sponsors, husbands, and coaches, or only privilege those perspectives. I seek to center the voices and experiences of Ethiopian women and unpack how they understand what it is like to navigate this transnational economy of running.

### ***1.5 Structures of Hegemony in the Transnational Economy of Running***

What might be called the transnational athletics economy is a primary object of scrutiny in this dissertation.<sup>29</sup> If, as Kim Fortun says, ethnography can provide “a powerful and efficient way to read historical conditions,” I use it here to analyze sport, and sports institutions, which have become

---

<sup>29</sup> “Adjectivized” is a term Jane Guyer and Federico Neiburg use in their article, “The real in the real economy” where they critique the notion of the “real economy” after the 2008 financial crisis. The “real economy” was initially created to track the relationship between money and commodities, as distinct from financialization. They acknowledge that it is real insofar as it has social and cultural meaning, but historicize its creation to question the concept's turbulence. Federico Neiburg and Jane I. Guyer, “The Real in the Real Economy,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 3 (December 2017): 261–79, <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau7.3.015>.

such powerful drivers of both culture and capital.<sup>30</sup> On a material basis, many of the worlds' most powerful corporations – Nike, Adidas, Saudi Aramco, Toyota, ExxonMobil (and countless other automobile, apparel, gas, and technology companies) – and countries exert their strength through international competitions, siphoning capital and resources to countries and teams as they see fit. On an ideological level, sport can bring people together, provide grounds collectively effervesce, and reaffirm ideas about how culture and capital operate in the world. It is important to map how certain people and bodies of government then create and reproduce an economy and conception of economy, and to what ends, to see whom this economy truly serves.

Often when people speak of an economy, or “the economy” the definition and bounds of the concept are exceedingly nebulous, as evidenced by adjectivized descriptions of “it” as micro, macro, grassroots, financial, or informal. With hundreds of construction projects stuck in funding limbo, skyscrapers nearing completion, and Ethiopian politicians celebrating urban growth by subscribing to the “emerging economy model,” it is easy to see that calling an economy good always necessitates a follow up question: for whom? Pre-Civil War Ethiopian GDP was burgeoning, but most people on the streets of Addis Ababa felt as poor as ever. However it is defined, the economy in Ethiopia is marked by class exclusions and hierarchy within the broader structures of global capitalist relations.

Actors in the running economy – corporate sponsors, agents, coaches, and race directors -- operate according to a set of market principles that are never defined or backed up by evidence, but reinforce hierarchies of knowledge, power, and control. Sit at a hotel bar after a major marathon with a group of agents, race directors, and sports marketing executives, and the power of hegemony is on full display. But these actors, agents in the literal sense, mainly take pride in understanding how the

---

<sup>30</sup> Kim Fortun, “Ethnography in Late Industrialism,” in *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology*, ed. Orin Starn (Durham: Duke University Press), 119-136.

hegemony of the economy of running works, not in reflecting upon their own role in producing and reproducing it.

Agents will lament that there is “just not enough money to go around.” They mean that there limits to the amounts distributed between athletes (without addressing the politics of such distribution), and will sign, at sponsorship meetings, contracts that produce and reproduce racialized and gendered global inequalities. I’ve been told that “An Ethiopian woman is just not as marketable as a woman from Europe,” without addressing how contract negotiations are carried out, or providing suggestions for new marketing opportunities or ways bonuses might serve individuals differently. In other words, sponsors, agents, coaches, and even athletes themselves, continuously produce not only material conditions, but a hegemonic understanding of “the economy” itself.

But, if one leaves that hotel bar, walks up a few flights of stairs and down a hallway, and shares a room with an athlete, they will get an entirely different story. “They told me I was getting \$10,000 entrance now it’s \$5,000. *Lebanoch!* (Thieves!),” I heard once. Athletes understand that contracts change, and they understand the layers of complexity belying these contractual changes, despite many agents wrongly assuming they don’t. Often, athletes refuse to accept the underlying economic structure as something that they should be forced to work within. Sometimes, as the agents say, they don’t understand the business. Other times, however, they just think the business is wrong.

A rich body of anthropological scholarship shows how the notion of a fixed and singular capitalist “economy” is a false premise. After all, capitalism carries within it highly diverse social relations, and various types of economies, including “spheres” or “regimes” of value, co-exist within broader capitalist economies.<sup>31</sup> And ethnographic research into studies of markets, economies, and economics, are useful methods to pose questions about how various actors conceive of the economy,

---

<sup>31</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013).



how these conceptions appear to be natural, and how, in some cases, the economy is contested. Because anthropologists bring an everyday perspective to a study of the economy, rather than an abstracted metric, I follow Niko Besnier and Susanna Narotzky's lead in not focusing exclusively on any particular domain of economic activity – exchange, accumulation, or calculation – but rather on the totality of making a living.<sup>32</sup> Ethnography, they argue, “enables us to explore how people can undermine or sidestep hegemonic models in the actual conduct of their lives.”

As I hope to show in more detail, Ethiopian women athletes who work within the market economy often explicitly and implicitly point out its many fallible logics. They contest it even as they aid in its reproduction, in this sense evincing anthropologist Hannah Appel's claim that “Capitalism is not a context; it's a project.” Markets do not merely reproduce inequalities but are made *from* existing inequalities that have material histories. However, because so many actors take capitalism and the economy as a given setting (agents, race directors, and sports marketers often lamented that Ethiopian athletes and coaches did not understand “the market”) a sense of capitalist realism often pervades these transnational spaces.<sup>33</sup> But, following Appel and countless other anthropologists who study work under transnational capitalism, my intention is to unravel how the capitalist sporting project is remade, and how sport is a site for the production of capitalism itself.

To this end, I use many elements of a Marxist analysis in attempting to map the modes and relations of production within the running economy. This entails exploring how labor is structurally assessed, and how value accumulates.<sup>34</sup> Claims to understanding value within the transnational athletics economy were always under negotiation and contestation, and therefore always in formation. But I do not wish to claim that a Marxist approach, or any approach, can adequately theorize a system of totality. I neither want to assume that all cultural phenomena fit into existing

---

<sup>32</sup> Susana Narotzky and Niko Besnier, “Crisis, Value, and Hope: Rethinking the Economy: An Introduction to Supplement 9,” *Current Anthropology* 55, no. S9 (August 2014): S4–16, <https://doi.org/10.1086/676327>.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books (Winchester: O Books, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (United States: Madison Park, 2010).

theoretical formulations of value, nor accept that cultural and social relations somehow exist outside of the economic domain. Approaching transnational capitalism as a co-production of distinctive knowledge and material contestations provides potential opportunities – both spatial and temporal -- to intervene.

States, companies, and governing bodies use existing political, social, and capital relations of dominance to exert control over Ethiopian athletes, outside *and* through sport. Antonio Gramsci explained that hegemony is less a matter of coercion so much as the establishment of “common-sense” of a society at various periods of time.<sup>35</sup> The moments and epochs that reinforce or create hegemonic understandings of society are not merely temporal, but also political, especially as they contend to be seen as, and therefore become, organic. And sport, historically, materially, and ideologically, has been a powerful way that “common sense” understandings of capitalism’s inequalities are remade, normalized, and sometimes contested (insofar as Gramsci underlined that hegemony is never complete).

Sporting institutions, powerful actors, and even athletes themselves, have privileged certain perspectives to make this seem true. Amateurism has been the prevailing logic in the biggest and most powerful sports organizations, from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The depiction of sport as a labor of love, or space of play (especially its association with childhood), furthers this idea. Running has become, in the global north, a ubiquitous activity for average white-collar workers to escape the doldrums of long working days and to better their health. This creates an even greater separation between those who rely on running for wages, and those who rely on running as a form of psychological and physical self-care.

---

<sup>35</sup> Antonio Gramsci and Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Repr. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2012).

The image of the poor, rural, Ethiopian child, toiling to reach the top also reifies another “common sense” fallacy in popular discourse, namely that sport is a great equalizer. Many recreational runners are often heard saying, “all you need is a pair of shoes.” Because it is just about what one’s body can do, and because we do see people from some of the poorest countries rising through the ranks and challenging at the top level, people often say that sport, in many ways, levels an uneven playing field. Ethiopian athletes would push back against these notions, arguing that even acquiring shoes should not be a taken-for-granted starting point. They see and feel the multi-varied and complicated terrains in the world of running that make competition anything but level. And as much as there are opportunities for women in running, the broader system of production and labor make it such that they are often re-embedded within patriarchal systems both within and beyond Ethiopia. As such, working in the sport of running, while different than other forms of work, needs to be understood within broader systems of gendered work that exist in transnational capitalism.

We know that factors like gender, race, nationalism, ability, sexuality, and kinship inform class categories, and require intersectional thinking and analysis.<sup>36</sup> In line with recent collective calls to revitalize and reinvigorate feminist approaches to the “socio-economic,” my ethnography centers insights that Ethiopian women give about the athletics economy, in the process seeking to interrogate a stagnant and general sense of economy through ethnography.<sup>37</sup> While many feminist ethnographies have followed a model of unearthing labor conditions in places like factories and call

---

<sup>36</sup> Laura Bear, *Navigating Austerity: Currents of Debt along a South Asian River*, Anthropology of Policy (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015); Sarah Besky, *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India*, California Studies in Food and Culture 47 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Christa Craven, *Pushing for Midwives: Homebirth Mothers and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (Philadelphia, Pa: Temple Univ. Press, 2010); Carla Freeman, *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work, and Pink-Collar Identities in the Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Lisa Rofel, Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, and Simona Segre, *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism: A Collaborative Ethnography of Italian-Chinese Global Fashion*, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, *Producing Culture and Capital: Family Firms in Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> Bear, Laura, Karen Ho, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako. 2015. "Gens: A Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism." Theorizing the Contemporary, *Fieldsights*, March 30. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism>

centers, running is a bit different because it is so deeply tied to the body and labor. Using running economy to re-instill the notion of the “human economy” that, following anthropologist Keith Hart, emphasizes how people make and remake the oft-considered impersonal machine of an “economy” makes it possible to write against market logic aficionados. This is, however, different than Jane Guyer’s notion of “wealth in people,” which argues that African people often cultivate wealth in relationships and interconnections that aid in the construction of their livelihoods. This concept sets up too neat a picture of supposedly traditional African concepts of economy, as if African people were not also participants in industrialized capitalist economies, who may also view their wealth in terms of the goods they accumulate.

I argue that the Ethiopian relationships and interconnections become wrapped up in the heavily industrialized and hyper commodification of late-sporting capitalism. Although the relationships women athletes create with family members, coaches, agents, and corporate representatives are different, they are interconnected, and deeply tied to their stature and transformation within this capitalist economy. As such, centering this analysis around gendered and racialized athletic labor allows me to scale athletes’ minute bodily actions to a much larger landscape: a worldwide, hyper-commercialized, capitalist sport landscape. Sport is certainly a social reality, but it is also a material one.

To engage in a structural critique of the economy of running itself, this dissertation tells the story of the women working within it, in and beyond Ethiopia. The global economy of running, the transnational athletics market, the Ethiopian economy, global economy, etc., are taken here not merely as interrelated contexts, but as projects that are made by and through material and ideological structuring. By centering the perspectives of women athletes and showing how they resist what many non-Ethiopian actors in the global running economy consider “common sense” principles in this

business, I hope to point to new directions for how the transnational athletics market can be understood and operate, differently, and how even the most marginalized actors can push for change.

## **1.6 From Gebere Lijoch to Ruachoch: Encountered and Cultivated Networks**

Almost every athlete from Ethiopia that I have met has identified as a *gebere lij* – or a child of farmers. This is a literal truth – most are indeed children of farmers. But to identify as such also implies both that you are *deba* – poor – and running to change your life – *hivot mekayer*. It also carries a sense of resilience acquired from a childhood working on the farm, growing up in tough circumstances, and often (especially in the case of women), leaving the farm at the behest of parents' wishes. Thus, the *gebere lij* identity provides the foundation and potential to become an athlete.

Most athletes began to identify as *ruach* (runner) when they begin running seriously, even before they acquire contracts. From the beginning, it is a deeply professionalized identity, regarded as a new life stage after rural beginnings. Once women begin pursuing life as *ruachoch*, they learn new social dimensions to this life path, which evolve at different stages – before, during, and after.

My fieldwork focused on women runners and the various relationships that shape their personal and professional lives. This includes their interactions with shoes and shoe companies, agents and coaches, husbands and boyfriends, and friends and family – all forms of connection that become tied up in the ideological and material apparatus of the running economy. I show how capitalist markets seize upon already existing inequalities to make and reproduce themselves through sanctioned and acceptable means. In other words, the corporate apparatuses that control so much of the running economy can use imperial debris, and histories of racist, sexist, and colonial medicine and practice, to create and reproduce hegemonic understandings of global sport and economy.

In Chapter 2, I provide a historical materialist reading tracking three connected processes – the development and gradual commercialization and privatization of capitalist sport; work physiology

and its overlaps with the fields of sports science; and Ethiopian political economy and sporting development. In so doing, I demonstrate how transnational capitalist sport both augments and reifies capitalist understandings of the “free market” and “free labor” through athletes’ work, in relation to the confines of “the rules of the game.” I argue that the state almost always plays a central role in constructing the terms of the market, but also show that global capitalist ideology has come to play an overdetermining role in the infrastructure of Ethiopian sport and commerce, at times undermining the role of the state. Moreover, I invest time in thinking about how, despite the co-dependency of states and markets, the understanding that they are often in tension allows for arguments over which powers should assert total control. These tensions, in turn, allow private companies to play an overdetermining role in the economy of running.

In Chapter 3, I focus on shoes and shoe companies to expand upon anthropological literature that addresses iterations of commodity fetishism and feminist ethnographic work specifically invested in exploring the mystified gendered relations of production. To do so, I tease out the ways Ethiopian women athletes both produce value for shoes and shoe companies, which is then abstracted in its global fetishized consumption. I explore these dynamics while engaging the ways in which athletes simultaneously fetishize the power of the shoes, by viewing their own potential value as incumbent upon their footwear.

Then, in Chapter 4, I explore the role of managers and their relationships to the women whose careers they help manage. This entails intervening in debates about the role of managers/agents in transitional capitalist processes, and the reproduction of culturally hegemonic forms of exploitation through licit means, like contractual agreements. Because managers or agents are the mediating party, and thus the forward face of capital exchange, their relationships with athletes can be tense and fraught. At the same time, they can be meaningful and exceptional. Often, the language of kinship inundates these athlete-manager spaces; it yields insight into the ways in

which the lexicon of family is used to both mask unfair relations and respond to new associations between parties. However, as managers and athletes attempt to form contractual agreements within a culturally sensitive frame, I show how racist and sexist inequalities are reproduced through reiterative contractual means.

In Chapter 5, I focus on women's shifting sense of their own embodiment between traditional ideologies of reproduction and the demands of the global running industry. Drawing on feminist theories and studies of social reproduction I reveal an inherent incommensurability with mothering (being reproduction *and* production) and the transnational athletics market. In particular, I focus on how neoliberal changes to sport, beginning in the 1980s, have created a transnational dimension in which women athletes' success is predicated on moving frequently, sometimes by migrating.

The sixth and final chapter addresses the opportunities and contradictions facing women athletes as they straddle local forms of social ordering, which may be at odds with international sport. Using ethnographic examples of how women form informal mutual aid groups (*iddir*) and relate to gossip (*wure*) and witchcraft accusations (*buda* and *metat*), I trace how the tension of teamwork and individual training impact, and are impacted by, these social institutions.

## ***1.7 Toward a New Running Economy***

In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, David Graeber laid the groundwork for anthropology to historicize and theorize the concept of value through our own disciplinary means.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, Graeber arrived at a theory that places human action and desire in a central role while maintaining the importance of structural limitations and potential, or the ways “actions becoming

---

<sup>38</sup> David Graeber, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*, 2001.

meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality – even if, in many cases, the totality in question exists primarily in the actor’s imagination.”<sup>39</sup>

Actors’ imaginations are often, if not always, quite different, and their imaginations are often informed by the structural worlds from which they come. The women athletes who are the focus of this dissertation are my primary concern; however, what became readily clear to me was that their imaginations, actions, and senses of value cannot be detached from so many other structures and actors they encounter on their athletic journeys. Although the athletes do not imagine postcapitalist futures, they do chart new pathways of value and, in doing so, question market logics. Also, in being literal frontrunners in crafting the new limits of speed, they push market logics in deeming what is valuable.

Women runners in Ethiopia enter the running economy to make money and transform their lives, and the lives of family members, often without fully understanding how the market works. They often disagree and realize that the economy of running is not set up for them, but rather benefits those who constructed it and play a major role in shaping its principles.

That said, women end up using their positions within the economy for a range of social and political ends. They use the running economy to acquire opportunities to migrate elsewhere, distribute money among friends, and create alternate pathways than those expected by a range of people. These chapters show that the road is hazardous, even as many like to think of transformation in sport as a beautiful and uplifting journey. Still, women also do advocate, push for, and create new modalities of money through their actions, expectations, and imaginations.

---

<sup>39</sup> Graeber, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value*, xii.



## 2. Whose Dying Muscles? Tensions Between the State and Capital

The World Championships for Track and Field are normally held in late summer. They did not take place until early October in 2019, however. That was because they were being held in Doha, Qatar, where the scorching summer temperatures were deemed unsafe for competition. By the time that the Ethiopian national team was selected, the contract negotiations for those competing in fall marathons had long been settled. Several athletes already set to run the New York City Marathon – including Ruti Aga, and the previous year’s champion, Lelisa Desisa (both represented by the agency I was working with) – were selected for the Ethiopian National team. This would mean that they would race a marathon in October, and then a subsequent marathon one month later. That would be very unusual – as most elite athletes race two marathons per year, one in the spring and one in the fall, to allow for adequate recovery and training in-between.

Tensions arose early in the selection process, between the athletes and members of the EAF. Management and the EAF were already in dispute about the fact that certain athletes should not go to the Championships because their fall marathons were a higher priority. Indeed, the top athletes were more focused on their training for New York. They were set to receive over \$100,000 just to run the NYC Marathon, as well as bonuses from their sponsors and the race organization. But the EAF asserted that they *must* compete at the World Championships for Ethiopia, otherwise they would be barred from international travel. Still, rumors that the EAF feared the athletes would not finish the race, or would not race hard, circulated around the training group.

Despite a midnight start to avoid the day’s heat, the conditions for the women’s race were especially brutal. Temperatures reached the 90s, with 73 percent humidity, and all three of the Ethiopian athletes dropped out of the race. So did more than a third of other 68 competitors. Ethiopian news cycles and athletes spoke about the *shame* that the country, the EAF, and the athletes

felt. The EAF was worried none of the men would finish their final, either. So, the following week, they issued a statement declaring that all athletes competing in the marathon distance at the World Championship would be banned from racing for three months.<sup>1</sup> Shrouded beneath a veneer of a medical concern for safety of the athletes, this measure punished the women for not competing, while showing the men competitors that this would be the only chance for them to compete, urging them to make the most of the competition.

Lelisa Desisa went on to win the race, but in a post-race interview he told reporters, in his limited English, that he would undoubtedly run in New York. He had been training for the double, and he even jogged in place on camera to humor the spectators. Lelisa did not recover quite as well as he hoped but was still planning to go to New York. Even as he realized he was unlikely to defend his title, or even finish the race, he wanted to collect his total \$150,000 in appearances by starting. If he did not begin the race, he would not receive any of that money. Both he and Ruti Aga boarded their business class flights one month later to run New York.

Following the races, in which Lelisa dropped out and Ruti finished third, the EAF announced they were terminating their agreement with the management company. This created a minor panic from other athletes represented by the agency. They worried that without the cooperation between the EAF and management, athletes might lose their chances to compete. Within a few weeks, Hussein travelled to Ethiopia, and the two parties negotiated a deal to overturn the decision. Hussein Makke paid a \$25,000 fine and issued a public apology.<sup>2</sup> Nearly all parties in private agreed it was a ridiculous spectacle, with the federation, as Hussein put it, “flexing its dying muscles and trying to seem relevant.” Many acknowledged through this process that the EAF had

---

<sup>1</sup> Dawit Tolesa, “EAF bans women marathoners for three months.” *The Reporter*, October 5, 2019, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/eaf-bans-women-marathoners-three-months>.

<sup>2</sup> Dawit Tolesa, “EAF fines Hussein Makke USD 25,000,” *The Reporter*, November 23, 2019, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/eaf-fines-hussein-makke-usd-25000>.

become less relevant and powerful in this athletics economy over the past years, doing little to help the athletes, and often a great deal to hinder the signing of contracts between athletes, agents, and shoe companies. It was known that the EAF was at one time very important, as were the state institutions supporting sport in Ethiopia. But those involved at the state level had been gradually losing their stature and would, from time to time, attempt to reinsert themselves as important entities, much to the chagrin of athletes and private capital alike.

## ***2.1 Context and Conflict***

This chapter has several aims. First, it provides a historical overview that gives context to the contemporary working conditions of women runners in Ethiopia. To do so, it explicates three connected processes – the development and gradual commercialization and privatization of capitalist sport, work physiology and its overlaps with the fields of sports science, and Ethiopian political economy and sporting development. As the story of the tensions between the EAF and management illustrates, many are eager to cash in on the labor of Ethiopian athletes. However, the athletes are largely left out of these decisions and conversations.

In addition to providing the context of the overall dissertation, the chapter contributes to debates in Ethiopian history and anthropology surrounding questions of Ethiopia's engagements with international markets and epochal shifts about capitalism and work. The development of capitalist sport, as I will show, helped produce ideological frameworks of the capitalist "free market" and conceptions of "free labor." As such, sport was both born out of, and helps to reproduce, a situation in which "the rules of the game" justify market-based frameworks that are often exploitative. I argue that, in part through its engagement with international sport, global capitalist ideology has come to play an overdetermining role in the infrastructure of Ethiopian sport and commerce, at times undermining the role of the state. While athletes indeed do produce value for the state, and state institutions continue to play an important, albeit dissonant role with the athletes and

capitalist sport, the ways in which Ethiopian sport has developed in relationship to transnational capitalist sport necessitates engagements with critiques of global capitalism and commercialism, at the gradual demise of the state in sport.

However, the state is by no means absent in international sport. In fact, state actors such as members of the EAF attempt to assert their power over foreign capital, often enforcing regulations that athletes view as disenfranchising. Much like other discourses in Ethiopian history, when certain state actors attempt to maintain or obtain power through negotiations with multinational companies and international federations, a select few state actors forge new pathways of influence. However, as athletes and managers have learned to navigate what they often view as state-led impediments, I show how the influence of the state has diminished through sports' hyper-commercialization and the actions of athletes and agents.

Historical scholarship on Ethiopia has engaged a range of questions about state-formation through different regime changes while giving attention to Ethiopia's longstanding involvement with international markets.<sup>3</sup> Complicating these conversations is Ethiopia's unique position as the only African state to keep its independence through the period of African colonization. As a result, while many acknowledge Ethiopia's historical relationship with the international powers, some have argued for prioritizing the importance of "indigenous, rather than colonial, process of state formation."<sup>4</sup> Christopher Clapham, in particular, has emphasized that the history of Ethiopian political economy has been shaped by "two key factors: the strength of the state, and the divergence between the sources of political power... and of economic power" within Ethiopia (primarily, the north and the

---

<sup>3</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1994); Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History*, The Peoples of Africa (Oxford ; Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974*, Eastern African Studies (London : Athens : Addis Ababa: J. Currey ; Ohio University Press ; Addis Ababa University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Clapham, Christopher. "The Ethiopian Developmental State." *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 6 (June 3, 2018): 1151–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1328982>, 1152).

south).<sup>5</sup> Although nuance should be a given, the strength of a hegemonic Ethiopian narrative has meant that the strength of historical narratives of Ethiopia have been incredibly important, and difficult, to write against. Indeed, genealogies that consider Ethiopia's space of transnational black exceptionalism have helped some of these hegemonic narratives to flourish – but often in productively radical ways among black and decolonial movements elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

Anthropologists have offered insights into how people in Ethiopia relate to these greater narratives of Ethiopian state formation and Ethiopian identity. Early works by Wendy James, Donald Donham, and other contributors used ethnographic work to contest prevailing narratives and to make clear that how closely some people identify with international accounts of Ethiopia largely depends on their locations, affiliations, and work.<sup>7</sup> Political and economic developments in the new millennium have led many scholars to ask how protest movements on ethnicity and economic liberalization reflect these narrations, and how recent political and economic developments of privatization are felt on the ground.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, young marginalized men in cities have been the subjects of recent ethnographic work regarding the opportunities for mobility and opportunity.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Clapham, "The Political Economy of Ethiopia from the Imperial Period to the Present." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Ethiopian Economy*, by Christopher Clapham, 32–47. edited by Fantu Cheru, Christopher Cramer, and Arkebe Oqubay. Oxford University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198814986.013.6>.

<sup>6</sup> See Adi, Hakim. *Pan-Africanism: A History*. London New York Oxford New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018; Redmond, Shana L. *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*. New York: NYU Press, 2013; Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2000; Shelemay, Kay Kaufman. *Soundscape: Exploring Music in a Changing World*. Third edition. New York ; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Donham, Donald L. *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*. Berkeley : Oxford [England]: University of California Press ; J. Currey, 1999; Donham, Donald L., and Wendy James, eds. *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History & Social Anthropology*. Eastern African Studies. Oxford : Athens : Addis Ababa: J. Currey ; Ohio University Press ; Addis Ababa University Press, 2002; James, Wendy, Donald L. Donham, Eisei Kurimoto, and Alessandro Triulzi, eds. *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism & After*. Eastern African Studies. Oxford, England : Addis Ababa : Athens: J. Currey ; Addis Ababa University press Ohio University Press, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Aalen, Lovise. *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilisation under Ethnic Federalism*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004207295.i-214>.

<sup>9</sup> Di Nunzio, Marco. *The Act of Living: Street Life, Marginality, and Development in Urban Ethiopia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. Mains, Daniel. "Friends and Money: Balancing Affection and Reciprocity among Young Men in Urban Ethiopia: Friends and Money." *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 2 (May 2013): 335–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12025>; Mains, Daniel. *Hope Is Cut: Youth, Unemployment, and the Future in Urban Ethiopia*. Paperback ed. Global Youth. Philadelphia:

Other anthropologists have left the confines of the city to explore how traders in smaller towns and villages and women and families recovering from severe medical procedures also make sense of their work and livelihood in a liberalizing state.<sup>10</sup>

I build upon these projects by laying the groundwork to explore how women experience the frictions between state policies and transnational markets, and how their movements may evade or push against working gender norms. In exploring the structures and material conditions and developments through which Ethiopian transnational sport has come into being, I contextualize how, through governmental and economic shifts, athletes have emerged as important political actors. Notably, some male athletes use their mobility to bring greater international attention to Ethiopia's injustices, even as their performances introduce economic investment and growth for the state.<sup>11</sup> Undergirding these processes, however, are important material changes that occurred alongside developments of Ethiopia's place in transnational sport and capitalism.

Ethiopia's economic and political shifts must always be understood in relation to the state's involvement with the international market. Likewise, the development of sport must be understood in relation to the development and shifts in capitalist production. By exploring the relationship between these two concepts, I show frictions that arise between state control and capital accumulation, and between Ethiopia and the transnational athletics market. This helps situate how the Ethiopian state has responded to transnational sporting pressures, and how it has helped to shape conceptions of the free market, free agency, and free labor.

---

Temple Univ. Press, 2013; Mains, Daniel. "Neoliberal Times: Progress, Boredom, and Shame among Young Men in Urban Ethiopia." *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 4 (November 2007): 659–73. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2007.34.4.659>.

<sup>10</sup> James Ellison, "'Everyone Can Do as He Wants': Economic Liberalization and Emergent Forms of Antipathy in Southern Ethiopia," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 4 (November 2006): 665–86, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2006.33.4.665>; Anita Hannig, *Beyond Surgery: Injury, Healing, and Religion at an Ethiopian Hospital* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Ezekiel Gebissa, "Lelisa's Message," *Jacobin*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/ethiopia-feyisa-lelisa-marathon-oromia/>.

Associations between work and leisure have become blurred in the past few decades. Still, sport, and its association with play and leisure, is often depicted in opposition to work.<sup>12</sup> Thus, language and conceptions of athletes seldom lend themselves readily to critical discourses about athletic labor. The language of “free agency,” the remote and emotional attachment to teams that provides an escape to fans from the mundanity of everyday working life, and the close association to play that sport indicates, sometimes augments the perception that sport is not labor. Further, the visible and the oft-cited rags-to-riches stories we often hear imbue athletes with a star status – an exceptional quality similar to their physical abilities – which makes their labor seem all the more “free.” Athletic labor, like other forms of labor that the power structures of global capitalism perpetuate, simultaneously enables the fallacy of “free labor” to persist, making it all the more difficult to contest, and in turn, makes this labor considerably less free.

This chapter, then, provides a broad historical overview to elucidate some of the reasons why athletic labor is so readily seen as free, and to situate the historical development of capitalism, sport, and Ethiopia, and women athletes’ place within it. I begin by laying out an abbreviated historical narrative that contextualizes how modern sport and industrial capitalism came into being conterminously and came to inform understandings of “free” labor. I then tie in how work physiology, and a desire to create fatigueless workers during industrial capitalism, sowed the seeds for the discipline of sports science. Hopefully this makes clear how the disciplines’ leading tenets today have roots tied to how worker energy was directly tied into production and profit.

Finally, I track the development of athletics, and female athletes within Ethiopia, and how the country entered this transnational market by developing state-based infrastructure to support athletes. To explore how women’s positions in transnational sport appear both outside and within

---

<sup>12</sup> Even as, as Eckert argues, “in the same manner, the demarcation of work and leisure, so starkly contrasted in the modern period, is becoming blurred as new forms of work acquire shades of leisure while leisure itself has been industrialized,” (6). Andreas Eckert, ed., *Global Histories of Work*, Work in Global and Historical Perspective, volume 1 (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016).

Ethiopia, analyses must be contextualized in relation to recent developments through which state-based sport federations and international federations have attempted to assert power. However, this chapter never loses sight of the broader international framework. In so doing, it aims to show how the increasing influence of transnational capitalist sport has led to a gradual demise of state support and influence and growing hegemonic forces of private enterprise.

## ***2.2 Free Labor and Fair Play in the Free Market***

Athletes in Ethiopia understand their daily training as labor. This contrasts with the common view of fans and recreational fitness enthusiasts of sports as something glamorous and fun very different from a regular job. In part, the assumption that sports are not work may have something to do with the notion of play being a fundamental cultural activity. Dutch historian Johan Huizinga popularized this idea in his formative text *Homo Ludens* when he asserted that play was more fundamental an activity than culture and classified it as an activity separate from everyday life. He described it as free, with separate boundaries and rules and, crucially, absent of material ends. Because of its uniqueness outside of space and time, play provided imaginations for new kinds of social interactions and connections, as opposed to games which emerge from preexisting social contexts.<sup>13</sup>

Although contemporary sports have elements of older forms of play, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists, show how different periods distinguish traditional games from modern sport. Historian Allen Guttman, for example, used anthropological accounts of sports and games to draw a distinction between earlier games and modern sports, being that they were for ulterior purposes “like assuring the earth’s fertility—rather than for the sheer pleasure of the activity

---

<sup>13</sup> Huizinga, Johan, and Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016.



itself.”<sup>14</sup> Roger Caillois noted that play did not create wealth or material goods, which made it different from sport; those who play would be different from professional athletes – because for them it is work.<sup>15</sup> That said, it can be difficult to perceive the difference between one who plays and one who works when it comes to activities that look and seem incredibly similar – i.e., those who run marathons at the elite level versus those who run marathons recreationally.

These distinguishable characteristics of modern sport – bureaucratization, standardization, continuity, consistency, and quantification – emerged conterminously with the new forms of capital accumulation and labor accumulation that Marx documents in *Capital Volume 1*. Thus, this historical process of dispossessing people from their lands through capitalist order must be understood in relation to a new paradigm of sport.<sup>16</sup> The means of production were privatized in industrializing Europe and a small subset of owners were able to profit off a bigger working class – a proletariat “free” – only to sell their labor for a wage. Simultaneously, sporting institutions and organizations became an important place to normalize new modes of capitalist sport and production, in various geopolitical, racial, and gendered domains. Even Silvia Federici’s analysis of primitive accumulation and the persecution of witches mentions how land enclosures simultaneously made public space more dangerous for women while attacking forms of women’s sociality, “including sports, games, dances, ale-wakes, festivals, and other group rituals that had been a source of bonding and solidarity among workers.”<sup>17</sup>

Like theater, music, and the arts, sport was another form of leisure commercialized in the 19th century.<sup>18</sup> These fundamental changes altered both the commercial enterprise of sport, as well as the ways in which it was played, organized, and regulated. The “objective” rule of law based on

---

<sup>14</sup> Guttman, Allen. *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*. Updated with a new afterword. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Caillois and Meyer Barash, *Man, Play, and Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Collins, Tony. *Sport in Capitalist Society: A Short History*. New York: Routledge, 2013, vii

<sup>17</sup> Federici, Silvia Beatriz. *Caliban and the Witch*. 2., rev. Ed. New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2014, 83

<sup>18</sup> Collins, *Sport in Capitalist Society*, 5.

property rights, business transactions, and gambling, were reformulated in sporting domains in the 1740s and through betting and commercialization, the binary poles of winning and losing – sports’ inherently competitive nature – “dovetailed perfectly with the newly dominant conceptions of the competitiveness of human nature.” According to Tony Collins, sport did not just coincide with industrial capitalism’s development, but it was “an integral part of that expansion, not only in economic organization but also in ideological meaning.”<sup>19</sup>

In industrial Britain, sport initially grew as an aristocratic enterprise, with an informal network of aristocrats and gentry controlling the playing field.<sup>20</sup> However, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a transition away from aristocracy-controlled sporting ventures. Industrialization and the enclosure of common lands meant that many members of the rural peasantry had flocked to urban centers looking for work and had taken up new sports as fans and players.<sup>21</sup> But with sport’s growing influence, the urban bourgeoisie sought to control its domain.

To institute it accordingly, Victorian era institutions like schools and churches began to imbue sport with a moral imperative. Central to this was the notion of amateurism – that participants should not receive material reward and “fair play” should be central to sports and games. If Britain was supposed to be the home of liberty, freedom, and fairness, fair play was central to this image. And sport was a powerful way to convey this idea.

### **2.2.1 Economies of Energy**

As the enclosure of common lands was occurring alongside the industrialization of the work force, work physiologists, physicists, and the growing bourgeoisie began to explore how human bodies could be made machinelike, and be best trained to avoid fatigue – “permanent nemesis of an

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 29

industrializing Europe.”<sup>22</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> century thinking, based on the second law of thermodynamics – the idea that the transfer of energy from a warmer to a colder body accompanied a decrease in total available energy – led to what Anson Rabinbach has termed a moment of “*transcendental materialism*... a totalizing framework that subordinated all social activities to production, raising the human project of labor to a universal attribute of nature.”

By the 1890s, an international avant-garde of fatigue experts created a field in which science and politics intersected, and they could subject individual body movements and rhythms to investigation for the purpose of enhancing worker productivity and deploying human labor power. By 1900, there were 100 cited scientific studies of muscle fatigue, nervous exhaustion, and brain exhaustion – problems pathologized as “diseases of the will.” Measuring fatigue “promised to unlock the principles of the body’s energies, to determine its economies of motion, and to reveal the most beneficial methods of organizing the expenditure of energy – both muscular and ‘nervous’ – so that the resources of both the individual and society might be properly deployed.”<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, a calendar set religious festivals to a “new commercial economy based on chronological clock-time,” that E.P. Thompson famously documented.<sup>24</sup> The introduction of these new measurements made idleness the sin against industry. While the working body was placed at the center of attention, it also abstracted the labor of the individual from the conditions of work and the political economy in which people worked.

As worker productivity became important, fears of entropy increased as well, and what constituted efficient workers became increasingly racialized. Physiologists understood that people would need periods of ‘recuperation’ through adequate nutrition, rest, and sleep. Scientists often

---

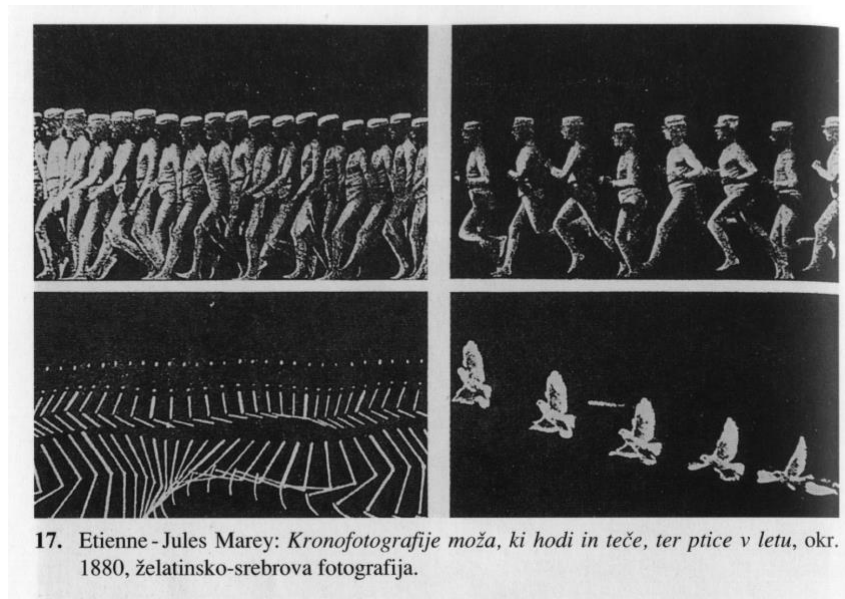
<sup>22</sup> Rabinbach, Anson. *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, 4

<sup>23</sup> Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” in *Class*, ed. Stanley Aronowitz and Michael J. Roberts (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119395485.ch3>.

wrote that people living in hot climates – especially those along equatorial lines – lived in idleness, but that ‘savage’ bodies could endure the ‘corporal discomfort’ – an explanation that would certainly help to justify the colonization of Africa which occurred at the same time.

New technologies for observing and measuring human movement emerged in this Age of Calibration. They helped people learn more about managing the productivity of workers, and their economies of energy. French physiologist, Étienne-Jules Marey, even designed a new apparatus for measuring human walking and running, “consisting of a portable inscriptor and experimental shoe... attached to the runner’s head was an apparatus that registered the bounce of the entire body at various speeds” making possible “a science of fatigue and a rationalization of the body’s movements - an economy of energy that led to a distinctly European science of work” and related to a modernist politics of a state devoted to “maximizing the economy of the body.”<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 3: Photos from Étienne-Jules Marey’s research on measuring economies of energy.**

---

<sup>25</sup> Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 99-119.

Early sports medicine coincided with these early studies of work physiology, principally due to the belief that athletes would serve as ideal participants to help researchers understand the greatest limits of human potential. Marey's invention, for example, was used to capture athlete movements in the 1896 Olympic Games and would later anticipate the 'force platform' which measures acceleration from a standing position.

John Hoberman notes that the turn to studying athletes was based on enhancing industrial productivity, but that this scientific development also laid the foundation for sports science that would later be geared toward high-performance (and even doping). The athlete's body increasingly became a terrain of experimentation and manipulation, open to chemical assay, and expected to be promethean and Janus faced – machinic, automatic, and exceptional, while being natural and premodern – became normalized during this time.<sup>26</sup>

The growth of these scientific studies coincided with a new age of colonization, and forms of experimentation became part of the process of normalizing slavery. Racialized conceptions of black and brown bodies as more pain resistant, durable, and better suited for certain activities become increasingly normalized.<sup>27</sup> Embodied experiences changed as the “the entire captive body [became] a living laboratory.”<sup>28</sup> Scholars have analyzed how not only classifications, but technological developments, can both derive and be directed at reproducing racial and economic inequality.<sup>29</sup>

Technologies like the spirometer – a tool measuring lung capacity – emerged to monitor vital processes, working capacities and fitness and were used to justify slavery because black lungs were

---

<sup>26</sup> Hoberman, John M. *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport*. New York : Toronto : New York: Free Press ; Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992., 22

<sup>27</sup> Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>; Cristina Visperas, Kimberly Juanita Brown, and Jared Sexton, “Introduction,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (November 30, 2016): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.28968/cft.v2i2.28797>.

<sup>29</sup> Lundy Braun, *Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Dorothy Roberts, *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Crete Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York; London: The new Press, 2012).

said to be unable to ‘vitalize the blood’ (“and this lack of vitality could only be cured by forced labor”). Other colonial ethnologists observed African bodies as carrying a ‘legendary hardness’ and ability to draw on ‘an inner state of relaxation’ that came from a lack of advanced intellect.<sup>30</sup>

Many of these technologies, used front and center in the development of African athletes, and the measuring of their “running economy” have grown in importance and scope today. One of the clearest examples, as noted before, are these instruments developed during the Age of Calibration.

The visual legacies that these instruments leave behind have consequences. As seen from this documentary from 2017, about a marathon project with three “ideal” athlete worker subjects, the legacies of these technologies that measuring worker efficiency and see athletes as inherently subject to scrutiny, are deeply embedded in understandings of African athletes as remarkably efficient workers.



**Figure 4: Still from National Geographic Documentary *Breaking2* measuring Eliud Kipchoge’s running economy.**

At the same time that research in work physiology bloomed, and that the seeds for the sports science discipline were sewn, Europe was rapidly industrializing and colonizing Africa.

---

<sup>30</sup> Braun, *Breathing Race* 28; Hoberman *Mortal Engines*, 34.

Further, the idea for the rebirth of the modern Olympic Games was gaining traction heading into the 1890s. These confluence of factors at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would come to situate Ethiopia as an African exception, as the Ethiopian state evaded the scramble for Africa.

## ***2.3 Ethiopian Forays into Global Sport and Commerce***

### **2.3.1 Modernity, Statehood, and Concessionary Politics**

As Italy launched its first attempt to colonize Ethiopia in 1895, a historical epoch was ending. *Zemane Mesafînt* or Era of the Princes (1769 – 1855) persisted for nearly a century during which regional infighting for claims over the kingdom of Abyssinia produced turmoil, largely disconnected from international politics.<sup>31</sup> Toward the end of this period, however, when the Horn of Africa was being sought after by British, French, and Italian empires, dynamics shifted into what Christina Tekie has called a long tradition of concessionary politics:

a diplomatic strategy that plays colonial rivals off each other through the politics of concession-giving, or providing economic monopolies in key industries, not only to ensure Abyssinian survival and independence in the face of colonialism, but to enhance the ruler's power through revenue generated by the very concessions given.<sup>32</sup>

These concessionary politics meant that the formation of the Ethiopian state resulted in certain centers of power within the country, with others, on the periphery, largely excluded. As we shall see, this spatialization of power and economy continues to structure the ways in which Ethiopian sport has been incorporated into the political economy of international sport.

---

<sup>31</sup> Pankhurst, Richard. *The Ethiopians: A History*. The Peoples of Africa. Oxford ; Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, 127.

<sup>32</sup> Christina Tekie, "Brewing Development: Multinational Alcohol Companies, the Neo-Concessionary State, and the Politics of Industrialization in Ethiopia," (Ph.D. diss, Duke University, 2019), 72.

Scholars of Ethiopian history and historiography often debate the stability and coherence of teleological epochs of Ethiopian state formation. While critical of these formations, many agree that there is something of a grand narrative that Tibebe Teshale has described of state formation: Emperor Tewodros II (1818–68) was the ‘initiator’, Emperor Yohannes IV (1837–89) was the ‘elaborator’, and Emperor Menelik II (1844–1913) was the ‘consolidator.’<sup>33</sup> All employed, in some form or another, a degree of concessionary politics to achieve self-interested gains. Emperor Menelik II, in particular, was well positioned to gain influence after leading the Ethiopian campaign against Italian attempts at colonization.

In the 1896 Battle of Adwa, regional leaders from around Ethiopia worked together to stop Italian invasion. This event is now considered a seminal moment in Ethiopian history, and March 2<sup>nd</sup> is now a national holiday. Following the battle, however, Italian ambitions to invade Ethiopia were not fully halted. Now entangled in relationships with British, French, German, Italian, and US powers competing for influence in the area, this battle and the decisions made thereafter are often considered a turning point in Ethiopia’s relationship with the international marketplace.<sup>34</sup> Menelik II signed the Treaty of Wuchale with the Italians, and the colonists he had just assisted sought to deceive his rule. A deliberately misleading mistranslation of Article 17 of the treaty indicated that Ethiopia would become a ‘protectorate’ of Italy, an empire still interested in concessions in banking, infrastructure, manufacturing, and extraction industries.

But before taking power as Emperor, Menelik II had begun to extend his own sphere of influence by establishing what would become the new capital of Ethiopia. In 1879, he visited Mount Entoto – a 10,000 foot mountain in the middle of the newly named Addis Ababa – which he considered an ideal center for a military base. Seven years later, he began to settle in the area, and

---

<sup>33</sup> Teshale Tibebe, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia: 1896-1974* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Zewde, Bahru. "CONCESSIONS AND CONCESSION-HUNTERS IN POST-ADWA ETHIOPIA: THE CASE OF ARNOLD HOLZ." *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi E Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per L'Africa E L'Oriente* 45, no. 3 (1990): 365-83. Accessed July 12, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/40760536](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40760536).



built his wife a house near the mineral hot springs that she liked to frequent. He then constructed an Imperial Palace, which remains in place today.

During this time, too, questions of Ethiopian currency were at the forefront of developing trade and increasing state revenue.<sup>35</sup> Under Menelik's leadership, coins were finally produced in 1894, and by 1905, the Bank of Egypt (under the Bank of England) was allowed to open in Ethiopia. The following year, 1906, saw the first bank – the Bank of Abyssinia – open in Ethiopia. This, along with the introduction of a postal system, telephone lines, and policies enticing foreign merchants to settle in the country, are known by historians of Ethiopian history as 'the base years' in Ethiopian urban and national development.

After Menelik II officially took his seat as Emperor, he established Addis Ababa ("New Flower" in Amharic) as the capital, and planted eucalyptus trees along the city streets to ramp up construction. By 1910, the city grew to 70,000 and became an important center for international and national business and trade, which it still is now.<sup>36</sup> But for the indigenous ethnic Oromo group, that populated the land prior to Menelik's founding, this would become, and remains today, a contentious part of Ethiopian history that melds regional infighting with international concessionary and monetary interest.

Menelik's founding of Addis Ababa has elicited different opinions and legacies of the ruler. While some cite him as a hero, others consider him an African colonizer, who as Tekie mentioned, made concessions for his own ends. Establishing the capital of Addis Ababa not only meant dispossessing people – the Oromo – from their lands, but also establishing a center-periphery

---

<sup>35</sup> Shiferaw, Bekele. "Ethiopia's Transition from a Traditional to a Developing Economy, 1890s–1960s." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Ethiopian Economy*, by Bekele Shiferaw, 16–32. edited by Fantu Cheru, Christopher Cramer, and Arkebe Oqubay. Oxford University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198814986.013.1>

<sup>36</sup> Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 195.

relationship between Addis Ababa and the rest of Ethiopia in which the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Amhara group would have disproportional control of the economy for years to come.<sup>37</sup>

When Menelik II died, his grandson Lij Iyasu succeeded him (1911-1916). Menelik's Wife, Empress Taytu, attempted to seize power from the young boy shortly after, and he exiled her and her daughter as a result. Iyasu's short rule, and a range of miscalculations with foreign powers, led to his removal, and the regent, Ras Tafari Mekonen, came in as the new ruler of Ethiopia.<sup>38</sup>

Tafari was keen on modernizing schools, implementing leisure activities, and formally incorporating the independent African nation into the international economy. First and foremost, he wanted Ethiopia to become a member of the League of Nations, but this proved difficult. Members of the League – consisting at the time of only international European powers – debated Ethiopia's acceptance for a long time and scrutinized their inclusion. They were particularly intent on pointing out that Ethiopia's institution of slavery created moral and humanitarian problems and delayed their admittance.

The differential treatment Ethiopia received upon trying to join the league was often overtly racialized. As a result, Adom Getachew has cited their eventual membership as a “burdened membership” – “a form of inclusion in international society where responsibilities and obligations were onerous and rights and entitlements limited and conditional.”<sup>39</sup> Although Ethiopia was on the international stage on paper, they were treated differently than other member nations. This arrangement yielded racialized and material consequences and foreshadows the way Ethiopia has been treated in the international community, more broadly, over time.

---

<sup>37</sup> Wendy James et al., *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism & After* (Oxford, England : Addis Ababa : Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 207.

<sup>39</sup> Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 54.

The following year, Tafari was able to travel around Europe and meet with leadership throughout the world, and sport became a central way Tafari laid claims to Ethiopia's modernity and connected with international communities. When he attended the Paris Olympics in 1924 he returned to Ethiopia with the intent to take on European models of sports organizations, linking sport clubs to churches, factories, and youth clubs.<sup>40</sup> European colonists throughout the continent were using sport as a central instrument of control, employing athletic enterprises to extract and embed ideas about class, morals, and rationality. Tafari emulated colonial efforts to modernize Ethiopia and get rid of more "traditional" sports. He would allow traditional sports like wrestling (*tegele*) a place in festivals and events, but Tafari sought to bring modern structures into the country, which could be held to international standards.<sup>41</sup>

Tafari was officially coronated in 1930, as King of Kings, and became known as Emperor Haile Selassie, but his concurrent foray into developing sporting infrastructure and modernizing Ethiopia was halted when Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935. Fascist Italy waged a brutal six-year effort to control Ethiopia resulting in the deaths of well over 700,000 people, and the destruction of many social, cultural, and economic institutions.<sup>42</sup> During the Italian occupation, interracial sports were prohibited, and Ethiopian training and competition segregated from Italian ones. Italian urban designs like the *Centro Sportivo* at the heart of Addis Ababa would later become central not only to the avid sportsmen and women of the time, but the entire Addis Ababa municipality. While some have indeed argued that Italian occupation was far less influential than other colonizing processes on the

---

<sup>40</sup> Robert Chappell and Ejeta Seifu, "Sport, Culture and Politics in Ethiopia," *Culture, Sport, Society* 3, no. 1 (March 2000): 35–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14610980008721861>, 37.; Benoit Gaudin, "Sports and physical education in Ethiopia during the Italian Occupation," in *Sports in African History, Politics, and Identity Formation* (London: Routledge, 2019), 196-205.

<sup>41</sup> Bromber, Katrin. "The Stadium and the City: Sports Infrastructure in Late Imperial Ethiopia and Beyond1." *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos*, no. 32 (December 17, 2016): 53–72. <https://doi.org/10.4000/cea.2098>, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Haile Selassie, Edward Ullendorff, Harold G Marcus, Ezekiel Gebissa, and Tibebe Eshete. *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress*. Chicago: Research Association School Times Publications : Frontline Distribution International, 1999.

continent, contiguous vestiges of European influence remained in the spatial sport construction processes, as well as institutional training regimens, in Ethiopia.

With the assistance of British forces, Selassie returned to Ethiopia and helped to defeat the Italians, thereafter, reestablishing himself as ruling Emperor. He continued to see great value in sport and believed developing sporting institutions would contribute to the process of Ethiopia's modernization and state recognition in the global arena, both by and through concessionary means. Selassie erected stadiums manifested in new ideas of Ethiopian Modernity and in 1941, the emperor granted the land to the National Sport Confederation of Ethiopia to construct a stadium, and an Ethiopian sporting body that would promote "good character."<sup>43</sup>

The Ethiopian Olympic Committee was founded in 1948, but, like its delayed acceptance into the League of Nations, the EOC faced a delayed international recognition. In 1949, Selassie expanded sporting institutions by creating the Ethiopian Athletics Federation (EAF) to oversee athletics – track and field and marathon running. Still, it took until 1954 for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to recognize these governing bodies, where they could enter the global sporting arena.

During this imperial period a great deal of athletic infrastructure laid the ground for state-supported athletic excellence within Ethiopia and continues to this day. The Imperial Bodyguard, Air Force, Navy, and Police all had sports clubs and were the center of sports and training, and sports were an important institution through which leaders of the Ethiopian state made claims to modernization and belonging in the global marketplace.

---

<sup>43</sup> Bromber, "The Stadium and the City," 61.

### 2.3.2. African Rise, Amateur Decline, Commercial Explosion

Although Ethiopia, and the many African countries that gained independence shortly thereafter, would find a place in the global sports system, they had little if any say about the organization, rules, and values, of international sport at the time. Up until the 1960s, amateurism was critical and central to the Olympic movement and most global sporting institutions. When the modern Olympic Games were reborn in the late 1890s, Pierre de Coubertin alleged that amateurism inspired the ancient Greek Olympics, and should be maintained in the new era of sport. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, amateur was a word used to describe an aristocratic patron of sport. It was supposed to reflect attitudes of British middle classes, who wanted capitalist economic competition alongside a hierarchical, ordered social structure. However, it came to take on more important material aims for those seeking profit – it was used “not only as a means of avoiding paying wages to the young players whom the crowds came to see, but also as a way of using moral authority to control those players.”<sup>44</sup> Sport was projected to have a moral purpose and amateurism – not receiving payment – foregrounded an idea of gentlemanly privilege. “Fair play” (as noted before, which was directly tied to conceptions of “free labor”) would then govern the conduct of the games. While these rules had different variations across countries, until the 1960s, it was the strict rule of the IOC that only amateurs could compete in the Olympic Games.

But just as aristocratic expectations of who would participate in global sport were being reconfigured, amateur hegemony was beginning to be called into question as well. Amidst the tumult of the 1960s, Ethiopia, which had been a symbol of Black superiority, provided further inspiration for African countries in the decolonizing project. When Ethiopian, Abebe Bikila ran down the streets of Rome past an obelisk stolen by Italian occupiers and became the first Black African to win the

---

<sup>44</sup> Collins, *Sport in Capitalist Society*, 25

Olympic Marathon, he added fuel to what was already becoming a fiery decade worldwide, in and outside of sport.

Bikila's iconicity was amplified by a drastic material advancement made at the 1960 Rome Olympics that dramatically accelerated the commercialization of sport: television. Being the first televised games also made it one of the most sought-after events for advertisers of the year. Satellite transmission in 1962 further amplified the potential for capital accumulation through the games, as the games could be broadcasted around the world.<sup>45</sup> With new television capacities, Olympic hosts also sought to capitalize on displaying national prowess and economic potential. For example, 1964 became known as a chance for Tokyo to showcase its scientific enhancements. Dubbed the 'Science-fiction Olympics' the Games displayed Japan's burgeoning electronics industry. While running events had used Swiss technology by the watchmaker Omega, the Tokyo Games were timed by Seiko. The organizers enlisted printing giant Epson to make chronometers and timing calibrations increased to one-hundredth of a second metrics for better accuracy.<sup>46</sup> Importantly, there was quickly a lot of money to be made and invested, but it quickly became clear that it was not set up for athletes to profit from.

But four years later, the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games hardly projected a culture of utopia – scientific or otherwise. In fact, political controversy reached new heights and political theater. To begin, many considered boycotting the games because South Africa – a racist apartheid nation – was set to compete. Further, Mexico City, like much of the world in 1968, saw an onset of political activism. Students were protesting in the streets, and being killed, which led many athletes and fans to question whether nations should attend the games all.

---

<sup>45</sup> Stephen R. Wenn, "Growing Pains: The Olympic Movement and Television, 1966-1972," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, 4 (1995): 1-22; John Slater, "Changing Partners: The Relationship Between the Mass Media and the Olympic Games," *Fourth International Symposium for Olympic Research*, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada, (Oct. 1998): 49-68.

<sup>46</sup> David Goldblatt, *The Games: A Global History of the Olympics*, 2018, 399.

Also on everyone's minds were questions of altitude and amateurism, which were deeply implicated with each other and the newly growing profits of broadcast sport. When it came to altitude, questions of fair play and preparation arose, as some would be able to acclimatize if athletes had better financial support to participate in high-altitude training camps from their national federations. Several scientific studies were conducted regarding athlete safety and altitude before the games, but the science was so new that scientists had little idea of what to expect.<sup>47</sup>

The IOC declared that athletes were only allowed four weeks in a year for "special training" – in this case, at a special altitude camp. While they allowed two extra weeks for the amateur athletes set to compete in Mexico City for safety purposes, these stipulations raised geopolitical debates about fairness and honesty. Firstly, only some certain national federations would be able to provide the financial support for these camps. And secondly, environmental availability would compound the affordability. Thus, when Kenyans and Ethiopians sent their biggest and most prepared teams to Mexico City and did considerably well in the middle- and long-distance events, it was believed that they had unfair advantages, having been born and raised at altitude.

However, debates about amateurism in sport were also heightened because of Cold War politics, pervasive at the time. Soviet athletes and politicians argued that athletes were being exploited as sport was becoming a big business and athlete health was not taken into consideration, while Americans accused Soviets of violating amateur code by paying their athletes well and using sport for political purposes. The star power and cultural and political influence of athletes would further question a range of intersecting injustices – class, race, and exploitation all were made visually iconic in a famous photograph from the 1968 games when Tommie Smith and John Carlos stood atop the

---

<sup>47</sup> Kasperowski, Dick. (2009). "Constructing Altitude Training Standards for the 1968 Mexico City Olympics: The Impact of Ideals and Equality and Uncertainty." *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. Volume 26 (Issue 9). Pages 1263 – 1291

Olympic podium with their black fists raised to protest racial economic inequality in the United States.

At the same time, and as I will discuss in the next chapter, shoe companies began to enter the shoe market and were slowly looking to sponsor athletes. Sponsorship for athletes remained illegal according to IOC rules, but the shoe companies and athletes began defying rules that did not allow them to make money. Some have even argued that Carlos and Smith, whose Puma shoes are in the image of the black power protest, did it as a commercial stunt.<sup>48</sup>

The IOC and the governing body for track and field, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) clamped down on these sponsorships. In 1970, the IAAF announced track athletes could only wear plain white shoes in IAAF-sanctioned competitions and shoe-company representatives would be barred from entering Olympic villages. However, many athletes and companies began to defy these rules, as they saw how much international federations and private corporations were beginning to profit.

The IOC and the IAAF also sought to control the new member federations by initiating similar top-down development approaches characteristic of postcolonial capitalist regimes. With 48 new National Olympic Committees forming in the 1950s and 1970s, a Technical Aid Program was introduced that anticipated a top-down approach. Between 1974 and 1975, the IAAF, which saw itself as an expert organization responsible for developing emerging nations, increased its funding for coaching activities in Africa from 1711 to 15000 pounds. The rhetoric of development helped to justify that the IAAF host international athletics under its umbrella and bring a commercial direction to the federation.

---

<sup>48</sup> Michael McKnight, "A Brush With Greatness: The Puma Shoe that Upended the 1968 Olympics," *Sports Illustrated*, November 15, 2019, <https://www.si.com/track-and-field/2019/11/15/puma-shoe-upended-1968-olympics>.



Through these development initiatives, the IAAF saw it was able to make great sums of money. For example, a pivotal moment occurred in 1978 when the IAAF contracted *Dubai International* to sponsor a ‘Golden Mile’ race, which paid \$400,000 to the IAAF’s development initiatives. Most of the development initiatives were focused on coaching courses but took into consideration little consultation from African countries. But having been provided a glimpse of the mass profits that could be gained through influence over the federations, and the capital that could flow in from the corporations, a small vanguard saw economic potential. Shortly after the Golden Mile, the African Athletics Federation approached Nike to ask about opening up new forms of private development.

The new President of the IAAF, Italian Primo Nebiolo, accelerated commercialization through sponsorship and television rights, making the IAAF less dependent on the sales of the broadcasting rights of the Olympic Games. While the budget increased enormously, the demands for support in administration and infrastructure, particularly from Africa, remained unaddressed. Further, Nebiolo “was quoted as saying that Africa should do more to help itself rather than constantly demanding more financial resources that were unlikely to be adequately used” perpetuating a neoliberal rhetoric all too common in development paradigms (Krieger 1349).

Historian Jorg Krieger argues that the processes of cooperation and conflict between stakeholders show that the IAAF’s development activities were interlinked with the simultaneously occurring commercialization and battle for democratization within the federation; this relationship mirrored the link between increased commercialization and the shift of power characteristic of globalizing sport. Ultimately this development allowed the West to extend its control over economic, technological, political and knowledge resources in global sport while athletes were, for a long time, not allowed to make money. And while athletes have since been able to earn a living, there remained tight controls over who would profit from the labors of these athletes.

### 2.3.3. The Ethiopian *Derg* and the Cold War

Despite major shifts toward a global commercial model of sports, Ethiopian state sporting institutions actually grew following amateurism's decline, as the Ethiopian monarchy would see its final days. And although this meant running as an exceedingly lucrative career path in Ethiopia was yet to take hold, structural opportunities for women began to bloom during this fifteen-year period.

While students were protesting in 1968 in Mexico City and around the world, students in Ethiopia were also reading Marxist-Leninist texts. The inequitable system of land tenure struck a chord for those reading about the ills of private property and land dispossession in Ethiopia. In 1964 and 1965, protests broke out under the slogan of "Land to the Tiller" which specifically called into question inequalities in the agrarian structure of the country.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, for the next several years, students organized and wrote theses and dissertations analyzing the modes of production in Ethiopia, identifying a land-owning aristocracy not too dissimilar from feudal Europe.

It was the year after the Mexico City Olympics in 1969 when Ethiopian historian, Bahru Zewde, argues the student movement in Ethiopia crested. Specifically, the murder of a radical student leader, Tilahun Gizaw in December of 1969, pointed to an era of "unprecedented savagery" in Ethiopia.<sup>50</sup> When the revolution occurred in 1974, the Derg's first orders were to nationalize all land. Although Donald Donham notes that the decisions to nationalize land may have seemed progressive, he argues that it was not a true response to the agitations of much of the former Ethiopian peasantry. Rather, it was led by an urban intellectual left comprised mainly of students – *zemecha* – who transformed the local balance of power when they made their way out to the countryside to implement new changes.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement, c. 1960-1974*, First published in paperback for the rest of the world, Eastern Africa Series (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2017) 125.

<sup>50</sup> Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Ethiopia*, 180.

<sup>51</sup> Donald L Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 46.

Still, growing influence in international communism saw the rise of student groups throughout Ethiopia and turmoil between two particular fronts – MEISON and the EPRP. MEISON was sympathetic to a temporary control of the military *Derg* committee whereas EPRP was opposed. Inspired by Russian writing, the Ethiopian Red Terror – *Qey Shibir* – saw the top-down violent disposal of any opposition by a vanguard party led by Mengistu Hailemariam.

Whereas Selassie was allied with the U.S., the *Derg* would come to receive the aid and assist in Soviet expansion in the horn of Africa. Many institutions received support from the USSR, including sporting establishments and bodies. Politically, the *Derg*'s motto of Ethiopia First – *Ethiopia Tikdem* – came to be modelled in sport, with the idea of sport serving as a common denominator for integrating numerous tribes with diverse languages and customs into a single nation.<sup>52</sup> By 1976, the government was in control of every sports club, all of which changed their names to be representatives of the armed services, security forces, and trade unions.

Despite the *Derg*'s misgivings, a major shift led to an increased participation for women in sport. Except for a select few, women had minimal participation in sport in Ethiopia prior to the revolution. In 1973, a year before the revolution, the Ethiopian sport mentor, Ydnaketchew Tessema, published a 50-page report about promoting sport in Ethiopia, and did not mention women's participation. The *Derg* by contrast made "Sport for all" a part of a newly inclusive model, and women's football teams emerged alongside the new acceptance of women in military and police athletic clubs such as *Omedla* (Police Sport Club) or *Maremia* (Prison Club).

With interest, resources, and facilities directed to women athletes for the first time, two women were set to compete at the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games. However, this also coincided with the beginning of decades of Olympic boycotts. Ethiopia, along with numerous African countries and Soviet-allied states withdrew from the games following the acceptance of New Zealand's

---

<sup>52</sup> Chappell and Seifu, "Sport, Culture and Politics in Ethiopia."

presence (New Zealand received a rugby team from apartheid South Africa, leading to the exit of many federations).

Following the games, Soviet support grew not just in influencing women athletes to participate, but with training for coaching, physical education, and sports science. In 1979, for example, Tsigie Gebre Mesih – an Ethiopian female athlete – travelled to attend a coaching course in Leipzig, East Germany, and returned to Ethiopia to coach other women athletes in short and middle distances.<sup>53</sup> Another athlete, former Ethiopian sprinter, Woldemeskel Kostre, spent years in Hungary pursuing a Ph.D. in sports pedagogy and returned to Ethiopia in 1982, a degree in his hand, to coach middle and long distance runners. He first served as an assistant to Negussie Roba and later became the main coach of the national team. His coaching career led him to later train all the most successful male and female athletes of the 1990s and 2000s.

After Ethiopian women were allowed to compete in the Jan Meda International Cross Country (JMICC) competition in 1985, they joined their male counterparts in the long-distance events. The following year, they even attended an international competition in Switzerland, which was the first time they competed in an IAAF competition.

As the ongoing Cold War made its way deep into sporting politics, options for international competition were limited – as were opportunities for making money. Thus, as Ethiopians had limited opportunities to compete abroad, they developed a deep sporting system at the local level. Following the East German Spartakiades that Ethiopian sports officials had observed in studies in the Communist bloc, they modeled a version and held an Inter-Regional School Sport Competition called Spartakiade in the Arsi region of Ethiopia in 1987. Among the athletes who emerged from this event was Derartu Tulu, who would go on to be Ethiopia's first Olympic champion.

---

<sup>53</sup> Benoit Gaudin, "Sports and physical education in Ethiopia during the Italian Occupation."

Even though international private management first emerged in Ethiopia in the 1980s, the strength of the state reigned supreme.<sup>54</sup> Throughout the 1980s being hired by a state-supported club in the capital city was the way to earn an opportunity to train full time, receive a salary and dedicate oneself exclusively to athletics.<sup>55</sup> Through these conditions and institutions, it became possible for both women and men to pursue sport in Ethiopia. Still, because of the lack of international racing opportunities, Ethiopian athletes were not showing the world, on the highest stage, what they were capable of. This would change in the coming years.

## ***2.4 Queen Derartu***

In 1991, as the Berlin Wall fell and the end of the global Cold War was in sight, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came into power under the guise of the late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi. Meles was a member of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) – one of many opposition groups that came together to see the initial fall of the *Derg* – and then coalesced into the EPRDF. The Prime Minister, who was steeped in Marxist-Leninist writings, wrote and spoke about the neoliberal rationality that many states had fallen privy, and his political potential fell. Yet, despite the fact that Ethiopia would no longer be a communist country, they would develop by and through the state first. Thus, Meles rejected many of the central tenets of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) spearheaded by groups like the IMF and World Bank.

That said, despite its claims of being a developmentalist state, Ethiopia's embrace of neoliberal reforms from the IMF and World Bank should not be understated. Indeed, Ethiopia was keen to let in foreign and private investment but with state supervision for infrastructure and poverty reduction. As many scholars of neoliberalism have articulated neoliberalism is best

---

<sup>54</sup> 1982 was the year when founder of Global Sport Communication, Dutch agent Jos Hermens, came to Ethiopia to tap into an emerging athletic market. Jim Denison, *The Greatest: The Haile Gebrselassie Story*, 1st ed (Halcottsville, NY: Breakaway Books, 2004).

<sup>55</sup> Bezabih Wolde and Gaudin Benoit (2008), The Institutional Organization of Ethiopian Athletics, *Les Annales d'Ethiopie* – Review of the Centre Français des Etudes Ethiopiennes, vol 23, dated 2007, p. 471-494.

understood as a set of ideological moves usually employed and invoked with a combination of private capital interest and the state – often, and in Ethiopia’s case, an elite vanguard section of the state with more to earn.<sup>56</sup> Post-1991 Ethiopia certainly embraced neoliberalism, but did so under exceptional circumstances, meaning that in some sectors they maintained more state control. However, in athletics, because the guiding principles of international competition were overdetermined by certain capital centers, rapid privatization into the Ethiopian athletics market occurred more rapidly.

In addition to the new capital flows brought into Ethiopia both by athlete investments and corporations, athletes also emerged as some of the country’s most visible figures on the world stage. This was made clear, especially for women, when one year after the EPRDF overthrew the Derg, the Barcelona Olympic games themselves were set to be an extravagant ordeal with profound economic costs. Thus, when Elena Meyer and Derartu Tulu, athletes from newly competing nations South Africa and Ethiopia, respectively, toed the line at the end of the Olympic Games, the eyes that descending upon the women were global, scrutinous, political and economic.

Politically, the Barcelona Games marked the end of Olympic boycotts and a simultaneous symbolic victory for capitalist hegemony. Mass construction, infrastructure expansion, and operational costs totaled an estimated \$9.7 billion, with an overrun of 266%.<sup>57</sup> In many ways, the commercial success and increase in tourism meant that the Barcelona Games would be touted as an exemplar for lavish Olympics to come. However, central to the perceived success of Barcelona’s

---

<sup>56</sup> James Ferguson, “The Uses of Neoliberalism,” *Antipode* 41 (January 2010): 166–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00721.x>; Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2006); Stephen J. Collier, “Neoliberalism as Big Leviathan, or ... ? A Response to Wacquant and Hilgers: NEOLIBERALISM AS BIG LEVIATHAN, OR... ?,” *Social Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (May 2012): 186–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2012.00195.x>.

<sup>57</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg and Allison Stewart, “The Oxford Olympics Study 2016: Cost and Cost Overrun at the Games,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2804554>.

Olympics, and an enormous component of capital growth (often at the expense of residential fervor), was broadcasting.

Tulu's victory was transformative for women athletes in Ethiopia, and further exemplified the unique circumstances that competitive success could bring to athletes. As late capitalist sport and post-amateurism began promising much more in terms of material gain, athletes from poor countryside areas were seen on television celebrating their newly earned riches. Older athletes have told me that watching Tulu, Werkinesh Kidane, and other early pioneers on television inspired them to run, or to move to Addis Ababa and seek the riches that sport could bring. Younger generations often look to Tirunesh Dibaba or Meseret Defar – and their allegiance is often regionally linked.

While Ethiopia was incorporating itself more deeply in this capitalist system, however, the government's sporting infrastructure was still very much in place. The typical way for athletes to come up in the system was, and to an extent still is, through government clubs, which usually receive some monetary support from local and small governments as well. That said, there is a new tension wherein private managers and international agents, while sometimes working together with the EAF, have also come into friction with the state infrastructure of athletics. More recently, athletes, sponsors, officials, and managers cite tensions between the state and capital as quite impediments to their development. Part of the reason for this tension lies in the hybrid structure of liberalization upon which the Ethiopian economy and policies teeter.

Meles' strategy after 1991 did fulfill its promise to be a developmentalist state, in some regards, through the ideology of a "revolutionary democracy." Under the federalist structure, the developmentalist state promised state-building through national own development, and specifically in

the Ethiopian context – through ethnic mobilization.<sup>58</sup> This follows a top-down approach through which a vanguard party in the Ethiopian government selects which sectors to liberalize and which to keep state-operated.

Meles was explicit in foregrounding the ideological project of the developmentalist state as a Gramscian one, in which people collectively adhere to broader objectives and principles. Undergirding this hegemony, he wrote, was a structural level centered around boosting the capacity of the state through state-driven growth.<sup>59</sup> Numerous scholars contest the extent to which this was carried out. Tekie, among others, asserts that developmentalism here is more centered around social reproduction of ethnic-based democracy that “fortifies not only its structural but ideological control over the territory.”<sup>60</sup>

Certainly, ethnic conflict has spurred, and been amplified by mainstream ideological and structural battles in Ethiopian news cycles and research about Ethiopia, but the transition to multiethnic federalism has also had profound implications for workers of all ethnic backgrounds and of various classes – including athletes. Developmentalism has meant stringent control over some sectors, and subsequent frustration but foreigners looking to work in Ethiopia. At the same time, the Ethiopian economy also began to embrace neoliberal changes heading into the new millennium, leading to an ethos and increase in entrepreneurial subjectivity like that of African paradigms continent-wide.

This type of developmentalism also allowed some loosening of restrictions for foreign development and investment in Ethiopia. In sport, this meant an increased involvement of

---

<sup>58</sup> Sarah Vaughan, “Revolutionary Democratic State-Building: Party, State and People in the EPRDF’s Ethiopia,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2011): 620–23,

<sup>59</sup> Meles Zenawi, “Good Growth and Governance in Africa: Rethinking Development Strategies,” in *States and Markets: Neoliberal Limitations and the Case for a Developmental State*, ed. Akbar Norman et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 141

<sup>60</sup> Tekie, “Brewing Development,” 91.



international agents coming to work between athletes, and shoe companies and international races. Athletes often interpret this privatization, which centered contracts as an ideal goal, as guiding the way. But for the shoe companies and agents, the Ethiopian state and Ethiopian “mentality” often gets in the way. Often, state institutions still can clamp down on private capital when they see fit.

When Hussein was forced to come to Ethiopia, make a formal apology, and pay a \$25,000 for representing an athlete that raced one month after winning a World Championship, he cited, as he had many times before, Ethiopia’s historic backwardness. In fact, many who work in the athletics sector often point to Ethiopia’s uniqueness – having never been colonized – and an austere sense of national pride as an impediment to doing business with them in athletics.

Ethiopian expertise – in this case the medical justification for banning athletes from competition – was excused abroad. International actors often saw scientists, coaches, and husbands involved with athletes’ training in Ethiopia as utterly unqualified, and potentially halting their growth and productivity. I often heard a refrain from one agent that “they are screwing themselves over” and that, despite the immense reserves of talent in Ethiopia, the athletics industry “was ready to leave them behind.”

The “free [athletic] labor” prominent capitalist ideology is easily undone in this matrix, as the athletes often try to act within the frictions between international capital and the Ethiopian state. And, in the conflicts that emerge between different entities, athletes can acutely feel the brunt of disagreements; had Hussein stubbornly not paid his fee, his athletes would have faced hurdles in attempting to get visas and documentations necessary to race abroad. While marketing agencies and the athletics market itself rests upon notions of “fair play” and “free labor” to accumulate value, the actual work of athletes is often saddled with bureaucratic complications.

### 3. The Business of Selling Shoes

It is not even 5:30 AM and Coach Moges, driving in the pitch black as I sit in the passenger seat, is already on the phone with Habibu. “Do we have size 39?” he asks. Habibu tells him no, not yet. Coach Moges has just picked me up for a training session, and I am accustomed to these early morning panicked phone calls.

“Shit,” he says, in English. The coach knows one athlete with an upcoming competition is soon going to be hounding him for the newest version of Nike shoes. “Hannah, these shoes are causing a big problem,” he tells me. “The athletes, they think without these shoes, they cannot run well. It’s not good for them. It’s not good for their psychology.”

Nike does not deliver directly to Ethiopia. It’s too risky and too complicated. Large shipments worth up to \$4,000 may require high customs taxes or get stolen. However, athletes with contracts are guaranteed at least two bags per year of what everyone calls “facility.” Facility means *yesport masariya* in Amharic – literally, sports materials – meaning clothes, bags, and shoes. Delivering facility to athletes is a logistical headache. Coaches, agents, and sponsors are in constant communication to figure out how to get athletes their facility in time for training and competitions. Athletes based in the U.S. and Europe have their facility delivered to the front doors of their homes. But for athletes in Ethiopia, Nike will send bags of clothes and shoes to their international agents in the U.S. or Europe, and they are brought to Ethiopia as often as possible, on an ad hoc basis.

In the management’s What’s App group, urgent shoe requests constantly fly back and forth. Whenever someone from the agency is heading to a race, he will check at least one bag of facility to send back home with the athlete after their competition. There is never enough space, and never can enough bags go at one time. Facility tends to arrive just in time.

A shoe like the Nike Alphafly, under request that morning, has branded ZoomX foam cushioning the bottom of the foot and a carbon fiber foot plate that gives the shoe a spring-like feel, helping to lower marathon times by minutes. And, according to peer-reviewed research, the shoes improve running economy by about 4%.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the shoes are controversial; in 2019, journalists and rival brands accused some wearing the shoes of partaking in “technological doping.”<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 5: Nike Alphafly**

Getting access to good running shoes in Ethiopia was always a problem, but dramatic advancements in Nike shoe technology that began in 2016 raised the stakes. Following the staged marketing races aimed at men breaking the two-hour barrier in the marathon, record breaking performances by athletes wearing new shoes, and an overwhelming amount of road race victories, athletes clawed for the newest models. We are now in the era of the “super shoe.”<sup>3</sup> Records and times have dropped dramatically in the past few years, and while accessing super shoes is relatively easy in 2022, in 2019 super shoes were still a relatively recent phenomenon, and top of mind was who had access to certain shoe technology.

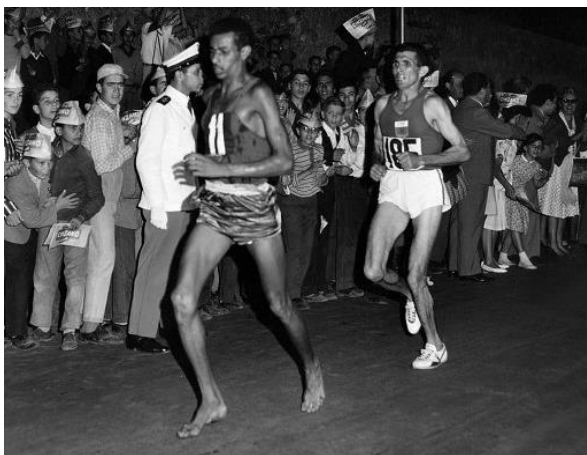
---

<sup>1</sup> Wouter Hoogkamer et al., “A Comparison of the Energetic Cost of Running in Marathon Racing Shoes,” *Sports Medicine* 48, no. 4 (April 2018): 1009–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-017-0811-2>.h

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Bayly, “Despite criticisms of ‘technological doping,’ Nike Vaporfly shoes avoid global ban,” *NBC News*, January 31, 2020 <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/despite-criticisms-technological-doping-nike-vaporfly-shoes-avoid-global-ban-n1127386>

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Taylor, “Nike Vaporfly 4% was only the beginning. A ‘super shoe’ revolution is afoot,” *Fast Company*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90610034/nike-vaporfly-4-was-only-the-beginning-a-super-shoe-revolution-is-afoot>

While the shoes are far more accessible outside of Africa, performances of Kenyans and Ethiopians wearing them has created the most controversy and publicity. As a result, common narratives of Ethiopian victories owing to “natural” advantage – high altitude, genetic supremacy, and a *lack* of shoes – have waned. But before the maximalist turn, the supposed benefits of barefoot running had enough traction that they managed to impact the shoe industry. For years, minimalist running was in vogue, premised on the idea that it helped make previous African champions superior. As noted previously, legend Abebe Bikila, who became the first Black African to win an Olympic Gold Medal in 1960, won the race without shoes and famously became known as “the barefoot runner” thereafter. Not only did Bikila’s shoeless victory come to inform ideas about barefooted African athletes, but companies tried to cash in on this image.



**Figure 6: Abebe Bikila en route to his Olympic Victory.**

Prior to the current period of elaborate high-tech running shoes, in the early 2010s, minimalist shoes were all the rage. Those seeking to “go back to the basics” and run like the Africans and early human ancestors, were buying shoes that all but mimicked not wearing shoes at all. One pioneer of this movement was the Italian shoe company Vibram, that sold “barefoot shoes.” In 2010, they trademarked the “Bikila” name, and later paid a \$3.75 million settlement to Bikila’s family

for not asking permission.<sup>4</sup> In turn, this was a clear litigious demonstration of how profiting from the image and hard work of athletes – disguised through production – could be seen as extractive.



**Figure 7: Vibram FiveFingers Bikila Running Shoes.**

In 2019, when I was in Ethiopia doing fieldwork, the shoe industry and perceptions of advantage inverted from years prior, with the running industry in the midst of a maximalist boom. Now, the African foot was being fetishized in a new way – rather than through its hardened soles from running barefoot, but through its work in a shoe. For a country of athletes whose reputation of success was attributed to natural ability and barefoot running, the recent performances – for journalists, fans, spectators, recreational runners, sponsors, agents, and coaches – became all about footwear.

This chapter is about shoes – the companies that make them, the ways they are marketed, the athletes who wear them, the labor behind them, and the social relations they engender. In the previous chapter, I outlined tensions that arise between the Ethiopian state and private capital, and here I argue that shoe companies have come to play an overdetermining role in the transnational athletics market, leading privatization in the industry. These corporations dictate the movement of capital through commodity exchanges of clothes and shoes, the marketing of athletes to growing

---

<sup>4</sup> Podium Runner, “Family of Abebe Bikila Sues Vibram,” *Podium Runner*, February 11, 2015. <https://www.podiumrunner.com/events/family-abebe-bikila-sues-vibram/>.

consumer bases, and the underemployment of many Ethiopian women athletes. I will show how shoe companies become the predominant profiteers from athletic labor, using the performances of top runners to market and sell their products. With their power and influence, the shoe companies dramatically alter various social and economic relationships and powerfully influence the working conditions of athletes.

And yet, these companies provide a tool critical to an athlete's running economy. Taking the shoe as a historical object, embedded with social and material relations, this chapter explores the ways these new shoes are valued by both athletes and lay consumers. As consumers buy the shoes as objects abstracted from the labor of their production, and corporate marketing schemes further alienate the majority of those workers producing value in factories and at competitions, the shoes become fetishized in varying registers. Women athletes in Ethiopia value shoes for what the shoes physically enable, as well as the values they culturally and materially symbolize.

Shoes, writ large, introduce a range of new exchanges in Ethiopia. Many athletes with contracts sell most of the shoes they receive as their facility, earning cash, and making the shoes more accessible for those in Ethiopia with enough capital to buy them. However, acquiring the shoes in the first place requires sufficient facility, which requires years of grueling work. Nevertheless, formal and informal transnational shoe exchanges elicit new exchange relations within Ethiopia. They raise and question ideas about product quality and authenticity, alongside socioeconomic mobility and modernity, especially among athletes who are not yet sponsored.

Women athletes face two concurrent challenges that men do not. First, the current conversation surrounding these new, specialty shoes regards a range of male-dominated time thresholds that provide more commercial opportunities for men athletes. Second, shoe representatives, race directors, and agents, made it very clear to me that Ethiopian women athletes are considered *particularly unmarketable*. As a result, they must run fast – *faster* than their European and

Americans competitors, and relatively faster than most men athletes – to get access to the shoes and the material benefits that follow.

For all athletes, getting the latest footwear, and producing more value, depends largely on running incredibly fast. And production needs to be sped up along global assembly lines for capital to prosper. The speeds necessary for Ethiopian women to obtain contracts and capital increase at greater velocities than relative speeds expected of Ethiopian men, as well as women athletes in the U.S. and Europe. Ethiopian women runners then produce value for the shoes, which is abstracted in its global fetishized consumption. Simultaneously, Ethiopian women fetishize the power of the shoes themselves, viewing their own, potential value production as incumbent upon possessing the shoes. In analyzing the multiple valences that the shoe fetish brings to surface, Ethiopian women alter social relations, amid racing to get a pair.

As Marx famously defined it, the commodity fetish obscures the work and social relations that go into a commodity's making, as if its production occurred naturally. I seek to show the social relations behind producing the latest high-tech running shoes – in both their natural and supernatural iterations.<sup>5</sup> Athletes who are not sponsored, and not even close to sponsorship, produce value for Nike in part because running is a collective endeavor in Ethiopia – thus, their own labor leads to their exclusion from accessing the very products which accumulate value. How do Ethiopian women understand their own value production for the shoes and shoe companies, and what do they make of

---

<sup>5</sup> In *Capital Volume 1* Marx explains that the social organization of labor is mediated through the buying and selling of commodities. The social relations between people are then perceived as social relations among objects, which help to obscure the social relations themselves. Michael T. Taussig's classic *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* centered this theoretical concept explore how the fetishization of evil mediates conflicts between precapitalist and capitalist modes of production that objectify social relations. As workers attribute their alienation in the capitalist mode of production to pacts with the devil, he explores how social relations are obscured through the development of exchange values and the subsequent effects that has on society. While I focus more in this chapter about the relationships women form with the shoes and shoe companies, in Chapter 5 I address how shoes come into play in witchcraft and social relations with other women athletes.

their relative inaccessibility? And how is it communicated to them, or not communicated, that they are partially in the business of selling shoes?

### ***3.1 It's Gotta be the Shoes***

An iconic advertisement in the late 1980s featured Nike shoes. Spike Lee, playing Mars Blackmon – the fictional character from his 1986 film *She's Gotta Have It*, asks Michael Jordan what makes him the best basketball player of all time:

Is it the hair cut?

No, Mars.

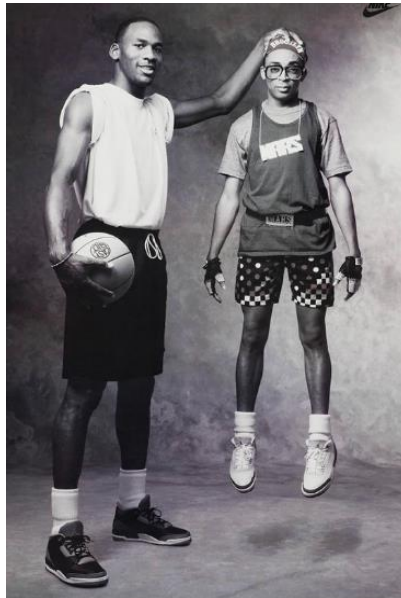
Is it the shoes?

No, Mars.

Is it the extra-long shorts?

No, Mars.

It's the shoes then, right? It's gotta be the shoes!



**Figure 8: "It's Gotta Be the Shoes" Print Ad.**



This is one of Nike's most famous marketing schemes, which, despite times of controversy, have proven to be the most valuable.<sup>6</sup> However, to understand this corporate behemoth's dominance stature in the global economy, it's worth historicizing the role of shoe and apparel companies in international marketing schemes.

In the world of sport, the earlier pioneers of sponsorship were German brothers, Adolf and Rudolf Dassler. Their company, Adidas, launched the modern age of sportswear marketing.<sup>7</sup> The Dassler brothers went into business selling shoes after mechanization, in the industrial revolution in major German cities, eliminated many jobs. They benefitted from Nazism's premium of building on the martial fascist idea of the strong male body put on display in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Many athletes and clubs were looking for high quality footwear which provided an excellent business opportunity for the Dasslers to forge relationships with new and future clients.

Adolf Hitler wanted the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin to showcase the power of the Nazi Party. The games were divisive and many from around the world thought they should not proceed, because the Nazi regime initially sought to ban Jewish and Black competitors. But members of the IOC, including U.S. Olympic president, Avery Brundage, refused to speak out against the anti-Semitism and racism of the Nazi regime. They insisted that politics and sport were separate spheres, and that the games should proceed. Perhaps the most famous star of the Olympics was the Black American sprinter, Jesse Owens. Members of the NAACP mostly thought that Owens should not compete, to protest the racist Nazi regime, but the American Olympic Committee branded him, and other athletes of color threatening to not attend, as "un-American agitators." The Black Ohio State track star ended up boarding the SS Manhattan and arriving in Germany to race at the first televised

---

<sup>6</sup> Many journalists and academics have written about Nike's particularly tendentious marketing formulas. See, for example: Joshua Hunt, *University of Nike: How Corporate Cash Bought American Higher Education* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2018); Matt Hart, *Win at All Costs: Inside Nike Running and Its Culture of Deception*, First edition (New York: Dey Street Books, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Smit, *Pitch Invasion: Three Stripes, Two Brothers, One Feud: Adidas, Puma and the Making of Modern Sport* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2007).

games. Shortly after he arrived in the Olympic village, Adolf Dassler presented his shoes to Owens, and asked him to wear them in the Games. Impressed by the quality, Owens accepted the footwear, and went on to win four gold medals in front of Hitler, bringing unprecedented attention to the Dassler brother brand.<sup>8</sup> Business boomed thereafter.

The Dassler brothers split up after the war. Adolph combined his nickname (Adi) and last name (Das) to name his company Adidas, and his brother Rudolph created a new firm called Ruda – later to be named Puma – in response. The brothers, now rivals, competed to get the best athletes to wear their shoes, and began paving the way for a post-amateur corporate sport model. Amateurism meant that athletes could not accept payment and often had to buy their own shoes. The brothers, to the chagrin of many Olympic officials, ignored this rule. They went on to supply shoes to top Olympic prospects in exchange for publicity.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in the 1960 Olympics, even famed Ethiopian barefoot Bikila was offered a pair of ill-fitting shoes by Adidas via the Ethiopian Athletics Federation.

### **3.1.1 Nike and the Beginnings of Controversies**

For the next several decades, shoe and apparel companies would continue expanding their reach through athlete endorsements. In the 1960s, a track athlete and his coach – Phil Knight and Bill Bowerman – began a shoe company by distributing Japanese shoes around the United States. Through a series of ups and downs, they eventually started producing their own shoes under the title

---

<sup>8</sup> Smit, *Pitch Invasion*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> At the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, for instance, Adidas turned to Czechoslovak distance runner Emil Zátopek, and implored him to wear his shoes. He was impressed by the quality and agreed, but Zátopek had to remove one of the three Adidas stripes from his shoe – the trademark of the brand – as not to “aggravate his country’s communist rulers by wearing the product of a capitalist economy.” When the Melbourne Olympics came around four years later, Adolf sent his son, Horst, to the to give out free shoes to Olympic athletes, a novel idea at the time. Then, at the 1960 Rome Olympics, Adidas was to supply sprinter Armin Hary with shoes. However, before the competition Rudolf Dassler paid Hary to wear Puma spikes – a direct violation of amateur rules. Although Hary only wore Pumas for the competition, and Adidas on the podium, the idea of private sponsorship changed hopes and expectations for company owners and the amateur athletes who could make more money in one competition than they would be able to make in several months of meager amateur wages. *Ibid.*, 61

Blue Ribbon Sports and renamed themselves Nike in 1971. Famously, they paid an art student \$35 to draw up their logo.<sup>10</sup>

Nike took sports marketing to a new level. In founder Phil Knight's memoir, *Shoe Dog*, he discusses how he sought to capitalize on the image of athletes: "We'd known for some time that athlete endorsements were important. If we were going to compete with Adidas... we'd need the top athletes wearing and talking up our brand." One of the first major Nike athletes was Steve Prefontaine – a pioneer in dismantling the amateur rules that disallowed athletes to get paid. By supporting Pre, as the rebel figure was known, Knight realized the value of his image "He was generating thousands of dollars of publicity, making our brand a symbol of rebellion and iconoclasm."

While Nike also started as a running brand, Knight and his executives wanted to market sports gear to the mass market. Further, developing a reputation of breaking the rules only strengthened their edgy influence. After signing an incredibly lucrative deal with Michael Jordan in the 1980s, Nike released a shoe called the Air Jordan 1 – a pair of red and black Nike shoes that Jordan wore for the Chicago Bulls – which were said to violate dress code rules in the NBA. The NBA commissioner, David Stern, threatened to fine Jordan \$5,000 per game if he wore the shoes, and Nike decided they would foot the bill.<sup>11</sup>

The "banned" sneaker did wonders for Nike, generating buzz and making the shoes a hot commodity. Nike appealed to a range of consumers ready not only to side with racialized rules that discriminated against Jordan – and indeed reflected a range of racialized rule making surrounding African American fashion – but also helped to produce feelings of intense brand loyalty. And

---

<sup>10</sup> Drake Baer, "How Nike Got An Insane Deal on the Swoosh Logo," *Business Insider*, July 25, 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/nike-bought-swoosh-logo-for-35-2014-7>.

<sup>11</sup> Justin Sayles, "The Once and Future Sneaker King," *The Ringer*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.theringer.com/nba/2020/5/4/21246027/air-jordan-1-nike-michael-jordan-sneaker-king-legacy-the-last-dance>.

Jordan's tremendous success on the court led many aspiring athletes to believe that "It's gotta be the shoes."

These histories – both production of high-performance shoes and the importance of athlete endorsements – shed light on how corporations continue to understand athletes' values today. Running fast, winning, and breaking records while wearing a particular brand has been central to this project. Drawing on a global running boom, which has seen more and more recreational runners taking their fitness goals increasingly seriously, shoe and apparel companies have tried to profit. Unlike the women toiling away for meager wages to produce the physical shoes, Ethiopian women athletes, by running fast, produce value for Nike. Their labor – to prepare, train, recover, and ultimately perform – added value not only to the shoes, but to the brand's overall image. To be an innovator, and a literal and figurative front-runner in sport, was critical to Nike's overall value on the market.

### ***3.2 The Commodity Shoe Fetish***

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Nike came under scrutiny for the brutal and exploitative labor conditions in its sweatshops in Asia. Organizers with the Students for Sweatshops movement ventured to expose the conditions of the production of the shoe.<sup>12</sup> They sought, as Marx put it, to show that "the mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things."<sup>13</sup> Through campaigns against the sweatshops, activists tried to force other people to realize that the objects they cherished were actually made by exploited workers, including children, under horrible conditions.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Liza Featherstone, *Students against Sweatshops* (London: Verso, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 164-5.

<sup>14</sup> Featherstone, *Students against Sweatshops*.

In other instances, activists and scholars have sought to uncover and trace social relationships that global capitalism often endeavors to make invisible. This has sometimes meant returning to “the things themselves,” as Sidney Mintz did with sugar in *Sweetness of Power*.<sup>15</sup> In his formative work, Mintz traces the production and consumption patterns of sugar, showing how it evolved from a rare luxury item to become a common part of life. Many have followed this methodology and shown that ethnography has the ability to point out incongruous values given to certain commodities, and values people expect from these commodities, amid transnational networks.

Thinking about the murky terrains through which commodities are produced has led to critical insight into the forms of exploitation, injustices, and maltreatment, and to uncovering aspects of *supply chains capitalism*. Field research, especially that which is multi-sited, opens up ways of rethinking the relations that exist when places of production are spatially disparate from profit generating spaces, in transnational capitalism.<sup>16</sup> Shoe companies in particular have lent themselves to ready examples of these types of exploitation, and anthropological work has provided keen insights into the lives of workers who produce certain commodities in poor working conditions. Veronica Redini, for example, has turned to thinking through how footwear, although manufactured in Romania, is still marketed and branded as “Italian,” allowing for a formation of global value changes that demonstrate how concealment is an important part of the profit making process.<sup>17</sup> Not only do the Romanian workers who actually produce the shoes watch consumers understand them as Italian products, they are also precluded from owning these shoes once they are on the market, because their wages are not high enough.

---

<sup>15</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Tsing, Anna. “Supply Chains and the Human Condition.” *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. XXI, no. 2, 2009, pp. 148-176.

<sup>17</sup> Veronica Redini, “Commodity Fetishism Again. Labour, Subjectivity and Commodities in ‘Supply Chains Capitalism,’” *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (November 1, 2018): 353–62, <https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0032>.

Feminist scholars have pointed out the ways in which women’s labor has been exploited in this transnational schema even more so. Aihwa Ong, for instance, has noted how people are obligated into forms of “flexible citizenship” to work for low wages in Asian factories producing Nike shoes.<sup>18</sup> Jane Collins, too, importantly points out the ways that ideologies of gender and ethnicity can be crucial to the political strategies that employers use to recruit and oversee a low-cost efficient labor force.<sup>19</sup> And others have written ethnographies detailing the ways that women are real value producers, working to create products for mass consumption, often at unquestionably low wages – be it electronics from China, roses from Kenya, or tea from India.<sup>20</sup>

However, there is less research on how women workers contribute to the value of commodities through a newer “human economy” – one that is centered on the consumption of performances and services, rather than the production of materials.<sup>21</sup> The ability for corporations to excel in this kind of transnational economy depends on their ability to speed up production, and more recently, invest in branding that enables consumers to establish “emotional ties.” These ties are often dependent on mass consumers getting a glimpse into the lives of those sponsored by the company.<sup>22</sup> Certainly, studies of workers who toil in factories around the world, making both Nike shoes and the materials for different parts of the shoes, should yield to studies aimed at reducing the “phantom-like objectivity” of commodities. At the same time, we need to consider how less traceable

---

<sup>18</sup> Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Lou Collins, *Threads: Gender, Labor, and Power in the Global Apparel Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Ngai Pun, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, [NC]: Hong Kong: Duke University Press; Hong Kong University Press, 2005); Megan A. Styles, *Roses from Kenya: Labor, Environment, and the Global Trade in Cut Flowers*, Culture, Place, and Nature (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019); Besky, *The Darjeeling Distinction*; Mythri Jegathesan, *Tea and Solidarity: Tamil Women and Work in Postwar Sri Lanka*, Decolonizing Feminisms (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Keith Hart, ed., *The Human Economy: A Citizen’s Guide*, Reprinted (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where All of Life Is a Paid-for Experience* (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000).

and quantifiable elements of the capitalist mode of production use existing inequalities to reproduce images and emotional connections to brands.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that these new super shoes are scientifically reported to enhance running economy – not only the ability to save energy while running in races, but the ability to recover faster from hard training sessions – means that having access to them *by* running fast, enables one to run even *faster*. The convergence of the scientific expertise behind these shoes, and the emotional connections to the shoes that athletes help to provide, serves as the basis for understanding both how the athletes create value for the shoes, and how shoe companies come to value athletes as well. There is an essential friction in this nexus, in which athletes’ abilities to produce value for both themselves and the company is uneven to begin with, but also deeply imbricated. Anna Tsing encapsulates this friction well, in her ethnography of the same name: “In fact, motion does not proceed this way at all. How we run depends on what shoes we have to run in.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, as athletes fight to get a pair of shoes, certain pathways open up and create a relative ease of movement, but at the same time, the value-producing structures to which athletes contribute limit and predetermine directions and places people and capital can travel.

### ***3.3 Nike comes to Addis***

In January 2020, I arrived to Meganana – a central hub in Addis Ababa – long before daybreak. Like every other Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, dozens of athletes in the training group awoke to multiple alarms before 5 AM, to take public transport from our respective neighborhoods to Meganana. Selamawit, a young woman, newer to the training group, arrived wearing the same orange tattered Adidas she did every day, to board the bus with 15 other athletes on the way to Akaki. When the bus arrived at 5 AM, the athletes who came early were sitting on small scraps of

---

<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 128.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

paper under the building owned by Ethiopian running legend, Haile Gebreselassie. We stood up and boarded the bus in a tired silence.



**Figure 9: Service Bus we often took to training sessions.**

Other than a few homeless people sleeping on street corners, the streets were dark and empty, as they often are in Addis Ababa before daybreak. By 7 AM, Meganana begins bustling and stays chaotic until about 10 PM, a time during which it is impossible to take a few steps without bumping into other pedestrians. I tried to remind myself, on days when it was particularly hard to get out of bed so early, that I would get to see Meganana in this rare light.

Akaki, by contrast, is a district south of Addis Ababa in the Oromia region known among athletes for its dirt roads. Once or twice per week the training group would convene in one of two places in Akaki, depending on whether the training was focused on speed – fast intervals with short rest – or long distance – runs up to 35 kilometers. The dirt roads are a red clay color, and the undulating hills have beautiful views of a wide range of crops – greens, wheat, and Ethiopia’s staple, *teff*. It is a beautiful place to train with fresh and clean air, and the slightly softer surface reduces the impact of training on the bones and joints.





**Figure 10: Flat training section in Akaki.**

The January 2020 morning was different; three Nike representatives were in town and came to watch the group training. Normally, the East African Sports Marketing Nike Representatives visit Ethiopia once or twice per year. But this visit had a dual purpose. Beyond the standard annual visit, to go over contracts and maintain a presence with the athletes, two shoe developers had come along to do some product testing with the top-level athletes on the latest Nike super shoe.

### **3.3.1 Group Tiers**

The ESMM training group is big, and athletes come from different tiers. At the top of the group are the athletes with Nike contracts. Some of these athletes have just run impressive debut marathons and others have represented Ethiopia in the Olympics and World Championships more than once. These athletes each have individual contracts with Nike that guarantee them biannual bags of facility – training clothes, racing kit, and shoes – and yearly salaries with varying levels of bonuses and reductions.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Sponsorship companies, in particular Nike, often have “reductions” built into their contracts. Reduction clauses allow sponsors to cut, or reduce, payments, when athletes do not perform a certain amount of times or up to a certain standard. In the following chapter I explain more about how these can be legal but duplicitous forms of arrange labor relations.



**Figure 11: Top tier contract athletes, with full facility and early edition of Nike super shoes.**

Another tier of the athletes have signed contracts with the management company, but agents have not yet negotiated a deal with Nike. However, the management company considers this tier of athletes part of the development group. ESMM has a deal with Nike where they sign the athletes with the agency, and then have a budget (it was about \$300,000 per year when I was there) to buy these developing athletes shoes and clothes. However, these athletes are not guaranteed any set amount of facility by Nike, nor do they have a contracted salary. Yet, their loyalty to the brand provides potential opportunities for racing and future contracts.

Finally, there is another group of athletes who have either been invited to train with the group, or have asked to train with the group, and have been accepted by the head coaches. These athletes have no real affiliation, but may have shown some promise in government clubs, and come to the training regularly. They do not get any gear from the agency, and train in what they already have, with the hopes of getting signed at some point.

Selamawit, for example, is from the Amhara region and was scouted by one of the management's members at a club competition in the previous year. She moved to Addis Ababa to train with the top-level group, showing potential there. However, like many athletes coming from

clubs, she had not yet adjusted to the grueling marathon training session. She often finished early, foregoing the last few repetitions, as she adjusted to the sheer number of kilometers she was now running. That said, she would still brave the dark and scary streets of Addis Ababa in the middle of the night to make the 5 AM bus in whatever shoes she had.

While most of the contracted athletes (but not all) wear Nike gear on a regular basis, the second and third tier athletes often do not – or they wear a mix of brands. Many of the second and third tier athletes have collected a mix of used shoes and clothes over the years, and train in what they own. I do not think I have ever seen an unsponsored athlete wearing a piece of clothing or a pair of shoes that has not been noticeably used. Unlike the top tier athletes, second and third tier athletes do not have cars and chauffeurs. They live in training camps or rent houses around Addis Ababa, and they are the ones who meet in Meganana to take the service bus. And they frequently lament how difficult it is to train in old shoes.

On regular training days, wearing other brands poses no problem for the coaches or athletes (other than the fact that photographs of brands other than Nike are not allowed on the agency's social media platforms). But on this day, when the Nike representatives would be there, the coaches told athletes to not come to the training in any clothes other than Nike.

### **3.3.2 The Shoe Ruling**

When we arrived in Akaki shortly after 6 AM, and the athletes begin piling off the bus, one of the coaches approached a few of the athletes and whispered in their ears. They were told to get back on the bus or leave the training for the day because the Nike representatives could not see them because they were not in Nike gear and think they were allowed to train with the group. So, Selamawit and a few of the third-tier athletes went off and did a different training on different roads for that day.

A warm-up ensued and everyone did their exercises in perfect fashion looking sharp in their matching swooshes. Two of the Nike shoe developers – avid runners themselves – joined for the training in the black prototypes that all the athletes were eying. The other developer rode in one of the support cars and observed the athletes, asking the head of the management about a select few and how their training was going.

Still not running much from a nagging IT Band injury I had at the time, I sat in the back seat of the car as the agent and the marketing director discussed a range of topics – oscillating between conversations about the athletes – “See this third woman. She’s your next big woman. She’s running London this year” – quickly to other topics, like upscale travel – “The hotel in the Rabat Diamond League is incredible. The food is amazing, but they are thinking about switching to a boutique hotel.”

They spoke candidly about the problems with contracts and athletes’ knowledge of the business. The agent, Hussein, then solemnly turned and told the Nike marketer: “The biggest challenge we face here is from the husbands. Husbands are a big problem. They don’t let us work freely, it’s really frustrating.”

Jack, the Nike Africa sports marketing representative, interjected to agree: “Husbands and boyfriends are the worst things for female athletes.”

But finally, they got around to the main reason they were there – the shoes.

Hussein eventually asked Jack about whether they were going to be ok with the new World Athletics regulations. Jack seemed confident: “I think we’re gonna be ok. They’re going to come up with something, but I think the ones we have coming out now will be fine.”

The week that Nike visited happened to coincide with a highly anticipated ruling from World Athletics about shoe regulations. Like the Air Jordan shoes, there was a great deal of discussion regarding whether the shoes were going to be banned from competition. Journalists and non-Nike athletes had been citing IAAF regulation 143.2, which states that shoes “must not be constructed as

to give athletes any unfair assistance or advantage.”<sup>26</sup> Both track fans and pundits of the sport were starting to believe that Nike athletes had an unfair advantage over other sponsored athletes, who were contractually obligated to wear their sponsor’s (inferior) shoes. This also seemed to help Nike’s shoe sales and popularity in the global market, with recreational runners willing to spend the \$250 to lower their personal best times in 5Ks and marathons. However, those who were sponsored by other companies argued a continued lack of fairness in the sport. Ultimately, the shoes would be deemed acceptable, which would further bolster sales.

Many considered Nike’s marketing brilliant, despite people also likening the shoes to a mechanical form of cheating. Never had the sport seen such a centered discussion on a particular type of shoe. Some of the controversy, and Nike’s general marketing strategy, seemed to capitalize on the persisting debates, mirroring trends in late-capitalist business in which anything can be commodified – in this case, even controversy.<sup>27</sup>

Nike has benefitted from a form of value creation that rests upon it upending governing rules within and beyond state institutions – something it has been unapologetic about since its inception. In his ethnography about Coca Cola, Robert Foster notes that value creation also involves the evaluative work of consumers, with extraction of surplus value, in addition to the deployment of labor power, relying on capturing “use values attributed to products by consumers.”<sup>28</sup> Corporations can co-opt powers of governing institutions (relevant in the case of athletics in as it pertains to the international governing body of running) to provide goods and services that the state cannot. The athlete-consumers, in this case, only care if the shoes are banned insofar as it effects their performance and see their ability to get the shoe as an advantageous necessity. Simultaneously, a

---

<sup>26</sup> Sean Ingle, “No record is safe with IAAF posed to allow arms race in shoes to run and run,” *The Guardian*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2019/oct/21/shoes-nike-world-records-technology>

<sup>27</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 11. printing in paperback, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Robert John Foster, *Coca-Globalization: Following Soft Drinks from New York to New Guinea*, 1st ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

broader consumer public may thrive upon this controversy, supporting the Nike brand that pushes the limits of sport, performance, and drama.

The shoe analysis and ruling also made clear just how powerful Nike is in the global economy of running. The newest version of the Nike shoe had a stack height of 39.5 millimeters.<sup>29</sup> The WA regulation unveiled in early 2020 dictated that all new shoes would need to be no more than 40 millimeters – a move, which several pundits indicated had to do with Nike’s overall financial power and influence in the sport – in the way that Nike funds federations, coaches, and athletes. This broadly seemed like an acceptance of Mark Fisher’s notion of capitalist realism within the sport – a mindset in which it is easier to imagine the end of the world rather than the end of capitalist dominance.<sup>30</sup> More specifically, in this case, it certainly seemed more realistic to imagine the end of a notion of “fair play” than it was to reckon with the underlying dynamics of capitalist enterprise.

After the training session, we returned to the starting spot and the athletes, exhausted from the training and stretches, meandered back to their cars to vigorously wash themselves with water they brought in small jerry cans. One athlete pours handfuls of water into another athlete’s cupped hands, and they use it to clean their face, legs, and arms, as best as possible. Athletes often joke about this type of washing – calling it a “*shle* shower” (a type of shower prostitutes are said to take) – but before they embark on hour-long journeys home, they want to feel as clean as possible. Then, they changed their clothes and gather around for the post-session meeting.

After most training sessions, the coaches give a post-training pep talk and some instruction for the days ahead. But since the Nike team was present, the floor was given to the sports marketing representative, Jack. Jack thanked everyone and told them he was happy to be there visiting for the few days and how excited Nike was to work with this group, and then he opened the floor up to

---

<sup>29</sup> Stack height is the term used by industry experts to refer to the amount of material between your foot and the ground.

<sup>30</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

questions. A member of the Ethiopian staff most fluent in English stood at the front of the group and translated the impromptu question and answer session.

Immediately Dejene, the husband of a top woman athlete, raised his hand: “When are Kipchoge’s shoes coming to Ethiopia?” And everyone laughed.

### ***3.3.3 Lemegzat weis lemeshet? (To buy or to sell?)***

A few months earlier, on Saturday, October 12, 2019, Kenyan Eliud Kipchoge was preparing to break the two-hour marathon barrier in Vienna, Austria. On that same morning, the ESMM training group met in Sendafa – a town just east of the city limits for a hard training run. The coach used the event as motivation for the run, “If Kipchoge can break two today, then we can run a fast 35 (kilometers).”

Selamawit, then, in her orange Adidas shoes – clearly from a bygone era and on the verge of falling apart – added under her breath, “with the shoes.”

Selamawit’s understandable frustration gets at a type of alienation that should be counterintuitive to the work in sport. Athletes, especially runners who are often very in touch with their bodies and their athletic ability, are also in touch with the speed that they produce. However, they can become completely alienated from other products brought to the international athletics market – shoes – so much so that the very objects they help to bring value to are completely out of reach. Further, once signed as professional athletes, they often do not understand that they are in the market of helping to *sell* the shoes.

I usually trained in a brand of shoes – HOKAs – which I had been wearing since 2014. Later on during fieldwork, Selamawit asked me what type of shoes they were. HOKAs have a distinctive style, often with a significant stack height but a unique curvature along the bottom of the shoe, that one athlete used to joke, resembled a boat. But, more significantly, they are not one of the two brands that sponsor Ethiopian athletes.

She asked me if they were also for *athletes* – meaning professional runners – rather than just *civil* – people who work for a living but may run on the side, and who are almost always foreigners. I explained that Hoka, along with other brands, sponsor athletes in the U.S., and that there are a lot more options for sponsorship opportunities with different brands in the U.S. As our conversation evolved into one about shoes more generally, I mentioned that shoe companies look at athletes as people who “sell shoes.”

Taking this as an opportunity to get insight into how she viewed her role in the value creation of shoes, I posed the question about brands: *Min mawek yifellegalu?* “What do they want to know?” *Endet athletoch lemesbet yichellalu?* “How can the athletes sell shoes?”

Selamawit corrected me, thinking I had erred in my Amharic. *Megzat?* She asked? You mean, “How can athletes buy shoes?”

This encapsulated so much of the obscured relations of production embedded in this shoe and sponsorship driven economy. Athletes, especially from Ethiopia, often take much longer to learn that, in pursuit of being fast enough to get access to the highest shoe technology, they end up being subsumed into the value creation process of the shoe companies as well. And women, until Kipchoge’s preeminence became well known and understood, did not understand the gendered lack of opportunities that constrained them.

In Margot Weiss’ book *Techniques of Pleasure*, she writes about how *technological prostheses* – the exchanges between bodies, subjects, techne, and toys produce *body in play* “that is simultaneously divided into parts and extended through objects, both produced and transformed through consumption.”<sup>31</sup> Weiss works with SM practitioners who spend their time, money, and energy becoming professional, and understanding their preparation as work. Consuming the latest

---

<sup>31</sup> Margot Danielle Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 104.



technological prosthetics to make them better workers too, owning toys, makes the notion of “consumer knowledge” important; this includes how a prosthetic aids in blood flow, body temperature, weight and pressure, tendons and connective tissue. According to Weiss, consumption becomes productive as people become practitioners with a sense of collective belonging to the SM community “by developing such technical and bodily knowledge and buying and using toys.” However, such belonging is limited to those who have the material means to participate. Weiss steps in the complicated tensions that exist among practitioners, who stress about their social relations surrounding the products they want to buy to better their labor. She argues that formulations of measured value “allow us to depart from the more one-sided understanding of bodily commodification as necessarily alienating, or productive of a violent dehumanization.”<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, runners have become increasingly aware of how technological prostheses they desire – shoes – enhance running economy in that it betters their training, recovery, and ability to run fast. But having access to the shoes induces stresses about the sociocultural dynamics of running economy as well. It not only reinforces tiered dimensions of sociality (which I’ll address more fully in the final chapter) but also their understanding of how value production works in the running economy.

*Aiyedllehum*, I said, thinking and reaffirming my Amharic. *Mesbet*. “No, to sell.”

### ***3.4 Gendered Employment***

In 2016, Nike embarked on what became a multi-year campaign for a new era of shoe technology. It began with the promotion and occurrence of a staged event, *Breaking2*, wherein the corporation funded an effort to break the two-hour barrier for the marathon.<sup>33</sup> The event was staged

---

<sup>32</sup> Weiss, 129.

<sup>33</sup> The two hour marathon barrier encapsulated the minds of running fans and athletes for years long before it was broken. Similar to the four minute barrier in the marathon, broken by Roger Bannister in 1954. These two important markers developed immense intrigue, speculation, excitement, and investment. For more, see Caesar 2015.

in Monza, Italy, on May 6, 2017, and would employ a team of professional pacemakers, who would run around a race car track, and have the additional assistance of a wind-buffering vehicle displaying a large time clock. Also, for the event, the three African athletes – Kenya’s Eliud Kipchoge, Eritrea’s Zersenay Tadese, and Ethiopia’s Lelisa Desisa – would be wearing a new shoe – the Vapor Fly Elite.

Kipchoge is arguably one of the greatest distance runners of all time, but as noted in a documentary about the event, it was not only previous performances upon which the athletes’ selection was based; most important, was how much *potential* they showed – all three men had remarkably impressive *running economy*. After vetting many athletes, Nike flew all the participants to their lab in Oregon to test them on their oxygen uptake, form, and economy. They needed to be efficient athletes, with the highest potential to complete the task. While it was an unlikely feat, Eliud Kipchoge came close – closer than many expected. He finished in 2:00:25, which meant that the two-hour barrier was closer in reach than many had suspected.

Because of the performance, the shoes, which later retailed to the public for \$250 and were renamed the Nike Vaporfly 4%, arrived center stage. Scientific studies indicated that the shoes increased running economy up to 4%, not only providing comfort, but making the athletes even more efficient runners. Some were up in arms that the shoes were destroying running, as so many of the top times of the next years were performed by athletes wearing the shoes. In the meantime, the hundreds of thousands around the world that run marathons not in the elite field, but for fun, were increasingly donning the futuristic neon footwear.

Many of the recreational runners purchasing the shoes could not have named the athletes selected for the competition, except perhaps for the famed Kipchoge. While the marketing of the shoes was powerful, and Nike loyalists and enthusiasts were quick to buy in, what sold many recreational athletes on the quality of the shoe was that it was actually an advantageous product –

however, that it was made advantageous because of the grueling work of African athletes was not a connection made by many.

A few years later and a few months into my fieldwork in 2019, the next attempt at the two-hour marathon barrier came to fruition. The event would center entirely around Kipchoge, and while Nike would continue to play a prominent role, the occasion was also funded by Ineos – a petrochemical company run by Jim Ratcliffe.<sup>34</sup> In the two-year interregnum leading up to the second act, Nike had released a new shoe – first known as the 5%, and eventually called the Next %. This piece of footwear, which would be worn by all the pacemakers, and had been worn in marathons worldwide, again was reportedly increasing running economy even more. And just as it was becoming important for avid marathoners to buy the shoes to get their personal bests, it was creating logistical nightmares for Nike representatives, agents, coaches, and athletes, working in Ethiopia. These newer Nike shoes – in bright pink and bright green – were seen to possess near-magical and vital qualities for the athletes. They were, as Coach Moges told me more than once at 5 AM, causing big problems among the athletes.

After the training session, on the day Kipchoge was attempting to break the two-hour barrier, the athletes and coaches were crowding around live streams on smart phones – many of which did not work with the poor data connection – and were piling into their cars to go home. On this day, too, I got a ride home from Coach Moges, where he directed me to keep the stream going as long as I could, draining all of my phone credit. Many of the pacers for the event were Ethiopian athletes, and the gendered disparities of this opportunity would later be articulated to me by both women like Selamawit, who could not get a hold of the shoes at all, and also by women who were at

---

<sup>34</sup> Ineos has spent over £400 million on sporting enterprises, despite the fact that its business is focused on supplying plastics, paints, and medicines, from a collection of offshore gas fields and refineries. By putting on spectacular events in sports, some have criticized the company for attempting to greenwash its image of environmental degradation and boost the value of its own image. Thus, while the analysis here focuses on Nike, it is important to show the various capital interests – even those as evil as the oil industry – make their way and produce value through sport. See: Murad Ahmed and Michael Pooler, “Ineos: why Jim Ratcliffe is mixing petrochemicals and sports,” *Financial Times*, March 15, 2020.

the top in the sport, but paid less to win high level races than the pacemakers who ran a fifth of the marathon distance on this particular day. Ethiopian women runners spoke for weeks thereafter about what a male-oriented event this was; so many Ethiopian men would return with cash from their pacing duties, and at least one new pair of shoes harnessing the latest technologies.

When Kipchoge was just past half-way through, Coach Moges applauded him as if he had already finished. “This is amazing,” he said, several times over. But Kipchoge, unlike his world class pacemakers clad in the pink Next % shoes, was wearing a *different* shoe. An even *newer* prototype, almost comically large, that Nike was calling the Alpha Fly. It was made especially for the event and was causing quite the controversy as well. On Tuesday, when we reconvened for training, the athletes were in awe of Kipchoge’s performance, but the athlete’s all agreed on the ultimate deciding factor: it’s gotta be the shoes.

### **3.4.1 *Chama New* (It’s gotta be the shoes)**

Dejene is often the first person to ask questions in any forum, and he likes to be provocative. He especially jumps into the spotlight when foreigners are around and likes to practice and showcase his limited English. He is incredibly proud of his wife, Tsehay’s accomplishments, and sees himself as playing a big role, but also does not let people forget that he, too, was a top tier athlete. And he likes to get a laugh out of athletes and friends during tense training times.

This was probably a small part of his intention when he asked Jack during the open forum: “When are Kipchoge’s shoes coming to Ethiopia?”

Jack probably anticipated this question, and told the group, “We have some prototypes here that we’ll be testing with the athletes tomorrow, and it depends on size, but we will leave some pairs here with you. We expect them to be available for the spring marathons.” After his diplomatic answer, he shifted his body to indicate he would be taking more questions.

A male athlete, Berhanu, raised his hand: “I’ve seen some reports on social media about the shoes being banned. I’m wondering if we are going to be allowed to wear them.”

Jack responded: “Yes, those are some rumors, but we expect that the new ruling from WA will allow the shoes to be worn.”

Berhanu then asked a follow up: “Some other companies, like Adidas, offer three-year contracts. They also don’t get reductions. Why do we only get contracts for one year and they can change so much from year-to-year?”

Jack’s response was business-like, as he essentially dodged the meat of the question: “We handle each athlete on a case-by-case basis, and no two contracts are the same.”

Back to the topic of shoes, Berhanu asked a third question: “Sometimes we don’t get the shoes in time for the races. Are we going to have access to the shoes?”

Jack replied, “The shoes will be available, and we are going to work to get them to you as quickly as possible.”

This choppy and nervous confrontation makes the dual nature of commodity fetishism present in the shoes – as well as the gendered implications of working in this transnational capitalist market – expressly clear. First, it emphasized how much importance the athletes had been bestowing upon these new racing shoes the past few years – thinking, as Coach Moges said, “without these shoes, they cannot run well.” At the same time, it links together the shoes and their production to a powerful and corporate-driven sporting industry, and that the athletes are indeed producing value for the company, but not being appropriately equipped with protections and compensations in their contracts.

The day when the Nike team attended the training session was a rare instance in which Nike representatives are actually present and face-to-face with Nike athletes, and it also demonstrated the

ways women athletes' voices can, and often are, filtered through a range of male actors. Dejene was expected to be the voice of his wife, whereas the men athletes were expected to speak for themselves. Jack and Hussein earlier agreed that boyfriends and husbands are troublesome for the sponsors and the management; but for the women athletes, and I will touch on this in Chapter 5, this kind of support is seen as a vital protection, problematic as it can become.

### **3.4.2 Distribution**

The following day the contracted athletes were told to come to the office throughout the day to try on the new shoes. In the main office, the head of the management and head coach were engaged in biannual meetings with some of these athletes to discuss their contracts, concerns, and future trajectories. Within a hectic office, afloat with activity, I was enlisted to help translate between athletes and the Nike shoe developers as they explained the new shoe specs to the athletes and listened to their feedback.

Because the shoes were all in prototype form and not yet finished in their entirety, the Nike team did not bring half sizes, knowing that some of the athletes would not have their ideal size to try on. I translated some of the new specs of the new shoes several times for the athletes. The main difference in this newer model, I was told to explain, is the Zoom Air Pods, which the shoe experts believed would not only give back more energy with each step, but also would help to augment any negative affects windy conditions might elicit. There was also a new knitted material – the Atomknit – which should be more comfortable for a range of shoe sizes and foot types.

When I asked if anyone had questions, there was only one: “When do I get to use the shoes?” The answer was that it depended on the shoe sizes of the athletes and how many pairs will be available – but if they did not walk home with a set that day or the next, the Nike group would be sending the prototypes through management as soon as possible.

Given the logistical nightmare that is getting shoes to Ethiopia, the athletes were rightfully concerned. Of the twenty-plus athletes trying on the shoes, not a single person requested a half-size.

At one point another office staff member joked in Amharic: *Lela temokriyallesb?* (Do you want to try another)? No. *Gemesb temokriyallesb?* (Do you want to try a half?) No. *Ergetenya nesh?* Are you sure? Yes. *Rub temokriyallesb?* (Do you want to try a quarter?). No, the athlete responded immediately, before realizing that the question itself was a joke, and sharing a nervous laugh thereafter.

Even when the Nike shoe developers encouraged them to try on the size lower or higher, to see if a half size could potentially be more comfortable, not a single athlete complied. They all said the size they had on was best, likely hoping that if they did not take off the shoes, they might be able to wear them straight home. In fact, most of the athletes, when encouraged to do a few laps around the building, barely jogged so much as ten meters before coming back and hoping their enthusiasm would land them a pair of shoes. They were convinced. It's gotta be the shoes.

Meanwhile, one athlete who had won several races in the past, but whose performance had dropped in the past few years, requested a meeting in the office with the head of the management and the coach on that day. In an adjacent room, I overheard her boyfriend lamenting that she was not invited to try on the new shoes. Also, they were complaining about her dwindling appearance moneys and decreased racing opportunities in recent years. With her boyfriend doing most of the talking, Hussein eventually lost his cool:

“You don't understand how things have changed. You're not the athlete you used to be. You've run 2:27? Who cares? No one cares any more. You're not fast enough. Of course, I want to give you a Nike contract and give you the deals you used to have, but you have to understand the market has changed. You need to run *faster* to get these offers – to get these shoes.”

Later in the day, Hussein noted that the standards for time and speed had changed and were continuing to change so rapidly because of the shoes. What used to be an impressive time that could lead to more racing opportunities, a shoe contract, and better bonuses, was changing. Times once considered impressive, especially for women athletes, were no longer of import, and the material consequences were severe. But to many athletes, it was illogical. How can you run faster, in order to get the shoes, without wearing the shoes in the first place?

### ***3.5 Speeding up Speed***

In summer of 2019, I was in Utica, New York, serving as the athlete representative for a few ESMM athletes at the Boilermaker 15k Road Race. Hiwot had come from Ethiopia to run two road races – a 10k the week before in Atlanta – and was staying with me at the agency guest house in Pennsylvania the week leading up to the race. After spending five days together, I picked up the other runners from the Philadelphia airport and drove to the race, the evening before the competition.

I got to know Hiwot well that week, driving her to training grounds to prepare for the competition and shopping malls to buy gifts for her home and family members. She was born in Gondar, Ethiopia, and became a world-class athlete. Hers is a case of someone whose life has been transformed – materially and emotionally – through athletics. However, as much as she was someone who had achieved high levels of success on the track – appearances at the World Championships and Olympic Games – she also demonstrated how the seeming riches of athletics might not last long.

Her house in Addis Ababa, I later came to see in the fall, was big and impressive by most standards. Trophies, medals, and other mementos from top tier races surrounded an enormous flat screen television. She and her husband, also an athlete but of a far lower caliber, even have a separate room in their house that they used to give each other massages. But she always felt they were on the verge of losing it all.



In the days leading up to the race, I took Hiwot to some nice running trails in Pennsylvania, tagging along on her slow days. “I want to run the marathon now,” she said. “I was really injured for over one year, and I’m getting older, so I need to move up in distance.<sup>35</sup> Besides, all of the money is on the roads.” She talked about money every day that week. “If I win one marathon then I can have a baby,” she said, “then maybe come back to running.” Time was ticking.

The evening before most races, race directors convoke a mandatory technical meeting. There the organizers go over all the following day’s logistics. They will talk about when athletes need to report for a bus if there is transportation to the start, what time the race will begin, go over the map of the course, and explain post-race procedures for podium finishers, drug testing, and anything else that may be relevant. They also usually overview the prize money and bonus structure. I took notes during the meeting so that I would not forget to translate any useful information. When the meeting was complete, I repeated the instructions for the next morning’s race, in Amharic, to both the ESMM athletes at the race and some other Ethiopians represented by other companies. Then, we turned to look at the prize money. For the open race the breakdown was:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Place \$7,000
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Place \$4,000
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Place \$2,500
- 4<sup>th</sup> Place \$1,500
- 5<sup>th</sup> Place \$1,250
- 6<sup>th</sup> Place \$1,000
- 7<sup>th</sup> Place \$900

---

<sup>35</sup> Athletes use the verb “to be sick” (*yetamem*) to speak about illness, injury, and pain. Sometimes people spoke of *bmem* (pain) in the context of fevers, stomach issues, or viruses. But they also used it to talk about athletic injury. However, its transitory nature was also used to maintain a sense of indeterminacy.

- 8<sup>th</sup> Place \$800
- 9<sup>th</sup> Place \$700
- 10<sup>th</sup> Place \$600

Beneath this was another list for the top American men and women:

- 1<sup>st</sup> American \$3,000
- 2<sup>nd</sup> American \$2000
- 3<sup>rd</sup> American \$1000
- 4<sup>th</sup> American \$750
- 5<sup>th</sup> American \$500

Hiwot turned to me and joked, “You should run tomorrow, you’ll win money!” The athletes scoured the sheet and continued to talk about how ridiculous the prize money was: “You can come in 11<sup>th</sup> place as an American and still win \$3,000.”

Indeed, the results emphasized this geopolitical unfairness. Hiwot finished 5<sup>th</sup> overall the following day, earning \$1,250, behind three Kenyans and one Ethiopian. Meanwhile, the top American finisher, over one minute behind Hiwot (a lifetime in the sport of running), walked away with \$4,000 - \$1000 for 6<sup>th</sup> place and an additional \$3,000 for being the top American finisher. Further, Hiwot would have a range of expenses deducted from her overall statement at the end of the two races – her flights to and from Ethiopia, transport to and from the race, and reimbursements for the food bought during her stay. She walked away barely net positive.

These unequal pay breakdowns have become more normal in the sport of running, and the Ethiopian athletes are keenly aware of their unfairness. On the side of sponsorship and race directors, the main reason is that “Ethiopian athletes “aren’t marketable.” The director of the New York City Marathon, among other prominent race directors I interviewed throughout fieldwork,

spoke at length with me about this. He noted that there are cultural reasons why he thought women were not as open with the press in New York, because getting dropped in the middle of a big city could be intimidating for anyone. He also, like so many people I spoke to during fieldwork, referenced the fact that Ethiopia's past as a country that was never colonized meant that Ethiopians did not learn English in schools, in comparison to the Kenyans. He added:

I spent a lot of time with [an Ethiopian athlete] and I still don't have a whole lot that humanizes him, other than that, you know, I've seen him eat a sandwich. So, if I can spend all this time with a guy and not really get to know him all that well, how can somebody who is just tuning into a three-hour tv broadcast for five minutes? How are they going to get to know him? And how are they going to care about his results? And what his next race is? And I think it's a problem we all need to think about.

This oft-cited lack of marketability has also resulted in only two shoe companies sponsoring Ethiopian athletes – Adidas and Nike. Shoe representatives elsewhere have noted that it just is not worth it for them, because the corporate sponsors have a hard time telling these athletes' stories.

The emphasis on storytelling was one that repeatedly came up throughout fieldwork. Agents and shoe representatives agreed that the athletes had good stories to tell but did not necessarily know how to do so. Though most would not cite structural or even overt racism as a part of this calculus, one agent did mention that many companies just considered it harder to “market any Black women to European audiences.” While it was true that African men, too, “did not resonate with consumer bases,” women athletes from Ethiopia in particular, who almost do not speak any English at all, were *especially* unmarketable.

However, I came to see what many Ethiopian women, and scholars of racial capitalism regularly point out: markets do not merely exacerbate inequality, they are also simultaneously *made by* inequalities. Jane Collins, for instance, noted in her writing about the organization of labor within the

global apparel industry, that ideologies of gender and ethnicity are crucial political strategies that employers use to recruit and administer a low cost and efficient labor force.<sup>36</sup> Even as many profiteers in the sport view their hands as tied – noting that there is an unfairness for African athletes, and women in particular – they operate under the liberal notion that the market is just the way it is. While many actors in the industry would agree that the lack of relative opportunity was somewhat unfair, few would admit that this nexus between shoe contracts, performance, and opportunity, was made and strengthened by existing inequalities within and outside of sport.

That Ethiopian athletes are effectively discriminated against by running pay structures relates to capitalism's connection with the speeding up and the compression of time itself. To get contracts and win high payouts, Ethiopian women must run *really, really* fast. As geographer David Harvey famously noted, the acceleration of time/space compression in the new post-Fordist regime (which began in the 1970s) heightened the amplification of time keeping and cartography globally, which have always been tools for immense value creation. As the increasing velocities of capitalism can speed up and intensify labor processes, Harvey argues that there is an illusion of an annihilation of space by time.<sup>37</sup> Because capital is interested in efforts to speed up production in the labor process, new frictions between workers and management can correspond. While the times of some athletes seem to be getting exponentially faster, and sales of certain Nike shoes are flying off the shelves, other athletes cannot even gain access to a pair. It is in these frictions and disputes between athletes and their sponsors where stratification of gender, race, and class, are capitalized upon and reproduced.

---

<sup>36</sup> Collins, *Threads*.

<sup>37</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford [England] ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1989).

Many theorists of capitalism have noted how speed, no matter for its danger and violence, is key to capital accumulation.<sup>38</sup> Anthropologist Jason Pine, for example, notes that it is not just capitalists who have access, or must try and harness the power of speed, but that we live in a world in which a high-speed loop of consumption-production-consumption means that speed “will colonize the body and render it nothing more than its vector.”<sup>39</sup> Just as Wall Street financiers are snorting cocaine, truck drivers adhering to the 24/7 economy might use other illicit stimulants to try and harness an embodied speed to survive in an accelerating marketplace.

For athletes, adhering to certain time barriers in their training and performance pushes them to follow suit. And crucially, the time barriers which have fueled the rise of this super shoe and raised expectations about some of the sport’s most-invested-in events, were opportunities and events only for men. From an employment perspective alone, the Breaking2 and Ineos 159 projects hired a great deal of male athletes – most of which were from East Africa – and no women athletes. Further, the emphasis on the two-hour marathon barrier along with these shoes generally favored men athletes for racing opportunities – and sponsorship deals – even more unequally than in past years. Ethiopian women find themselves doubly disadvantaged by the racialized and gendered economy of shoe commercialization.

---

<sup>38</sup> Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 2006 ed., Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2006); Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009); Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> J. Pine, “Economy of Speed: The New Narco-Capitalism,” *Public Culture* 19, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 357–66, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2006-041>.



**Figure 12: Men running and working at the Ineos 1:59 Challenge.**

While I will explore the ways in which women athletes push against homogenous times enforced by the industry in later chapters, it is important to keep in mind how the market privileges a corporate-issued time to benefit private capital sporting interests. In fact, women athletes experience, more than their own attempted temporal rhythms, the harms and violations that this homogenous time elicits in their material lives: fewer racing opportunities, precarious contracts, and collectively producing value for the shoes that, often, evade the grips of their soles.

When I was in the Ethiopian office a few months after the race in Utica, Hiwot, who had been training back in Ethiopia but was preparing for her debut marathon in Frankfurt, came to the Addis Ababa office to pick up the coveted Next % shoes after the ones she tried on at the morning's training session were too small. But when she tried the next size up, they were slightly too big. The office had yet to receive more shipments, and thus did not have the adequate half size. Frustrated, and disappointed, she left the office with only a few days before her marathon debut to break them in.

Her frustration was not directed at Nike – as it seldom is with the athletes. It was directed at the management group for not having what she needed – they were not delivering for her what she

needed to be successful. Her frustration was also fueled by the potential disadvantage she would have – not being able to run fast enough, compete with her competitors, and further bolster her earning value. Nike’s dual ability to avoid interaction with the athletes by displacing this social relationship and logistical task of getting the shoes to athletes (which are deeply intertwined) on the shoulders of the agents – but maintaining supreme control in distributing the shoes and contracts – thus makes it possible for the athletes to fetishize the shoes which they are both reliant on and produce value for.

Hiwot’s debut was impressive – she ran well under a time that many expected of her, and her time was faster than most athlete debuts. Still, it was not fast enough in this new market for Nike to turn heads, give her a higher contract, and offer more than one new pair of shoes for her next marathon. She needed to produce this speed for Nike first – then be granted its benefits of the carbon fibers, the air pods, and the high-grade foam after. But with her unmarketability, and her unexceptional time, such benefits would not yet be possible.

## 4. Mere Managers

Having bussed tables in a high-volume bar and grill, I thought I had reached an apex of hearing curse words traded in a work setting. However, sitting in a small office in a business complex for three months in West Chester, Pennsylvania, I heard more profanity than ever before.

“You’re not understanding the FUCKING business!” Hussein yelled, for at least the tenth time that week. Hussein is originally from Lebanon and was a strong 800-meter runner a few decades back. He “used running” to migrate to the U.S., where he began coaching, then slowly developing athletes, before beginning work as an athlete agent. He settled in West Chester after meeting his wife Kim, who briefly ran professionally, and grew up in the Eastern Pennsylvania town.

The office was modest. Four small rooms and a center hallway, not much bigger than an average seminar classroom. Yellow walls were somewhat dirtied with all the packages of shoes and clothes coming and going and rubbing up against the walls. Even though one room was reserved for shoes and facility, orange Nike shoe boxes lined other walls from floor to ceiling, due to the constant influx of facility. High up on the walls were portraits of top athletes represented by the agency – a few Olympic champions and many top world contenders. But it was hardly a place of celebration and jubilation, and far more often a confine of frustration. In a doctor’s office a few doors down, psychotherapy patients also heard the occasional screams of frustration coming from Hussein.

When I met Hussein, the founder and director of the agency, and Chris, the athlete relations manager – the U.S. contingent of ESMM – at their office in December of 2018, they were skeptical about my plan to do an internship with them before heading to Ethiopia for fieldwork.

“You *really* want to learn the business?” Hussein asked me in this makeshift interview, and then paused.

I said yes. I explained that I was there mostly to learn for my research, but that I thought I could be helpful as I spoke both English and Amharic – a language that neither of them had learned.



“I got to tell you, it can be an ugly, dirty, business,” he cautioned. “People see the victories, and the glamor, but most of it is a dirty business.”

Again, he made it clear that he thought I was in over my head. “Ethiopian athletes are not like other athletes. Working in Ethiopia is impossible. You tell them to go this way, and they go *all the way around this way*,” he said, doing a full 360 degree turn to emphasize just how bad he felt the athletes and the Ethiopian staff could be to deal with.

#### ***4.1 Strained Interdependence***

When it comes to running, few of the people I have met working in management share a linear path to the profession. Several were former athletes, a few had studied sports management, but the men “on the circuit” (and they were mostly men) came to athletics world from a vast array of backgrounds. Most viewed the line of work as illogical – an exhausting combination of travel, frustration, and logistical quagmires – for, relatively speaking in the sports business world, meager returns.

I knew that athletes held their own views of managers. At the most basic level, athletes knew that, without a manager, they had no chance of getting competitions outside Ethiopia (“*Ethiopia wuch*”) which was the main purpose of running. Athletes had told me stories of managers stealing their money, calling them *lebawoch* (thieves), and not following through after promising to give them competition opportunities. But some athletes told me stories about how managers completely saved their lives, or their friends’ lives. Many people, in fact, thought that I *was* a manager, or when they learned I was a student and studying sport, at least hoped I was in school to *become* one. They welcomed the idea of a better manager.

While I stood out during fieldwork – for speaking Amharic and being a woman, alone in the world of athletics in Ethiopia – my whiteness was not a complete anomaly. White people – *ferenjjs* – or foreigners, dominated the business side of world-class running. Chris told me, in some ways

correctly, that when people see us, “they only see dollar signs, and they see us as one.” Indeed, this happened at a regional competition in 2018 in Asella, Ethiopia. One of the top management companies sent their representative from the Netherlands – a well-known figure in the world of Ethiopian athletics – to the races. When some people found me sitting on the grass seats at the side of the track, they asked me why I was not standing next to my business partner.

Rather than embedding myself initially with a Dutch company, I ended up working at ESMM (one of the prominent U.S.-based offices) for the better part of one year, hoping to understand the myths and truths about the business of international athletics and better investigate the social dynamics that emerged between women athletes and their managers. This period started over the summer in 2019 and led into my time spent in Ethiopia into early 2020, with a few trips abroad to help at competitions and accompany an athlete to a doctor’s appointment in Europe. But, in many ways, it started earlier; time spent with amateur athletes in years past yielded much speculation about what managers did, whether or not they were good, and whether or not they stole athletes’ money. Thus, I was interested to see how the process worked, what athletes’ contracts and arrangements looked like from the administrative side, to observe how information was communicated, and to compare what I observed with how athletes understood another side of the business.

In the transnational athletics market, the relationship between managers and athletes is one of complex financial and social interdependence. Following recent discursive shifts in the roles of management and managers in capitalism, I argue that transnational athletics are a field where, contrary to expectations, managers themselves have a certain kind of precarious existence at the helm of capital accumulation. Elements of their working position makes it seem as though managers participate in the exploitation of athletes’ labor. Some view them as profiteers, because the athletes

are utterly dependent on them, in the current systems, to get a “chance” (*idil*) to run “outside” (*nuch*), and because managers take the fetishized abilities of the athletes to constitute their own value for shoe companies and race organizations.<sup>1</sup> But this is a misreading of their overall functionary role in the economy of running.

Through working in this business, managers develop multiple forms of relationships with athletes. Although managers enable shoe companies to continue profiting from the labor of the athletes without ever having to negotiate directly with their workers, such transnational and commission-based relationships also lead to transformations in class relations between managers and their athletes, and among athletes. The subcontracting of athlete agents, then, resembles so many other facets of supply-chains capitalism, wherein the outsourcing of various roles creates more distance between the workers and their employers and the means of production, in a legal framework.

When I was doing fieldwork, I heard of situations in which relationships went sour, and other instances in which these dynamics produced new understandings of kinship and social relations. These arrangements are often further complicated when athletes’ managers are their husbands and boyfriends, who often insert themselves into these negotiations. Many of the dynamics discussed here speak to the broader experiences of athletes – men and women – in Ethiopia. However, what further complicates women’s’ positions in these social and political spaces are the ways race, gender, and power are reconstituted, and continue to constitute, contractual relations.

In athletics, a manager’s job is to acquire contracts for athletes, act as their cultural and lingual translators, and help them get racing opportunities; they regard their role to be determining an athlete’s value in different times and contexts. Understanding the social relations that occur in

---

<sup>1</sup> I emphasize the notions of *idil* and *nuch* because these were the dominating principles of how Ethiopians spoke. Of course being good enough and fast enough was critical to go “outside,” also having some luck or chance – *idil* – by working with a good manager was seen as an important part of the equation.

transnational athletics also yields insights into contesting modes of work valuation. Thus, I also explore the contract as a form in which capitalism and the logics of the international sports market gain “licit” acceptance and are normalized as “common sense.”

If managers may profit from athlete labor, they do not own or control the means of production – neither the labor of the athletes nor the raw materials required to stage events. In principle, they are parasitic. The intense and emotional frictions that arise through this precariousness gives rise to the ways in which capital attempts to mask social relations of value. Managers cite athletes “not knowing their value” and thinking they are “worth more than the market suggests” as the reasons for their frustrations. Runners usually only have access to the English-speaking agents’ perspectives, who arrive to conversations already frustrated with the “athletes not understanding the business.” As a result, I witnessed countless miscommunications and arguments that revealed how these different roles further abstract the ways in which capital accumulates from the work of athletes.

But I argue that it is precisely through these “misunderstandings” that we can understand the profound unfairness and inequitable distribution of capitalism’s accumulation. Sometimes it was not a mere misunderstanding, but an active disagreement; while acting as a translator during negotiations, I have witnessed athletes turning to me and asking, “Do you think this is right? Do you think this is fair?” in Amharic.

Social relations emerge and change in the matrix of the global running business. While frustrations, arguments, and fights are part and parcel of the business, the deep intimacy that managers and athletes share, and the ways they sometimes become incorporated in one another’s lives, leads to multi year-long relationships between people who are not just economically – but emotionally, psychologically, and sometimes spiritually – linked. The language of kinship inundates these spaces and yields insight into the ways in which the lexicon of family is both used in capital relations to mask unfair relations, and to respond to new associations between parties as they meet

through this business. Managers often consider it imperative to incorporate gender norms into these casualized and familial relationships, so sexist and racist norms get reproduced by and through contractual and licit agreements.

## ***4.2 Fighting for Every Penny***

### **4.2.1 Guardians of Production**

Hussein sat at his desk, head in his hands, not yelling for once. “There’s just not enough money. The problem is that there’s just not enough money,” he repeated somberly. Dramatic changes in the ranking system of the athletics market was making it harder to secure opportunities for athletes. “Except for the top, top, top athletes,” he said, “the rest are just left with crumbs and peanuts.”

He had just come back from a summer track meet, sponsored by Nike, in Eugene, Oregon over the weekend. Many Nike-contracted athletes were obligated, by their contracts, to compete at the famous Prefontaine Classic, and several of them begrudgingly boarded flights from Addis Ababa to make the twenty-four-plus hour journey the west coast of the U.S.

Hussein mused that the athletes had been difficult all weekend, telling him that their contracts should be increased after impressive indoor performances. Complaining that they deserved higher bonuses. Or even just wanting more facility. The new contracts, however, would not be signed for several months, and Hussein, the day prior, in fits of rage, reiterated one of his classic enraged quips, “They don’t understand the FUCKING business! They think things just *happen*. Like I can make things fall from the sky. They have no idea how hard I fight Nike for *every penny*.” He said this, dreading a phone call to an athlete’s husband, where he would explain that it was not always *his decision* whether the husband’s wife would get a raise or a bonus. “They don’t understand that the manager can’t decide every little thing.” He cast himself, as Marx put it, as a “mere manager”:

Joint-stock companies in general (developed with the credit system) have the tendency to separate this function of managerial work more and more from the possession of capital, whether it is owned or borrowed ... But since on the one hand the functioning capitalist confronts the mere owner of capital, the money capitalist, and with the development of credit this money capital itself assumes a social character, being concentrated in banks and loaned out by these, no longer by its direct proprietors; and since on the other hand the mere manager, who does not possess capital under any title, neither by loan nor in any other way, takes care of all real functions that fall to the functioning capitalist as such, there remains only the functionary, and the capitalist vanishes from the production process as someone superfluous.<sup>2</sup>

This is a commonly cited passage about the role of the functionary which has been much debated. Clearly, however, Marx draws an important distinction between the capitalist and the functionary – in other words, the owner and manager. As the “capitalist vanishes” the manager – the “mere manager” – comes to stand in for the capitalist allowing him to vanish. What this often means in material reality is that the manager protects the capitalist from being seen in a negative light, or even being seen at all.

The changing conditions of capitalism and processes of production have led social scientists to rethink the role managers play in the capitalist economy. In *Managerial Capitalism: Ownership, Management, and Coming New Mode of Production*, Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy seek to revise Marx’s model of managerialism for these newer times.<sup>3</sup> According to Duménil and Lévy, managers’ wages are now often deemed commercial costs, which do not generate surplus value. The sheer amount of commercial costs mean that these wages *can* be much higher, creating a distinctly powerful

---

<sup>2</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 512.

<sup>3</sup> Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *Managerial Capitalism: Ownership, Management and the Coming New Mode of Production* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

class for the manager. Marx assumed a growing gap between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, but he did not anticipate the transition to powerful managerialism and indeed a middle-class. Duménil and Lévy argue that high-wage workers and managers have come to play a much more important role in capital accumulation than Marx predicted.

Duménil and Lévy posit that managers comprise a new ruling class living on wages, rather than capital – a sharp transition in the global economy – and this class that has seen the strongest gains. They rely on a great deal of quantitative data to make their points – namely, that over the course of the past 80 years, the income of the top one percent of the population has doubled. Specifically, they harp on the statistic that, in 1920, the one percent derived 40% of their income from wages and now, they derive 80% from their wages. Thus, Duménil and Lévy’s provocation is for the working class to work more closely with the managers, and fight to ally with them in a battle for power. However, for a select few, capital continues to outpace even these significant shifts in wage increases.

In some cases, managers indeed do have the power to set their own remuneration and manage budgets accordingly, but this is hardly the rule. Economist Thomas Piketty has called these “supermanagers” who may work closely with the interest of CEOs and capitalists, but Piketty still argues that capital plays a more central role in accruing wealth.<sup>4</sup> Further, the role of the managers is variable. For example, managers of retail stores or global chains (the Gap, Starbucks, even Amazon warehouses), are certainly not involved in discussions about their own remuneration, and often have salaries not much higher than the employees that they supervise. In short, while the growth of managerial wealth may be significant, the capitalist class has hardly yielded control in broader strokes.

---

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Das Kapital im 21. Jahrhundert*, trans. Ilse Utz and Stefan Lorenzer, 2. Auflage in C.H.Beck Paperback, C.H. Beck Paperback 6236 (München: C.H. Beck, 2018).

For their part, anthropologists doing work across classed, racial, gendered, and national boundaries have shown that the terms and positions of workers and managers are constantly shifting.<sup>5</sup> Rofel and Yanagisako use the cases of Italy and China to explore how transnational divisions of capital and labor can illuminate how the relations between managers and workers are negotiated across spatial, cultural, and gendered lines. Their book, *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism*, uses Marxist analyses to understand how labor power – the capacity to work – was produced among managers working in Chinese and Italian fashion.<sup>6</sup> Rofel and Yanagisako’s fieldwork with Italian and Chinese managers elucidated the ways in which transnational capitalism is “a historically situated form of social interdependence in which culturally specific actors produce selves, forms of labor, along with commodities, all of which are mediated by the form of this social interdependence.”<sup>7</sup>

The managers, in the realm of fashion production, appropriated the fetishized powers of the commodity to “produce an interesting twist on Marx’s model of commodity fetishism.” They argue that instead of the social relations of the workers being captured in the commodity, the social dynamics attributed to commodities were recaptured in the labor power of Italian managers – as they constituted themselves “as the guardians of a legacy of artisanal production...[to] obscure the industrial labor of Chinese workers.”<sup>8</sup>

A related guardianship occurs in athletics. Here managers assert themselves as critically important lingual and cultural translators between the athletes, sponsors, and race directors. What emerges are complicated and dynamic, changing relations of social interdependence between managers and athletes, mediated by sponsors, and often for women, their husbands. While these relationships are certainly exploitative in some ways, the forms of social interdependence that arise

---

<sup>5</sup> Yanagisako, *Producing Culture and Capital*.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Rofel, Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, and Simona Segre, *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism: A Collaborative Ethnography of Italian-Chinese Global Fashion*, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 100



also form new relationships – sometimes beneficial to women athletes and sometimes malignant – that complicate formalist understandings of the alienable relations of capitalist production.

So, what is the role of the manager – or rather, the “mere manager” in this economy of running? Athletes depend on management not only for sponsorships and racing opportunities, but also for navigating visa processes, travel, doctor’s appointments, and other issues as they arise. And in the most traditional Marxian sense, the management is dependent on the athletes for their labor. Managers generally receive 15% of an athlete’s total earnings – from their prize money won at races, to contract salaries and bonuses, appearance fees, and more. Thus, this economic relation ties them together in distinct ways, when the firing of an athlete or a poor performance can directly impact a manager’s income and an indirectly impact their reputation. And further, decisions made by corporate sponsors and race directors, which the management must communicate to athletes, often lies outside of managerial control. Sometimes the managers have critical influence. Other times, they have none.

In the office, I overheard aggressive negotiations between management and race directors as well as sponsors. Hussein would pace back and forth in the office, wireless ear pods in his ears, “No, she’s in good shape!” he would say, “yes, Haji told me she’s ready to run under 2:25.” A pause. “Yes, last year she was a bit injured, and she was going through a divorce with her husband. But now she’s much better. She’s healthy, the asshole is gone. She’s a different person.” Selling the athlete’s newfound value worked in some instances but not in work others. I could deduce how well Hussein’s sale of the athlete’s labor power went by whether he slammed his hand down on the desk afterwards.

But, as Hussein often told me, you have to develop trustworthy relationships with the race directors and the sponsors. If you deceived them, constantly telling them that “our” athletes were in

shape, and they did not show up in the promised condition, they would mistrust you the next time. But, if you developed strong relationships, you could go to someone about a relative “unknown” and tell them, “I’m telling you. This kid is going to be the next star. She’s young, talented, smart... the whole package. You want this kid on your team,” you could help to broker a strong contract for the company and a life changing deal for the athlete.

This potential was often sold in a more holistic sense of running economy. I once heard Hussein refer to an athlete as having “The best engine [he’d] ever seen,” referring to her running economy. But running economy to managers could be more expansive; he, realized that “it was not just that. She listens and she’s smart,” indicating that being considered to have potential and good running economy was also tied to being cooperative and willing to work within the current athletics hierarchy.

While most agents probably earn in the six figures, far more than the average Ethiopian athlete, their pay is far less than the star runners who can become millionaires. However, the perceived scarcity in the business, “the peanuts” Hussein referred to – and the lack of stability on the part of the athletes – also complicates these relationships and creates conflict that is generated by capital’s interest. Managers are often the forward face of capital in this economy, and have greater stability as a result, but unlike managerial positions at finance firms that some economists have written about, the management’s peripheral structure positions it as an ideal functionary for capital gain. Unlike the apparel companies that sponsor athletes. and corporations that sponsor major races, they do not accumulate capital – they are mere managers.

#### **4.2.2 Scouting real talent**

Asella, where the 2018 junior national competition took place, is a small city with a steep asphalted main street. Approaching from Addis Ababa, after the malt factory, is Kenenisa Hotel, named after owner Kenenisa Bekele, a three-time Olympic Gold Medalist and former World Record

holder in both the 5,000 and 10,000 meter distances. Up towards the top is the Derartu Tulu Hotel – named for the first black African Olympic Gold Medalist, Derartu Tulu. Throughout Ethiopia, buying namesake hotels has become a regular path of investment. Haile Gebreselassie has a hotel chain with resorts and dwellings throughout the country, Haile Hotels & Resorts. Bekele has a few hotels in Addis Ababa, and as evidenced by recent expansions, athletes have been using their literal names to invest in hotel properties. Across from the Kenenisa Hotel is the bus stop, and adjacent to the station is a cobblestone road that leads to the Asella Green stadium.

In terms of infrastructure, stadium may be a misnomer. Asella Green, as it is known, does have a tartan track. One of under 20 in all of Ethiopia. And on one side of the track, near the finish line, there is some sheltered if dilapidated plastic seating. Further, by about 10 AM, the awning does little to protect the stinging sun. Around the track lie small grass hills with ridges for seating, also without solar relief. Like much of highland Ethiopia, the air temperature is not particularly hot, but the sun is brutally strong. While attending the competition, I felt my skin slowly roasting but opted to exchange embarrassing tan lines for long term optical health, donning sunglasses the whole time. By day two my nose would be pinkish, the rest of my face browning, but the area around my eyes – in the shape of my Ray-Bands – as close to white as my color gradient gets.



**Figure 13: Competition at 2018 Junior Championships in Asella.**

In terms of talent, stadium may be an understatement. In addition to being in a historical bastion of running excellence, the talent the athletes possess in a normal junior championship in Ethiopia are unparalleled. Some of the athletes here were already under contract, and already competing internationally. Others had seldom travelled outside their towns and villages except for regional competitions.



**Figure 14: Finish Line at 2018 Junior Championships in Asella**

On the first day of the 2018 competition, I arrived to verbal fighting and widespread disgust. “They have no control!” a coach of a major government club, Commercial Bank, yelled to me. We were vaguely familiar with each other, and I asked him what the problem was. “This is supposed to be a junior championship! Look at that guy!” he said, openly pointing at an athlete warming up on in the infield. “You think he’s under twenty years old? He’s at least 25.”

Internationally, people have criticized Ethiopia for “age cheating.” Many international journalists have said that athletes put down fake ages and compete at less than their real age, making it unfair for the other foreign competitors. Discussants on LetsRun, a preeminent running media outlet with active message boards from running fans around the world, regularly express doubt about

Ethiopian “junior competitors,” who they perceive to be much older than their ages listed on paper.<sup>9</sup> In fact, later that summer at the competition in Finland, a particular athlete was questioned by several pundits for being listed as 16.<sup>10</sup>

While many of these accusations stem from racism or cultural ignorance, they are not totally unfounded. Lying about one’s age is a problem as much domestically as it is internationally. In truth, many athletes really do not know their birth date, despite knowing they may not be the age they have promised. Agents need to make judgment calls, then, to gage an athlete’s potential. If, as this one coach exclaimed, the boy who won the race was clearly older than he said he was, agents would rightly plan for a different career trajectory. Thus, try as athletes might, getting a singular racing opportunity may not yield as many opportunities as one might think.

On the flip side, athletes see this as an imperative to get opportunities. Subtracting a few years from one’s age is not seen as so immoral, despite it being framed as such by Western media; athletes are keenly aware that the high levels of competition in Ethiopia mean they are deprived of opportunities that far inferior athletes of other countries may take advantage of. This was made abundantly clear when, two months later in Finland, Ethiopian athletes were lapping runners from other countries. Images of purported age cheating in Ethiopia went viral among the global track and field community, while the Ethiopian response was far milder. Still, agents must do more than scout the fastest Ethiopian runners; they must recruit the “real” talent, regardless of their listed age, and sign those with the most potential for growth.

In Asella, the winner of the women’s’ 800 meters was everything a savvy manager dreams to spot first. Completely unknown, Diribe Welteji won every heat, and the final, and had the face of a grade school student. She was, I was later told, “clearly a child.” She also was from the countryside;

---

<sup>9</sup> “African Age Cheating,” *LetsRun.com*, [https://www.letsrun.com/forum/flat\\_read.php?thread=5904093](https://www.letsrun.com/forum/flat_read.php?thread=5904093)

<sup>10</sup> “IAAF is a Joke,” *LetsRun.com*, [https://www.letsrun.com/forum/flat\\_read.php?thread=8910453](https://www.letsrun.com/forum/flat_read.php?thread=8910453)

she donned a yellow plain singlet at the event and was approached by someone on the ESMM Ethiopian staff. Luckily, Mustefa, who used to work for ESMM and who was at the event, speaks fluent Oromiffa – Welteji’s native language – and convinced her to sign a contract with the sports agency. This formal agreement between her and the agency mentioned that if she ran a good race in Finland, a shoe contract was a distinct possibility.

### **4.2.3 Navigating the “Meat Market”**

Two months later, in Finland, Diribe delivered. I met Mustefa in Finland when we convened for a late-night meeting after the first night of competitions. There he first introduced me to Chris, the other U.S.-based employee for ESMM, who gave me bits of information between a constant stream of WhatsApp calls between Hussein, who was in Europe at other competitions, and shoe representatives in both Finland and around the world. It was a “Meat Market” behind the scenes, he told me, specifically for the African athletes, with vultures abound.

Juniors from the United States, by contrast, were already in college, or potentially heading there next year. Competing at event like this was mostly a good experience, but very few would be signing life changing contracts as a result. For the unsigned Ethiopian juniors, this was the most important week of their lives.

I sat with the Ethiopian team throughout the races, sharing in their intense elation after wins and the deep despair when they did not bring home gold. Diribe, on her first trip outside of Ethiopia, was to be under the close eye of Mustefa throughout the weekend. And though she had performed well in her home region in her home country, this might be another story. Her performance here was absolutely critical; there was little sympathy regarding the fact that she had never left Ethiopia, or spent much time outside of her rural, Oromia farming town. She basically needed to win, Mustefa told me.

In the 800-meter final, she went out fast to the front, which can be a difficult position to hold throughout the entire duration of a race. Further, at a junior level, athletes are often not well trained to handle multiple races over a few days. They run the risk of burning out. In the first 400-meter, Diribe was fast – 58.88 seconds – and a gap grew between her and the rest of the field. Over the course of the second half of the race, it appeared that a competitor was gaining on her. One of the Ethiopian coaches sat down in frustration.

*“Mend new? Tesfa qoretal?”* What is it? Have you lost hope? Mustefa asked the Ethiopian contingent. Seconds later, Diribe struck back and pulled out the win. It was a stressful spectating experience and the coach next to me put his hands up and down a few times, as if to imply relief, rather than a celebration of her gold medal. She did not blow it, the coach’s gestures seemed to say.

We all stuck around for the men’s 100 Hurdle Final and the women’s 100-meter final, even though there were no Ethiopian entrants. Chris, having spoken with Mustefa about me asked, “So you’ll be in Ethiopia next year?” I had told Mustefa I would be back for fieldwork. “Are you going to live there? Do you want a job? Cause they’re all idiots over there.”

I laughed, pointing to Mustefa, “This guy knows what he’s doing.”

Chris said, “Nah, this guy’s an idiot.” I could not tell if he was joking.

Immediately Chris told Mustefa to go and find Diribe, and to not let her talk to anyone. He said they would be throwing contracts at her and directed Mustafa, very seriously, “Don’t let her get confused,” before whispering a few things in Mustafa’s ear.

Chris mentioned that competitions like these can ruin these athletes, because they are hounded by people from all directions. He noted the U.S. university coaches who talk to athletes, which was surprising since most Ethiopian athletes who do not speak English, have not finished school, or could not take the SATs, hardly seemed as if they would be ready to go abroad for college. But promises, Chris assured me, about everything and from everyone, would be coming their way.

And for someone like Diribe, a young woman completely alone “without a clue of how this world worked, could easily get confused.”

#### 4.2.4 Binding Contracts

Signing with an agency within Ethiopia guarantees little for the athletes. The main office of the agency is based in the U.S., but Hussein, and many other big agencies have offices with Ethiopian staff in Addis Ababa. These are not only the primary linguistic translators, but they help to arrange athletes’ visas appointments, travel accommodations, and communicate anything and everything necessary to the management based abroad.<sup>11</sup> From the office in the U.S., Hussein and Chris negotiate with sponsors and race directors to get athletes various chances.

Although athletes all seek elusive contracts, before they enter the world of international athletics, many do not realize that their first contract will be signed with a management group in the country. This first contract is mostly a gesture – a semi-formal relationship – although sometimes the agency will pay the athlete a modest salary to support her. The management does not guarantee facility, shoes, race opportunities, or shoe contracts on paper, but this first contract acts as a measure of trust between the agency and the athlete. Often, the athlete does not understand that a contract with the agency does *not* indicate a contract with a shoe company and a salary to immediately follow.

A first contract indicates that the agency agrees to give the athlete some basic assistance – often providing them with some startup money, sports materials, coaching, and racing opportunities, with the goal of eventually getting them to sign a shoe contract. In return, the athlete signs a document ensuring that the agency will get 15% of all earnings – from prize money to contracts to essentially any other income. This initial subcontract is in place for the agency because they do not

---

<sup>11</sup> I don’t spend enough time talking about the issue of visas in this chapter, but it is a huge part of the work of agents. Visas are extremely difficult to get for new athletes, and even established runners can have a difficult time getting the correct visas (transit visas included) in the correct time frame for competitions. Several athletes have missed out on enormous paydays because visa appointments, processing, or acceptance, were not appropriately timed.



want to waste their time and resources if an athlete will eventually sign an income-earning contract with a shoe company mediated through another party. This contract is mostly a social and promissory one; the athlete will stop talking to other agents and the agents will begin to find an athlete races and seek to negotiate a shoe contract at the right time. For Ethiopian athletes, going it alone is not an option. Most athletes do not speak English and have limited channels to interact with sponsors and race directors. Further, sponsors and race directors *do not wish* to negotiate directly with athletes. Like other sports and entertainment sectors where agents remain crucial, the relationships between agents and sponsors rest on reputation and trust. Hussein would often talk about the importance of these relationships:

“It takes *years* to build trust in this business. Years. So I need people to act professional.

Because when our team doesn’t act professional, I go to this race organizer or someone at Nike and then I look unprofessional. But when you are honest and you can tell the organizer or the rep that this person is not in good shape, this person is in good shape, you can expect this, A, B, C... that is how you end up with the best contracts.”

But a very important point, too, is that the structure of international athletics is organized in such a way that it is *bureaucratically and legally impossible* to compete at the highest level without middle management. World Athletics mandates that athletes ranked in the top 30 in the world *must* use the services of an Authorized Athletes’ Representative. This representative fills out an application with a member federation, sometimes pay a fee, and undergoes an evaluation process “aimed at establishing their education and knowledge in key areas of the sport of Athletics and the AR activity.”<sup>12</sup> The reason for this is that, at least in theory, the athlete will be better protected if their representative has

---

<sup>12</sup> “Athletes’ Representatives,” *World Athletics*, <https://www.worldathletics.org/athletes/athlete-representatives#:~:text=Athletes%20representatives,-Share&text=Athletes%20may%20use%20the%20services,negotiate%20their%20own%20athletics%20programmes>.

undergone this particular vetting system. As such, the makeup of this transnational capitalist market ensures that managers remain unavoidable for any athlete.

Once the first contract is set in place, the shoe contract – the most sought-after agreement for an athlete – is next on the agenda. This contract form is far more binding, complicated, and dreamt about. Many athletes at the sub-elite level envision this as a new phase in life – “once I get a contract, I’ll be able to...” they might say. The contract is a goal, but also a ticket to a new and freer world, where concerns about affording food would disappear and literal foundations for new homes and construction projects would begin. In many ways, both athletes seeking to sign contracts, and the shoe companies and managers who oversee the contracts, occupy what Hannah Appel has called “legal enclaves.” In Appel’s ethnography, charting how the transnational oil economy works through racial and postcolonial inequality, contracts shed light on the power and social life of both capitalism and legal liberalism. Because all parties are “free to sign” these contracts, they offer a sense of legitimacy. But in practice, according to Appel, they enable the transnational oil companies to get away with whatever they want. Moving beyond Durkheim’s observations – that the contract was not always contractual, and inherently social and cultural in form – Appel explores the uses of these social and cultural forms. The contracts exist “*precisely because* oil companies understand the wide-ranging social and political entanglements of their work, and they are constantly trying... to control that overflow... And to write contractual clauses broad enough to account for its unaccountability.”<sup>13</sup> Parties come to contract negotiations understanding the important role of social and cultural dynamics and use those dynamics to ensure their interests in the agreement.

Understanding how to seize power through these social and cultural dynamics can enable those

---

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism: U.S. Oil in Equatorial Guinea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 171.

putting the contract on the table – in this case, managers or shoe companies – to retrench inequality in this transnational relationship.

Here, even when the contract is between athlete and corporation, the social relations that take place before, during, and after its signing occur primarily (if not exclusively), between the manager and the athlete. Agents were keenly aware of this. Chris often cautioned me about the various ways a contract operated as much more than a financial agreement – but a social and familial one as well.

The contract form itself should not be understood outside of social and cultural relations; rather, these dynamic social and economic relations become embedded in the contracts. Because managers took, for example, the common occurrence in which they would be negotiating a woman's contract with her husband, fielding questions by and from her male counterpart, as reality, this norm would be reproduced. While agents viewed their correspondence with women's husbands as a necessary part of cultural and familial integration, in practice, they often reinforced the notion to both women athletes and all the people surrounding them, that this was the proper form of conduct in this new transactional space.

As much as contracts might legitimize a liberal logic, Ethiopian athletes, especially women, did not always buy into those assumptions. The contracts, many claimed, were deceptive. They were duplicitous and failed to carry out what they promised, or they were insufficiently translated and explained to athletes. For example, while contracts might have some figures in one bold number, they are often asterisked by what are known as “reduction clauses.” Reduction clauses became a part of the track and field fan vernacular in 2016 when a United States 800-meter runner, Boris Berian, violated a contract with Nike. He opted to sign with New Balance after learning that Nike's contract carried reductions between 20% and 50%. In Berian's case, his salary could be *reduced* if he did not

compete in a certain number of sanctioned races, did not achieve a certain ranking, missed a press conference, failed to wear Nike clothing at athletic activities, or for a slew of other reasons. It became public knowledge shortly after, despite many athletes signing Non-disclosure Agreements (NDAs) that prevent them from discussing specifics, that Nike was notorious for these kinds of contracts.

But reductions have been a part of Nike shoe contracts for many years, even before Berian. While Nike has the best bonuses, they have the harshest reductions. Thus, for an Ethiopian athlete who believes she is signing a contract for a guaranteed \$20,000, if she does not achieve certain results, she might only take home half of that. Her friend, by contrast, might win a particular set of races, earn a bonus, and take home almost twice what her contract stipulated, regardless of who performed better.

For women athletes, reductions can come in another duplicitous form: pregnancy. Until a number of American women athletes publicized their stories in 2019, becoming pregnant could be considered a reason for a reduction.<sup>14</sup> Managers and staff often told me that various elements of contracts were explained to athletes, despite the fact that many athletes claimed they were never given information. These impassioned arguments about contracts were so commonplace and shed light on the fallacious ways in which they are often seen to uphold certain norms.

While working in the office in the summer of 2019, an Ethiopian athlete who was in the U.S. to give birth came to collect money that she was not actually entitled to, because of pregnancy reductions. Meanwhile, a few Olympians began speaking out against this practice. U.S. Marathoner, Kara Goucher, 800-meter runner Alysia Montano, and one of the most decorated female Olympic track and field stars in history, Allyson Felix, spoke out against Nike. They all broke non-disclosure agreements to share the details of the reductions they were dealt through Nike contracts. The public

---

<sup>14</sup>Alysia Montano, "Nike Told me to Dream Crazy, Until I wanted a baby," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/opinion/nike-maternity-leave.html>.

backlash led to Nike changing their policies and changing athlete contracts to include an explicit clause detailing that performance-related reductions could not apply when due to pregnancy.<sup>15</sup>

Miscommunications over reductions often provoked aggressive and impassioned responses. Women athletes, or often their husbands, would call management and yell that they had been lied to, or storm into the office in Addis Ababa and assert that they were owed money. Managers chalked these interactions up to athletes not understanding the business or these contracts, even as managers also agreed that not everything in writing was fair. Athletes certainly buy into the ideology of contracts in many ways, and women certainly do not contest the masculine dominance in negotiations. However, I argue, that athletes poke a hole in the ideology of “licit capitalism,” through arguments and contestations, both between women’s husbands and management, and between husbands and wives within the home preceding and succeeding meetings with management. Their expressed outrage and accusations of thievery, though sometimes misdirected, offered profound ways of thinking about how their contracts – and the social relations embedded therein – were shrouded in dynamics of unfairness and duplicity that underlie the business.

### ***4.3 Negotiating Value***

“They don’t know their value,” Hussein told me, frustrated, after meeting with a group of young track athletes. “They have no idea. We know their value. That’s our job, but they don’t understand the business.”

During a trip to Ethiopia, when he was signing contracts with both the shoe-sponsored and agency-sponsored athletes, I sat in a meeting with three young women and three young men who trained under the same coach. They were all promising runners, potential stars. The problem, Hussein told me months earlier in the West Chester office, was the lack of opportunities on the

---

<sup>15</sup> Chris Chavez, “Nike Removes Contracts Reductions for Pregnancy Athletes After Backlash,” *Sports Illustrated*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.si.com/olympics/2019/08/16/nike-contract-reduction-pregnancy-protection-athlete-maternity-leave>.

track. “All of the money is on the roads. To make money on the track you have to be top 30 in the world... at least. They know because they used to see Haile or Kenenisa on TV and those guys are rich that they should automatically become rich but it doesn’t work that way anymore.”

To make matters worse, that year, World Athletics made the abrupt decision to cut certain track events from the most prestigious track circuit – the Diamond League. The events the organization determined were not bringing in as many viewers, and subsequent revenue, included the 200 meters, steeple chase, and 5,000 meters, among other field events. The longer distance events, as I wrote about then, had been dominated by Ethiopians. Now, the opportunity to race these events had been significantly reduced, and the subsequent financial fall out would be substantial.<sup>16</sup> Yet, athletes who had spent years training, and had just achieved the opportunity to represent Ethiopia on a global stage, were surprised that they were not making the big bucks. In a contract meeting in Ethiopia, one athlete spoke, “My family sees me representing our country and so they don’t understand why I’m not coming home with anything. I don’t understand it either. I’m the fastest in my event.” Not only was a contract not yet coming his way, but his event was also, slowly, being deemed irrelevant.

“You don’t understand your value right now,” Hussein never seemed to tire of repeating.

What real value *is*, and how it is determined, has been at the center of economics since the discipline’s inception, and attracted plenty of attention from anthropologists as well. Early classical economists, like Adam Smith, described understood value to be related to the price of the good realized in the market.<sup>17</sup> This formulation then excluded the amount of labor and materials that would go into producing a commodity, prompting Marx to focus on the labor time put into a commodity’s creation. While Marx’s theory is far more useful than Smith’s, socially necessary labor

---

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Borenstein, “The Marginalization of African Runners,” *Africa is a Country*, April 9, 2019, <https://africasacountry.com/2019/04/the-marginalization-of-african-runners>

<sup>17</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 2013.

time comes to a head in the sport of running, in which the supposed production of value – in many cases, speed – has a higher price point the more *quickly* it is produced– in most cases, through competition.

Although Marx contested this classical notion of value and understood the process of surplus as created through accumulated labor and social reproduction, anthropologists have often looked toward competing notions of value in different cultures to push beyond formalist understandings of value. Anthropologist David Graeber has advocated for a deeper understanding not only of how actors view the world, but also of what they felt justified to demand from it.<sup>18</sup>

So how do managers and athletes see value? What do they feel they can demand from the space of contract negotiations? How do they come to constitute the value of their labor? Managers viewed themselves as important characters for assessing and advocating for the athlete’s value, because they knew both the athlete and the market they were entering. Unlike the athletes, who “don’t understand the business,” and the sponsors and race directors who “don’t understand the reality on the ground,” their position as middlemen gave them power in the athletics market. After all, they had insider knowledge about the athletes, their shape, and their potential. In turn, this means that shoe companies did not have to enter into labor negotiations with the athletes, making the manager a powerful buffer between labor and capital accumulation.

However, as opposed to just middlemen, managers viewed themselves as central to determining the value both for sponsors and for athletes – and indeed constituted their own value through these relationships. They indeed profited from athlete labor, in addition to entering a labor market in which they had their own labor – the ability to determine value – to sell.

---

<sup>18</sup> Graeber, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*.

### 4.3.1 Understanding Market Changes

In between meetings in the Addis Ababa office, Hussein would reiterate how the athletes did not know their value. A few of them threatened to go with another manager, and Hussein would brush it off. “Be my guest,” he said, “but I’m telling you. I know the market. I know what your value is now, and what it will be in six months from now if you perform. You’re better off waiting until you get your time down and finish a few places higher.”

The athlete’s value was spoken about in a few different idioms. Obviously, results mattered – how good an athlete was and the performances she had already produced. But, managers explained to me, their value needed to be understood within the current athletics market.

Besides cutting track events, international governing bodies enacted major rules and regulations shifts in 2019, which changed the valuation of athletes. The IAAF already had a so-called Label Road Races program to categorize and organize elite races. In 2020, they added a new label and changed many of the rules of the system. For competitions from the 5km to the marathons, road race directors would apply for different status levels – Platinum, Gold, Silver, and Bronze. Each athlete, too, would be given a label status of the corresponding categories for each event. The number of “Gold” athletes differed for each event, but using the marathon as an example, the top 150 athletes with the fastest in the marathon that year would be considered “Gold.” The next 150 were Silver, and the athletes ranked 300-400 were Bronze. The labels corresponded to expected television coverage, the IAAF branding and promotion they provide, the amount of drug testing they require, and other technical measures related to road closures, safety, the hiring of pacemakers, drink stations, total finishers, and officials available. There is even a limitation on the porta-toilet to runner ratio required (1:62).<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> IAAF, “IAAF Label Road Races: Regulations 2019,” <https://media.aws.iaaf.org/competitioninfo/37136688-ca01-44da-8d15-7b0584b10694.pdf>



An athlete's ranking is based on their results. However, it is not simply determined by time or place at any competition. They are given “Placing Scores” based on the level and significance of the competition. In other words, the higher the level of competition, the better their chance of achieving a higher-level score. But without initial access to certain levels of competitions, it is very hard for athletes entering the system to gain points in the first place. For example, an athlete can get a better ranking by giving the same performance at a Gold Level competition than at a Bronze Level competition. Once they get a better ranking, it is easier for them to get into more Gold Level competitions. A Bronze Level athlete will have a difficult time getting into Silver and Gold Level competitions, and it can be hard to earn enough points to advance to the higher levels.

Further, Ethiopian women were at more of a disadvantage, because many race directors tried to compile diverse national fields to enhance the status of their marathons.<sup>20</sup> Having athletes from many countries is more appealing to the ranking system and better for the event’s general broadcast potential. Even though a great percentage of the top ranked athletes are Ethiopian, race directors will let in a lower-ranked athlete from Europe, the Americas, or Asia, who might be significantly slower, leaving dozens of Ethiopians clawing for limited spots. As of May 2020, Ethiopian women made up a remarkable more than half of the world’s top 50 ranked marathoners. Still, many of these athletes would have a difficult time getting into races with American women, who would be ranked over 200 and have times up to five minutes slower. This is one of many reasons why Ethiopian women migrate to other countries to run and switch nationalities to represent other countries as well.

This led to unhappy bewilderment at the Ethiopian office. “I don’t understand,” Zerife said. “I train as fast as Alem, I race as fast as Alem, but her *megbiya* (entrance) and her *contract* are much higher.”

---

<sup>20</sup> World Athletics, “Basics of the World Rankings,” *World Athletics*. <https://www.worldathletics.org/world-ranking-rules/basics>.

Hussein reassured her that he knew this – she was not wrong about her time or ability, but she didn't understand that the *system* had changed. That meant the *market changed*. He instructed me to pull out my laptop, go on the World Athletics website, and show her the World Rankings list. She had run well under 2:30, and he believed she had the potential to go even faster, but her ranking left her out of the Gold Label.

Initially, neither she nor her husband said anything in response. They seemed rather dumbfounded; they were equally surprised to see some sort of visual evidence on my computer, as they were to learn that this ranking system was so illogical. Finally, Zerife muttered, “*lik aydelum* – this isn't right.”

#### **4.3.2 Integral Translators**

Management could also use other factors to try and increase or decrease an athlete's value in contract and race negotiations. Firstly, the athlete's proven potential would be important. If the athlete was younger, had less experience and room to grow, and had a trusted relationship with sponsors, the manager could approach the sponsor and appeal for more.

I often overheard conversations like these in the West Chester office. There would be a conversation about an up-and-coming athlete. The race director or Nike representative might express doubt. Then Hussein would sell an athlete by emphasizing her value by talking about her embodied running economy, “You don't understand. This athlete has one of the best engines in Ethiopia. She's a machine and she's young and disciplined. She has the right mentality, and her husband is there but he's not getting too involved. She's the real deal.”

These pitches might not always sway race directors or shoe company executives, but did help managers like Hussein in developing rapport. Race directors were often men, though not exclusively. Except for directors of very high-profile races, they often had other jobs in the sport. Some were fellow agents who managed a few races, and some worked for the companies that sponsored these

racers. Sometimes negotiations about the value of athletes became dependent on other athletes – a decrease in appearance for one on the condition that another athlete was accepted into a race. Or sometimes, Nike would offer a lump sum of contract money to more or less be divvied up by the management, with the company maintaining ultimate approval. But importantly, these conversations between managers and directors about athletes’ value were also spaces where managers would assert *their own value* into the marketplace.

In *No Family is an Island*, anthropologist, Ilana Gershon, explores how Samoans living in New Zealand engage with government bureaucracies in the U.S. and New Zealand, differentiating between the roles of representatives and translators. Actors representing migrant communities yielded to insights into the untranslatability of certain matters.<sup>21</sup> While bureaucratic system carriers and Samoan culture bearers were willing to define culture in terms of value, difference arose in how they related to value. From Samoan perspectives, roles embodied values – inhabiting the role was the practice of being a value. However, one central consequence of the perspective was that Samoan values are fundamentally not translatable.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Samoan migrants were tasked with employing economic, social, and communicative strategies to work between demands of capitalist and ritual exchange, which often existed in tension.

Managers often position and represent themselves as playing the role of translator between third parties and athletes, although they often did not play this role in reality. Not only do they literally translate documents from English to Amharic or Oromiffa, but they present themselves as translators between local practices and the athletics market, to constitute their value to both parties. Managers have access to knowledge on the athlete’s potential, but also on whether they are ready to race – ready for something big. In shape. Fit. Only *mere managers* can provide this intel to

---

<sup>21</sup> Ilana Gershon, *No Family Is an Island: Cultural Expertise among Samoans in Diaspora*, Expertise (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Gershon, *No Family is an Island*, 101.

sponsors and race directors. Only *mere managers* can give the Ethiopian athletes this opportunity. And only *mere managers* could position themselves as the lingual and cultural translators, who understood the “local culture” but could translate market principles to the athletes and vice versa.

Thus, although managers see themselves as necessary for understanding and being able to communicate the value of an athlete’s labor, they use this value – its calculation and translation – to constitute the value of their own labor in this production process. They sell this evaluation labor in the same market – yes, by taking some of the labor from the athlete. Still, their own value is embedded in the exploitative process, as it is tied to the athlete’s performance and their own ability to sell the athlete’s labor to corporate sponsors.

## ***4.4 Kinship Capitalism***

### **4.4.1 More than Management**

“That was King Mesfin,” Chris said, angrily slamming his hand on the table in the West Chester office. “This guy is killing us. He wastes so much of our time.” Mesfin is not an athlete – he’s the husband and self-proclaimed coach of Senbere – a high level athlete under ESMM. Months later, in Ethiopia, I learned that in practice this meant he attended group training sessions and timed her splits alongside the head coaches in the training group. “He thinks he’s a coach,” Chris would often say, “but he doesn’t know anything about sports.” There was a chance that Mesfin and Senbere would not even be a couple much longer, he indicated.

I will discuss the complicated dynamic of husbands, boyfriends, and other men involving themselves in the lives and work of Ethiopian women athletes in depth in the next chapter, but every agent working in Ethiopia expressed frustration about having to deal with women athletes’ husbands. An iteration of “The worst part of working with Ethiopian women is the men,” was expressed on a weekly basis. In other words a woman’s husband could undermine her woman athlete’s value. If she had a particularly demanding husband who created difficulties, Chris would often pose the question

of whether it was worth working with an athlete, even if the woman was talented and kind. A woman' A difficult husband could dramatically undermine a woman's ability to continuously grow her social running economy.

"You want to know something about working with Ethiopian athletes?" Chris asked, a question he had posed more than once. "It's not like working with other athletes. Once you sign an athlete, they're not just your athlete. You're not just their manager. You're their father, husband, brother, sister, advisor. You go to their weddings, you know their families, you advise them on how to build a house. One minute they are screaming at you telling you that you stole all their money. You're a thief. And the next minute they are inviting you into their house for coffee. Trust me, no managers are in it for the money, because they just become your family."

The language of family was used often between managers and athletes, in both endearing and infuriating tones. This is not only because when managers called their athletes, or their athletes' husbands, they would start the conversation by calling them brother, "Hello brother, how are you? How is your family?" before telling them to be quiet and stop offering opinions about how to conduct business. This discourse is embedded in a broader conversation that imagines the Global North as rational and reasonable and the Global South as crazy and irrational. Still, the language and notion of family is an integral part of understanding how transnational athletics cannot be readily dichotomized into market and non-market domains.<sup>23</sup>

Even though managers asserted their value as being the purveyors of market principles between non-market actors (the athletes) and the sponsors (corporations) and often ceded an ability to assist athletes based on the ways the market was acting, the range of kinship terms and sentiments reflected between managers and athletes told different stories. Both managers and athletes would often speak of each other in familial terms. These familial relationships indeed could be quite fraught

---

<sup>23</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975).

– I knew of several “divorces” that had taken place between managers and athletes. But they could also be long lasting – women would sometimes refer to managers as “fathers.”

Anthropologists have done important work in showing how economic practices become mutually imbricated social relationships, despite theories and practices that attempt to draw distinctions between the two. Familial relationships, in particular, have been the subject of some ethnographic investigations into modes of production. Sylvia Yanagisako, for example, has explored how family firms in Italy sometimes prove to be a productive way of coping with the uncertainty of capitalism and its crises. Unlike some anthropologists who studied kin relations as jural principles, Yanagisako expands notions of the family under capitalism, arguing that the sentiments tied into kinship are part of capitalist production.<sup>24</sup>

Although the family relations that Yanagisako explores are biological, other forms of kinship can be leveraged in a capitalist production process, forming new social relations and maintaining a viable status within this process. Karen Ho specifically draws on this notion in both her methodology and her analysis of understanding financiers working on Wall Street. Her own access to a research site, and her subsequent understanding of how new relationships of trust and connectedness were formed, was based on “elite ‘familial’ connections” she developed through educational and organizing networks.<sup>25</sup>

Similar familial relationships were developed between managers and athletes in Ethiopia. Managers often spoke about being engaged in familial relationships as an unavoidable fact of working in Ethiopia. Being familial was an inconvenience and took away from the important administrative work that needed to be done to earn an athlete’s trust: “they suck you into their lives and it eats up so much time” I was warned. However, when this ire subsided, I sometimes witnessed

---

<sup>24</sup> Yanagisako, *Producing Culture and Capital*.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Zouwen Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

managers extending assistance and support to athletes; they seemed to be entrenched in relationships that were by no means *strictly* economic.

#### **4.4.2 Familial Ties**

About one month into working in the office in West Chester, I was told to brace myself for the visit of an athlete who was coming to collect money that “she thought was owed to her.” A bit confused, but nervous about asking for elaboration, I waited until she arrived at the office, eight months pregnant, hoping to collect over \$50,000 in cash.

Like so much of the Ethiopian economy, the international athletics is a cash economy. After prize money, taxes, and the percentage that agent’s take from all of this, athletes often net just a little over half of their winnings. However, they will often wait long periods of time, or deliberately ask to come to the U.S. for competitions once their money has been processed, to bring it back to Ethiopia in cash.

The difference between the black market and the bank rates in Ethiopia is monumental; and because foreign currency is so scarce within the country, bringing in hard cash – ideally dollars, but Euros are strong as well – behooves athletes. The bank rate has hovered around 30:1 during my time, whereas the black market rate has been over 50:1. Thus, athletes bring stacks of thousands of dollars back to Ethiopia to gradually exchange to get better rates. Black market money changers hang out around the national stadium, because with so many athletes coming and going abroad, there’s plenty of business. I learned later that Amane was one of the earliest members of the management “family.” ESMM had gone through two of her child births alongside her, and her success helped to establish the agency as a serious enterprise within Ethiopia. Some of the money she was requesting was from prior competitions, but the remainder was from the contracted salary that she had been receiving for years. But ESMM did not tell her that she was not on contract, and had been reduced the year prior,

because she was pregnant. In fact, Amane was in the United States precisely to have the baby there so that the child would have U.S. citizenship – something I witnessed often was successful women athletes using their P-1 visas, that they were given to compete at major marathons, to return to the U.S. and have children. However, I was told afterwards she was given upwards of \$15,000 from the company’s pooled money.

I looked stunned. On paper, Amane was not actually owed any of that money by Nike or the agency. She was disappointed with the amount they gave her, but because of a previous reduction and not being on contract at all, she thought she had \$50,000 to her name.

“It’s complicated,” Chris told me. “Amane is a pain in the ass. But she is like family. She helped us grow the company so much and Haji and the whole family might fall apart if she wasn’t well taken care of,” Chris said. Then, his tone changed, and he begrudgingly noted, “welcome to Ethiopia.” It was a relationship coupling love with pungent and regrettable frustration.

Other managers I spoke to also noted having familial relationships with their athletes. A lower profile agent, Owen, I met at a road race one summer, worked part time with lower-level athletes from Ethiopia and Kenya. Unlike some of the main agents who had “dorms” or “camps” for the athletes to stay at low costs while visiting for competitions, Owen had actually just converted the attic of his house into a makeshift Airbnb. When they were in town, he would take athletes to Ethiopian restaurants, and his wife had even learned to cook Ethiopian food. I asked him, as I did all the managers, if he charged them to stay.

“I do,” he said. “It’s a small fee, because I can’t afford to put them all up when they come. But you know it’s strange in their culture, to charge someone to stay in your home. Especially when you consider them like family. So even though I charge them, it’s not very much. So you do end up paying a lot of expenses out of pocket.” This is where measuring profit, exploitation, and charity



become intertwined and confused. I certainly saw instances in which managers might be making money they should not otherwise be making from the athletes but, also, other instances when they were acting out of concern.

From the perspective of some athletes, a family relationship – often fraught – was reciprocated in a multitude of ways. Some managers had stuck with athletes through rough times. Not only did they endure periods of underperformance, but, and especially in the case of women, also some ugly relationships with husbands and other family members. “Hussein is like a father to me,” one woman said. “When I came for a competition in America, he let me stay in his home. He cooked for me. When I was going through a divorce, he supported me.”

Indeed, sometimes the intricate knowledge of the sexual and emotional lives of athletes was put on full display in conversation within and beyond management. Certainly, within “the family” honest conversations took place to understand where an athlete was at in her training. It was acceptable for an athlete not to perform or train well because of divorce or family death, but that information had to be shared. Being able to effectively communicate then was integral to becoming a real part of the family, and would often produce benefits when working with management.

#### ***4.5 “Show [Them] the Money”***

The role of managers can be a difficult one to analyze, because often their positions in the production cycle lie in flux, and unseen. As Jerry Maguire, played by Tom Cruise narrates in the beginning of *Jerry Maguire*, the most famous depiction of a sports agent, “I’m the guy you don’t usually see. I’m the one behind the scenes. I’m the sports agent.” A few sentences later, he adds, “I was remembering the words of my mentor, the late great Dicky fox, who said, ‘The key to this business is personal relationships.’” However, the line from the film that everyone remembers is “Show me the money!”

In the world of international athletics, personal relationships, too, form the backbone of the production process linking Ethiopian athletes to the transnational sporting economy, in and through attempts to “Show [them] the money.” Managers do want value, even as they acknowledge the more complex “kin relations” that do not necessarily accord with this market logic. Managers play a critical role in this process, and respond to the gendered domains of Ethiopian sport, and the social, cultural, and economic formations at play within and across domains. Understanding the role of managers in athletics does not provide us with a blueprint for understanding managerial roles in all working environments, but it does yield critical insight into the dynamic roles managers can and do play in transnational arenas.

A deep ethnographic analysis into the role of managers and their complex relationships with women athletes is helpful in elucidating the ways in which capital continues to accumulate through the functionary role of manager. Sympathetic but critical readings of how the role of the manager expressed – from capitalists, the managers themselves, and the athletes who the managers represent – offer fresh perspectives on the working conditions of athletes and the transnational athletic economy, as a whole.

Further, exploring these relationships introduce more clearly the range of dynamics that women athletes must navigate to succeed in athletics, that stretch far beyond their physical capabilities. As discussed in the next chapter, women athletes are encouraged, and often want, boyfriends and husbands to be at their side as they pursue a career in this economy. But the ways in which they attempt to fall into roles of being a good Ethiopian woman and wife, and a wage-earning profitable athlete, are often in tension with one another. Thus, women athletes are not only seen as more difficult to work with because their para-social relationships are embedded in these socio-economic networks, but also because they must incorporate the networks of their labor into other realms of their personal lives.

## 5. Bodies at Work

“I’ve become fat now, haven’t I?” Tigist laughs, as we sit in Kalkidan’s house, in 2019.<sup>1</sup> The two women were former training partners who I lived with and trained with my first time in Ethiopia, but have remained friends, and we try and get together at least once or twice during my visits to Ethiopia over the years. Generally in Ethiopia, a person “becoming fat” is generally seen as a good thing. It is a sign that they may have come into money, that they have been on a relaxing vacation, or at the very least, that they are doing comfortably well. I have come back from a long weekend and been told, “you look good, you’ve gotten a little fat.” Tigist’s husband, Chalu, she jokes, “Always tells me I’m fat now.”

For Ethiopian athletes, however, becoming fat is a concern. It is a way of talking about one’s current “condition” – a way that, as anthropologist Michael Crawley argues, Ethiopian runners talk a world where concerns about energy are front and centre in an athlete’s mind. “Condition” is used frequently in conversation, and, lacking an Amharic translation, is one of the few English words in the athletic vernacular. Condition is something that you can have, for periods of time, that good training can augment – “condition *yimetal* – condition is coming.”<sup>2</sup> When one has condition, she wants to use it – she wants to race. Condition is essentially pointless if you cannot spend it, to get something more. But condition is also something can disappear quickly, and usher in new and profound anxieties.

A concern with “condition” dominates aspects of all athletes’ lives. But for women athletes condition is doubly complicated. When someone gets injured, they fear becoming fat, which may mean gaining just a few kilograms – going from a wiry 48 kg to a lithe 51k g. When husbands say

---

<sup>1</sup> I translate the term *wefram* to “becoming fat” because occasionally this was a transliteration into English by research participants. Hannig, for example agrees that *wefram* “exceeds the literal meaning of corpulence” but understands it in her context to be better translated to “well-proportioned” (215).

<sup>2</sup> CRAWLEY, *OUT OF THIN AIR*.

their wives have gotten "fat" in reference to their running, it is no complement. It is not that beauty is at stake – by Ethiopian body politics a few extra pounds can be a sign of attractiveness – but there is concern because it weakens the capacity to run fast. If athletes are “fat,” their “condition” is probably not good. They are not ready to work in athletics. Being fat means one cannot race, win, or make money.

“Yes, she’s more fat, I’m a little fat. You. You’re always the same,” our friend Kalkidan says, as we sit in her house one evening. She lives on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, near a neighborhood called *Summit*. To board a mini-bus in this direction one listens for “*Summit, Condominium*” because the area saw explosive growth in the past decade with innumerable condominiums popping up alongside the road. *Summit* connotes wealth, especially new wealth and investment, and *Condominium* a type of modernity that is inherently accompanied by displacement and gentrification. But Kalkidan does not live directly in Summit; she lives past the wealthy neighborhood, on what feels like the edge of Addis Ababa.

To get to Kalkidan’s house I meet Tigist in Meganana – a central hub in Addis where athletes meet to take service buses to training – take the mini bus to the Pepsi Factory, and from there jam ourselves into the back of a *bajaj* – a small Indian-manufactured three wheel autorickshaw – arrive at what feels as the ultimate end of the city, walk down a cobblestone road asking for the home of Arefu – Kalkidan’s husband – and find the corrugated tin door that opens to the compound. A little like a village, there are two cows, and various mud huts housing members of Arefu’s family. Kalkidan and Arefu have the largest dwelling, which is furnished with a matching set of sofas, and a microwave-sized television in the corner which plays Ethiopian music videos when there is power. A lone lightbulb barely illuminates the room.

Tigist and Kalkidan delight in seeing each other once again. I am always quietly perplexed as to why it seems to be necessary for me to be in Ethiopia for them to meet in person. They could

meet each other at other points, but they generally wait until I am around to reunite. Both are breast-feeding their daughters. Tigist's daughter is ten months old, quiet, and tiny. Kalkidan's daughter is just shy of two years, can do a drunken sailor walk, and enjoys the pastime of knocking things off tables. Kalkidan's older son, four-year-old Kibeki, goes outside to greet family members in the compound.

There is something a bit somber about my two friends "becoming fat," even though their husbands, family members, and most friends now see them as healthier, more beautiful, and more capable of raising healthy families. Normally a moment to rejoice, now that our days of training together and their days of training all together are long over, my friends' keen attention to caloric intake and bodily musculature has significantly changed. But how my two friends relate to their bodies is indelibly marked by their labor as athletes.

### ***5.1 Production and Reproduction***

Feminist theories and studies of social reproduction are helpful in making sense of Tigist and Kalkidan's and countless other Ethiopian women athlete's relationship with their bodies at work. Their experiences highlight an inherent incommensurability with mothering, being reproduction *and* production and the transnational athletics market. Because of this incommensurability different husbands, boyfriends, and coaches demand different things from women's bodies at different times, often heightening how these roles are incommensurable. It is not so much that the contrasting bodily ideals mirror the contrasting realms of production (being a wage earning athlete) and reproduction (giving birth and caring for the family) – though at times they seem isomorphic – but that the impossibility of being both are evidence of deeply rooted contradictions systemic in capitalism. Both are demanded of women athletes, even expected of them, despite the fact that so many people are willing to admit that their co-occurrence is essentially impossible.

The body is a privileged site to examine how a range of people within and tangentially tied to this transnational athletics market demarcate production and reproduction. Many scholars rightly question any distinct separation between production, or productive labor, and reproduction, or reproductive labor. I distinguish between the two of them in this chapter as productive labor being labor which is tied to the sport of running and eventually to a wage. Although not all productive labor in the sport of running is waged, I argue that any labor centered around the intent to make a wage (for example, training, eating, recovering, etc.) is part of the productive work of running. Reproductive labor generates value itself and is not geared toward wage-earning.

Despite this distinction I make, it is important to note that, following, David Griffith, Kerry Preibisch, and Ricardo Contreras, reproductive labor can generate other forms of value by itself while drawing on productive labor in advanced capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Many feminist scholars have pointed out that these domains are not as distinct as previously thought, and with more women joining the productive labor force, the separation between these two domains continues to shrink. As Diane Elson has pointed out, throughout the world the sharp rise in women's productive work has not been accompanied by men's reproductive work, making it such that female labor largely encompasses both domains.<sup>4</sup> The reason why these two domains become sharply demarcated, in the case of women's athletics, and what is different from men's athletics, is that these two forms of labor largely rely on very different body type ideals.

Like the foci of anthropologist, Niko Besnier's research Tongan rugby players who migrate to Japan, Ethiopian female athletes shed light on how notions of "habitus" – how structures can inscribe social class and status onto bodies – do not capture the complexities of the relationship

---

<sup>3</sup> David Griffith, Kerry Preibisch, and Ricardo Contreras, "The Value of Reproductive Labor," *American Anthropologist* 120, no. 2 (June 2018): 224–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12973>.

<sup>4</sup> Diane Elson, "Labor Markets as Gendered Institutions: Equality, Efficiency and Empowerment Issues," *World Development* 27, no. 3 (March 1999): 611–27, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(98\)00147-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(98)00147-8).

between bodies and social and class position.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the global circulation of professional athletes shows how their bodies become “object[s] of multiple expectations, demands, and hopes, many of which have little to do with sport and everything to do with kinship, communities, congregations, villages, and the state.”<sup>6</sup> In Ethiopia, women athletes become objects of multiple ideals of a working body as they deal with tensions between duelling body types as they pertain to different ideas of work.

### 5.1.1 Social Reproduction Theory

Social reproduction theorists have shown that the division between the public and the private has always been flawed, especially in reference to gender.<sup>7</sup> Recent shifts under capitalism have exacerbated the ramifications for women who are implored to embody this impossible tension. Ethiopian female athletes desire to be successful runners, caring wives, and healthy mothers simultaneously, but as social reproduction theory makes clear, the separation between production and reproduction under capitalism is a fabrication that needs to be undone.

The international athletics market in which Ethiopian athletes must work is predicated on moving frequently, sometimes migrating for good. Meanwhile, global political economic shifts in neoliberal capitalism have both augmented and been augmented by political economic changes in the business of athletics. Ethiopian women athletes and the relationships to their bodies within and through these processes elucidate how the capital and power differentials in this system play a role in how women experience their bodies and how their embodiment is valued. And the lived experiences

---

<sup>5</sup> NIKO BESNIER, “The Athlete’s Body and the Global Condition: Tongan Rugby Players in Japan,” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 3 (2012): 491–510; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Besnier 2012, 494.

<sup>7</sup> Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, 1. paperback pr (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Pr, 1987); Meg Luxton and Kate Bezanson, eds., *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006); Tithi Bhattacharya and Liselotte Vogel, eds., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

of Ethiopian women athlete workers and mothers, in turn, shed light on the aftermath on neoliberal capitalism's effects on women's transnational and migratory work.

Feminist theorists have drawn upon Marxist theories of value yet sought to revise them. They have pointed out that the labor power that people sell in the market needs to be reproduced, most obviously by producing children, who become workers in turn. But beyond biological reproduction, caring for workers – they must also be fed, clothed, sheltered, cared for, loved, and entertained in order to keep working – is an integral part of this reproduction. It is this type of unacknowledged and unpaid work that in the 1970s drew interest from scholars working at the intersection of Marxism and feminism, who wanted to showcase reproductive and other forms of gendered labour as fundamental to capital production.<sup>8</sup> The accumulation of capital exploits not only the workers, but also those who do not receive wages and whose work is not recognized as work, the labor of care that typically falls to women under patriarchal capitalist structures.

Debates about invisible feminized forms of labor have sometimes been tense. Many theorists faulted social reproduction theory for not adequately address racialized domestic workers who were paid, although most often underpaid or work performed by migrants.<sup>9</sup> Yet both performed the work of social reproduction. The role of domestic and migrant workers was instrumental in bringing to light the false separation of private and public spheres, in that these workers are not “private” or “unwaged” in the strict sense of the term. The rapid growth of a so-called “care economy” has seen labor once performed domestically by mothers and wives yet now often done by

---

<sup>8</sup> Silvia Federici, *Wages against Housework* (Bristol: Falling Wall Pr, 1975); Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, “The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community,” in *Class*, ed. Stanley Aronowitz and Michael J. Roberts (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 79–86, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119395485.ch7>.

<sup>9</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Nachdr., Pluto Classics (London: Pluto Press, 2001); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: HarperCollinsAcademic, 1991); Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, 1st ed (New York: Random House, 1981); Adelle Blackett, “Managing the Margins: Gender, Citizenship, and the International Regulation of Precarious Employment. By Leah F. VOSKO,” *International Labour Review* 150, no. 3–4 (December 2011): 457–61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1564-913X.2011.00130.x>.



low-wage migrants and people of color become crucial to social reproduction in an age of globalized financial capitalism and labour outsourcing.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1970s, as scholarly attention to social reproduction was growing, neoliberal capitalism was transforming the world.<sup>11</sup> Private enterprise was fundamentally altering work, labour, and migration, blurring even further the (already flawed) distinction between private and public life. The neoliberal recipe of fiscal austerity, anti-unionism, roll back of social services, and deregulation and privatization promoted to address economic crisis Global North in the 1970s was exported to the Global South through so-called "structural adjustment" programs with often devastating consequences. At the same time, certain financial centres of the world and multinational private conglomerates became ascendant, which would come to shape the dimensions of international sport tremendously.<sup>12</sup>

These changes have made life for many in in the Global South ever more hazardous and working conditions even more exploitative. As historian Tithi Bhattacharya points out, there is an attack “by capital on global labour to try and restructure *production* in the workplaces and the social processes of *reproduction* of labour power in homes, communities, and the niches of everyday life.”<sup>13</sup> This makes it imperative for us to turn to the experiences of workers a part of this global labor supply chain, like Ethiopian women runners, to understand how life has changed for working people with capital explicitly attempting to seize control of their public and private lives.

## ***5.2 Running Between the Lines***

In 2013, when I came to Ethiopia for the first time, Tigist and Kalkidan were coming into peak form. I arranged to stay at a training camp in Sululta, Ethiopia, which is just north of Addis

---

<sup>10</sup> Fraser, *Social Reproduction Theory*.

<sup>11</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 1. publ. in paperback, reprint. (twice) (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Niko Besnier, Domenica Gisella Calabrò, and Daniel Guinness, eds., *Sport, Migration, and Gender in the Neoliberal Age* (London ; New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction*, 183

Ababa, where I would return the following year. Sululta is home to many runners, who enjoy the higher altitudes, fresher air, and endless meadows and forests in which to train, in comparison to the grimy chaos of Addis Ababa.

I found that the road to Sululta from Addis Ababa winds straight up a mountain and is in a constant state of disrepair. Massive potholes back up traffic, as does a federal checkpoint at the top of the mountain where police check for contraband. The 20-kilometer journey can take close to two hours. The checkpoint overlooks Addis Ababa and greets travellers with new bi-lingual signs in Amharic and the local language, Oromiffa. Eucalyptus trees line the road. The time of year dictates the vista, as the dry season in December means the meadows will be tans and yellows, only to turn green and brown once more when the rains begin. After a few more kilometers, the road veers to the right and the Yaya Village – a famous hotel now owned by Ethiopian legend, Haile Gebreselassie. Many running fans and professional athletes from around the world have been to, or know of, the now infamous Yaya Village.

It was there, behind the hotel, where I met Tigist, Kalkidan, and the three other women living at the camp. We lived in basic quarters. Two bedrooms with bunkbeds, corrugated tin rooves, and paper-thin walls. There was one other room to cook and eat mostly basic high-carb meals – rice, pasta, and *injera ba shiro*. As a vegetarian, it did not bother me that meat was only on the menu once a week, though the women complained about it. Athletes, when not in the fasting season, and once they can afford it, see eating meat on a near-regular basis as a central part of fuelling success. But meat more than once per week was not in the budget.

Fasting, or *tsom*, is an important part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian religion. Tigist and Kalkidan are both Orthodox, which means they follow a form of fasting in which, during most of the year, they eat only vegan foods on Wednesday and Friday. However, there are several fasting seasons throughout the year. Before Easter, for example, for 55 days, religious Orthodox Christians

will maintain a vegan diet every single day. Several other long periods preceding holidays are often considered periods of “fasting.” However, often after big holidays, and certainly on the day of, periods of eating a lot of meat and dairy often follow. Meat is not only culturally important throughout Ethiopia (as a vegetarian, I have come to know this quite well), but is seen as crucially important for athletic success.

The group had a coach, and I joined in the hard training runs as much as I was able. But slower, and worried about being a nuisance, I mainly ran in the slower sessions. It was here that I quickly learned the style of Ethiopian forest running, which means crucially being with others – to avoid pestering men not to mention getting eaten by a hyena and – and passing along messages through body language about upcoming roots, rocks, and other treacherous impediments to training.

People that train in Ethiopia for just a few days will have likely experienced this type of training. Most athletes, when training in the forest, run in straight lines, and zig-zag through the trees. When the leader spots something on the ground that could cause a stumble, she points or snaps to indicate to the person in pace behind her, and so on along the line. Because of these risks, the running style is one that stresses collaboration, synchronicity, and rhythm; falling out of step with the other athletes is not only demoralizing – it places others at risk. Despite so many of the rewards and work seen as being individual endeavours, running in Ethiopia is a collective form of work. These runs were seldom less than an hour, and often would not end where they began, sometimes requiring a ten, or twenty minute walk, back to the compound. The single file of runners made conversations difficult. And I often was able to ask questions thereafter, while scrubbing our clothes, washing our shoes, drinking coffee, or knitting.

In my first interview with Tigist, I was surprised to learn that this was her first time training consistently, without interruption, and with reliable financial and emotional support. Born in a town

called Chereka not far from Bahir Dar, she developed health problems in early childhood and was sent to live with her aunt and uncle in Addis Ababa. People in the town thought she might have been marked by the *buda* “evil eye” and her family feared for her reputation.<sup>14</sup> At her aunt and uncle’s home, she was responsible for the bulk of the housework. When she saw children playing soccer in the neighbourhood, she would join them. But when her uncle learned about her playing, he called her a *doorije* “delinquent, hooligan” and beat her. This was not proper behavior for a young woman, he said, and she might bring shame to his family.

As soon as Tigist could move out, she did. She took a job at a café in Akaki, south of Addis Ababa, where top-tier athletes often go to do hard training *korokonj* soft surfaces. *Korokonj* can describe a range of surfaces but might best loosely be translated to “rough road.” Training on *korokonj* is generally a bit smoother than gravel, and harder than dirt, but does not have the smoothness of asphalt. Every now and then, athletes would also use it to describe uneven training. If they were experiencing some injuries, or some ups and downs, they might say training was not going so well – it was like *korokonj*.

After training, runners would often come to the café in their track suits, which kindled Tigist’s dreams of being an athlete again. They would talk about their experiences racing in France, Turkey, Japan, and the United States, and don sports wares that can only be purchased outside Ethiopia. She asked her boss if she could change her work shifts at the café so that she could train in the morning and work in the evening. And he said yes.

### 5.2.1 Fulfilling Basic Needs

In the following years, she trained, got injured, took up a new job, and did it all over again – a fairly common cycle for athletes who do not achieve early success. She worked at an ale house, then

---

<sup>14</sup> The next chapter will delve into the specific social and economic dynamics of *buda*.

worked as a domestic help in a Canadian family's home, then worked in a supermarket, all the time continuing training. As was common among young athletes who were not members of funded clubs, Tigist would join a group of athletes who would each contribute a small sum every month to pay a coach for instruction. She reflected:

At the beginning I didn't have a lot of demands for running. I didn't ask for many things. But later on, the more I ran, the more my expenses were for shoes. So I had to work in the afternoon to cover those expenses. I sold *Sambusa* and made 400 birr [US\$6] a month to use for expenses and I had to quit education to continue running so I could make enough money.<sup>15</sup> If all of your needs are fulfilled – like shoes, and sports clothes – like you use for asphalt or *korokonj* and so on, then it's just your strength that is required to win and I think that's easy. But if those things aren't fulfilled it won't be easy.

Tigist refers to her “needs” to run, but she had to work other jobs without a partner, family, club, or coach for support.

Many athletes believed it would be relatively easy to be successful if they had had enough money and the proper materials. Junior athletes not yet picked up by a top club would point fingers at elite Ethiopians who didn't invest in young athletes pursuing sport, or the EAF, or the government. They assumed athletes in the U.S. and Europe were receiving support from their governments and other institutions (or rightly, that they could just sometimes afford their own materials), but that Ethiopia was a difficult place to see one's basic needs met.

Despite lacking basic resources, athletes like Tigist wanted to not to appear needy, but legitimate herself as an athlete. Like all junior athletes, she would diligently scrub her clothes and shoes so that they look new at every training session, only to get muddied again. In addition, young athletes often identify themselves as athletes even before they secure a spot in a club or with

---

<sup>15</sup> *Sambusa* is a popular street food made up of lentils and fried dough.

management. There was a pre-professionalizing neoliberal dynamic to the expectation of professionalism from the starts.<sup>16</sup>

Many scholars have observed that labor under neoliberalism often encourages workers to form attachments to their working subjectivities and for work to pervade all sectors of their lives. I would argue that athletics, especially with the ability to work being so dependent on having a strong and healthy body, follows suit here as well. However, this does not mean women, including athletes, are free from the responsibility of producing and reproducing domestic spaces. For example, Tigist noted:

My brother always told me to stop [running] and so did my mother. My father was a little bit more encouraging but overall my family didn't like the idea of me running. Whenever, I would talk to my brother he would say "Are you still running? Why? There's no point. You should stop now." My family thought that I was wasting my time here with the running. I always felt anxious when I would go home to visit because they wouldn't see any big changes in my lifestyle, they had hoped that I would make something of myself once I got to the city but I hadn't really had much success. They thought I was struggling for no reason. For them, they would hope to see me married with a good life. Maybe I would have a child. They would want me to be able to support myself and this lifestyle here. They would also want me to bring some of that home and be able to support them to some extent. Those were the kinds of significant changes they had in mind. More important than money and success was marriage. I would come home unmarried, without kids and they would be disappointed.

Pursuing athletics would not free Tigist from the expectation of raising a family. To the contrary, her family wanted her to become *more* fat, get married, and start a family. If she stopped running and was

---

<sup>16</sup> Ilana Gershon, *Down and out in the New Economy: How People Find (or Don't Find) Work Today* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017); Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antivork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

seen as healthier she might be seen as more valuable for marriage. Because she had not yet delivered material results to the family, they viewed her career aspirations, and her body type by proxy, as the wrong pathway.

### **5.2.3 Who sets the pace?**

The work Ethiopian women runners do to become a thin and productive athlete has its own spatial and economic teleology, driven by a geography of money and opportunity. The density of geographical and financial opportunities in European, North American, and increasingly Asian, metropolises, means that Ethiopian athletes train to run outside Ethiopia. That is where the money in athletics is located – *Ethiopia wuch*, or “outside Ethiopia.” Like all women at the camp, Tigist was looking to go “outside.”

Early on, however, and often before they enter into a relationship with an agent, women have entered into relationships with men. As I learned in Sululta, meeting one’s future partner on training runs in the forest was quite common. Ethiopian female athletes want to train with men; they see it as critically advantageous, if not essential, to success in the sport. This gives male athletes an opportunity for short and longer-term relationships with women who also belong to the running world.

Men, too, view women being able to train with them as advantageous as well. They also often think and openly express that women have an advantage in building careers. Not only is women’s sport just seen as a less competitive endeavour, but because they always can guarantee faster training partners – men – the perception is that they can get stronger with greater ease. Being able to lock into a pace and rhythm and focus solely on the person’s footsteps in front of you, both in training and races, can be a huge advantage. It may not seem like keeping track of pace is very taxing, but, as I found myself, being able to just focus on the act of running, and being able to “go to sleep” (meaning, in the running vernacular, free one’s mind from pacing and tactics) is a huge

advantage in distance running. Women, it was noted, had far more opportunities to take advantage of this reality.

Within Ethiopia, too, at elite training groups, male pacemakers attend training sessions regularly and get paid a small salary by the management to pace the women in practice. Although the boyfriends and husbands of pacemakers were often once pacemakers themselves, they often mock the pacemakers currently laboring to make their wives better – playing on emasculating tropes of men working for little money to advance female careers. The King Mesfins of the world (the husband of an elite athlete mentioned in the previous chapter) who so irritated Chrises and Husseins of the international running economy, often find their wives in places like the forests of Suluta. Kalkidan explained this conundrum to me in 2013:

It is always good to train with the boys because you notice so much improvement in your running when you train with them. However, the first thing they ask you when you ask to train with them is if you have a boyfriend. They want you to date them if you want to train with them. If you don't want to they usually won't train with you. If you try and force the situation by just running with them then they will tell you to stop.

Mesi, another woman in the training group, had begun a relationship with a man who was pacing her shortly after the young women had begun living at the camp. Mesi was the fastest runner, and on several training days, Kalkidan and Tigist began joining Mesi, her boyfriend, and a few other male runners on their training runs. One of the men wanted Kalkidan to become his girlfriend, but Kalkidan was in a committed relationship. Mesi delivered the message to Kalkidan, in which she explained she and Tigist would no longer be allowed to train with them.

Sometimes these arrangements yield fruitful results. Sometimes men may pace their girlfriends and wives to impressive performances. Sometimes, they will even be able to stop running, hire a pacemaker, and support their wives in other ways. In some ways, the dynamic appears as if



typical gendered divisions of labor become reversed. At an elite competition in France, I was talking to the husband of a top Ethiopian athlete in the hallway of the hotel. I asked him a little bit about his own background in the sport and was unsurprised to learn that he, too, had been an athlete. He viewed this as an asset, understanding the things that his wife needed to succeed. But he was keen on making it clear to me that his work with his wife's running career was a full-time job. Though uncompensated, cleaning the house, taking his wife to training, cooking for her, were critical for her success and recovery. While his wife was out achieving televised glory, he felt he had played a key part in getting there.

Yet such arrangements are not a simple reversal of gendered roles, at least in the sense of providing women more freedom. Men might seek to support their wives emotionally and physically, but their efforts sometimes yield unintended effects. Husbands, for example, sometimes viewed a part of their role by also making sure that their wives were maintaining the correct body weight, or what was called "the kilo." I once heard a story that immediately after his wife gave birth, an athlete's husband asked the doctor how quickly she could resume training. When several weeks had gone by, and she was still not feeling ready to run, he beat her.

#### **5.2.4 No love is pure**

It is important to contextualize running partnerships within a larger context of Ethiopian relationships. Once, while in the office in West Chester, Pennsylvania, when Chris was ranting about the meddling of a runner's husband, he shared a long tangential backstory of how the couple came to form a relationship. By his account, the woman was a "sweet girl" but married "this asshole" because "it made more sense for the religion and the families. In Ethiopia, there is no love. Marriage is like running to them – it's a business." Unknowingly, Chris was echoing the assertions of Africanist anthropologists that "love" is not necessarily a main element of marriage.

In his essay on male friendship in Ethiopia, anthropologist Daniel Mains notes that most of the men he worked with agreed that *nitsub fikir* (“pure love”), in which “neither partner is expected to provide monetary support for the other” is, generally speaking, quite rare.<sup>17</sup> Marriage is generally viewed, by both men and women, as strategic, and more valuable than the more romanticized Western expectation “pure love.”<sup>18</sup> Other times, this is predicated on labor opportunities. As anthropologist, Anita Hannig, has argued, a *sit’ota* (gift) marriage is one in which a union occurs so that one family can gain access to a man or woman to care for another’s sick family member, or lend their manual labor on the farm.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the essential material and logistical ties to marriage continuously upend the ways they are often thought as inextricably tied by people and institutions in the West. Chris’ need to explain this love in terms that oppose it to the Western norm of disintegrated romantic love, and with a level of disgust, reifies the general notion shared by many who work in athletics that athletes end up being greedy, and only caring about money, but anthropological literature suggests that running is not the primary means by which relationships void of “pure love” come to be.

There are a multitude of material reasons for marriage in Ethiopia.<sup>20</sup> Among them are social or economic mobility. But parents and family members bestow a particular value in women bearing children. Parents will often utter *abebayen liy* — “let me see my flower bloom,” which carries both material and sentimental valences of value. While the joy of having children certainly figures for both

---

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Mains, “Friends and Money: Balancing Affection and Reciprocity among Young Men in Urban Ethiopia: Friends and Money,” *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 2 (May 2013): 335–46, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12025>.

<sup>18</sup> Mains, “Friends and Money,” 343.

<sup>19</sup> Hannig, *Beyond Surgery*, 36.

<sup>20</sup> Hannig notes the multitude of ways in which marriages take place in Ethiopia: These can include forging strategic alliances between two families, producing offspring, gaining access to land and inheritance, securing help for agricultural and domestic work, and seeking the comfort of loving companionship. The anxiety of their daughter “standing alone (*qomo qer*)—derived from the verb *qome*, which means “stand” or “stop,” and *qerre*, which means “be left” or “go out of use”—features prominently in parental decisions to arrange a marriage for her at a young age (the term for an old maid is *qomo qerret*).”

daughters and their parents, allowing their flower bloom is part of seeing the entire value of a woman expressed in a public-facing way. Being a woman athlete, then, carries no different distinctions from being a woman, more generally, in terms of expectations of getting married and having children.

What *is* different in running is that the gender role reversal that makes the woman the chief economic earner. And while many women do have well-intentioned husbands, dozens of women have spoken about the ways that a system of gendered exploitation has been structured around their labor. Women I met during my fieldwork told me they'd seen men hit their wives in front of their training groups after a poor performance in practice. Other women have been beaten or chastised by their husbands or boyfriends for becoming pregnant at inopportune times, or they've been left stranded at training sessions if they did not perform well. I once witnessed the husband of a top athlete drive home in the middle of a training session when his wife had an off day, leaving her to find her own transportation. The next year when I saw her alone after a run, another athlete told me he had divorced her and taken all of the money she had earned. She had moved out of her home and began carpooling with a man who offered to be her pacer.

In 2021, Kenyan long-distance runner Agnes Tirop was found dead in her home in Iten, Kenya. Tirop had finished fourth in the 5,000 meters at the Tokyo Olympics, and a month before her death, she set a world record for the women's-only 10K. Her husband, Ibrahim Rotich, was immediately considered a prime suspect—a few days later, the police found him allegedly attempting to flee to a neighboring country.<sup>21</sup> While the violent circumstances around Tirop's death were shocking for many fans of the sport for many people working in elite athletics in both Kenya and Ethiopia, the tragedy wasn't a total aberration.

---

<sup>21</sup> BBC, "Agnes Tirop: Husband arrested in Kenya after Athlete's Death," BBC, October 15, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58919391>. At the time of writing Rotich has been charged with murder but has not been convicted. He remains in police custody awaiting a bail hearing.

Women spoke both openly and in private about feeling like “cash cows,” and not knowing what to do about the fact that men began recruiting women at younger ages to take charge of their finances. Women have often explained to me that going to the city and entering the world of athletics is scary in general, and terrifying alone. Finding a man to protect them from other men that might take advantage of them felt like a rushed and stressful process, but one that often led to a sad reality of linking up with mal-intentioned husbands and boyfriends from the get go.

In most cases the understanding is that a woman likely has less access to cash and labor opportunities (although this is certainly changing with the global proletarianization of labor) but through sex, marriage, and willingness to do the bulk of what is typically unremunerated labor, she can gain access to material support. In athletics, these roles can dramatically shift where the wages are won by the woman and invisible labor toiled by the man; however, the eventual or simultaneous biological labors of giving birth, and at other times still maintaining the home, will be considered women’s work and stress the bodies of women athletes in ways seen detrimental to athletic recovery and growth.

### ***5.3 Embedded in Tension***

As Tigist noted, her family’s desire for her to get married, wanting to see their daughter “bloom,” was in tension with her chosen path of running. Moving to Addis, and hoping to move abroad, the trajectory for a valuable athlete, meant she was in a constant embodied state of tension with being valued as a potential child bearer and potential wage earner.

A very successful runner, Habitam Alemu, who I got to know quite well after accompanying her to a doctor’s appointment in Germany, explained this situation to me quite clearly. She was born in a town from the same region as Tigist, in similar circumstances. She was from a town called Mer Awi, about 35 kilometers from Bahir Dar. She had two older brothers, two younger brothers, and

three younger sisters. When her father died, because she was the oldest girl, she was expected to help her mother take care of the home after going to school.

While in school, she learned that she had a lot of natural speed, beating everyone in the school races. Her brother moved to Bahir Dar to work, and there learned about Ethiopia's famous runners watching them on television. In their countryside, they knew nothing about the legacy of Ethiopian runners, because they did not have a television or radio. Her brother thought this could be a great opportunity for her and their entire family.

Habitam's brother encouraged her with gusto, but her mother opposed. This constant fighting went on pause when Habitam suffered from abdominal pain and learned she had appendicitis. After an appendectomy, her mother was convinced the ailment was from her training, and told her that would be the end of her running career. "My mother said, 'No, you were about to die, you are recovering. Don't start. You should continue your education.' But I hated school. When I was in the class all I was thinking about was running. Only running. And she kept refusing and my brother would come and talk to her. And they said let her start. After that, the school competition started and I began to win. This hurt my mother's heart."

It was not her mother's personal hesitation, Habitam explained, but the way things were in the countryside. "She was afraid I would die," she defended her mother, "And you know, in the countryside, it's not normal for girls to shine up. It's not like that. This was just the societal attitude. My mom was just being a good person and trying to protect her kids."

Because of this school success, Habitam was recruited by a government club in Addis Ababa, a critical step, and moved to the capital city to begin training at Mebrat Haile, earning a meagre salary of 480 birr/month. "When you are in the countryside, you think Addis is like Europe. So coming to Addis was a really big deal. But it was really difficult. And it's really difficult especially

for women. I learned quickly that the only choice I had was to have a boyfriend.” In order embed herself properly in Addis Ababa.

This type of protection is cautioned among women athletes before they get success. There are indeed practical purposes, like training, and other forms of assistance. But the other implicit assumption is that men will need to be the face of negotiations with agents, managers, and the like (even as the agents are not necessarily in favor of these gender roles), and thus integral to the overall success of many of the women athletes.

At Mebrat Haile, Habitam met Mule, another middle-distance athlete. “After one month working together we moved in together,” she said. Although he was pretty good, he had some injury problems, and because life in Addis was expensive and difficult, they had to make a decision. “After a little while we decided we either needed to focus on me or him. I would have to care for him or him care for me. He was having some Achilles problems so he said we should make me the priority and he would support me.”

For a while, they still struggled, but then the plan panned out. Habitam finished on the podium at the national championship, and shortly thereafter got picked up by an agent and was racing abroad. I got to know Habitam much better in Europe, when I was asked by the agency to go to an indoor competition in France, where I dormed with her and few other Ethiopian runners competing at the Indoor World Tour. From there, she and I travelled together to Munich, Germany, to go to a follow-up appointment with a sports doctor. I was there to translate and make sure everything went over smoothly, but it was my first time in Munich and she had been there a few times.

Not only did Habitam remember exactly how to get to the office – my ability to use Google Maps was moot – but she had clearly developed particular strategies in her international travel to cope just fine despite not speaking any English. She gladly showed me around Munich and had very

clear ideas about the things she wanted to eat – pasta dishes to which she could simply point at the add-ons – and places she wanted to shop. She did ask me if I knew of better places to get cheap perfumes, jeans, and gifts, which were expected from her upon her arrival to Ethiopia, but as she later told me in a more formal interview, “When you come from the countryside like I told you, you learn how to survive. When you’re a *gebere lij* (the child of a farmer) you have strength. I can do all of this work. And when you’re a woman, it’s much harder. So you learn how to protect yourself in any circumstance.”

Habitam expressed excitement for the day her mother will come to Addis Ababa and see the life she has created. Whereas before her mother wanted her to start a family and stay in the countryside, the support she has given her means that her mother now encourages her to wait longer to have children and make the most of her athletic career. “I still don’t think she has any idea about my life here,” Habitam noted, “I’ve had to change so much.”

The process of disembedding is not necessarily linear and shifts and changes continuously. Habitam, even as she goes to global championship events, and learns to thrive in a range of circumstances, understands that many elements of her life decisions – including marrying Mule – were important critical steps to her development as an athlete. That they did not start out of love or passion makes them no less important – only a part of the working life.

#### **5.4 “Outside” Hazards**

While Habitam’s trajectory has been smooth and yielded storybook results, this is not necessarily the case for many Ethiopian women athletes. Although going “outside” for Ethiopian athletes is often the start of a fruitful career, those with less assurances that they will continue to find success in the sport, are fewer than often reported. As such, many take advantage of the first time to go “outside” by trying to start a life elsewhere.

The opportunity for Tigist to go “outside” came in 2014, although health complications would keep her from becoming one of the next Ethiopian greats. I was in Ethiopia for the second time, and in the year I was gone, she had gotten married, gotten pregnant, had a miscarriage, and suffered from severe tendonitis in the knee. She managed to control her knee pain with a rigorous stretching program and by overusing anti-inflammatories, and she did not miss more than two consecutive days of training.

It was also in that year, when she was fit and showed promise, that she met Roberto, a running enthusiast from Spain who came to Ethiopia to train in the highlands. Tigist ran with him frequently during his stay, showing him the best routes to take through the forest and the flat meadows ideal for interval training. Before leaving Ethiopia in 2013, he gave Tigist a training t-shirt from his running club in Spain and told her he would invite her to race with the club.

Roberto was not an IAAF-registered agent and did not intend to help Tigist find a sponsor or contract. While most athletes in Ethiopia seek a foreign manager to find them races abroad, some like Tigist have found less conventional means of going “outside.” As detailed previously, most gradually link up with an established management agency who specializes in getting up and coming athletes visas, sports materials, racing opportunities, and later on, appearance fees and sponsorships. It is unclear exactly what Roberto’s motivations were; I have heard some stories of running enthusiasts looking to “do good” or bring some clout to their clubs abroad. Some people believe that there are sneaky men like Roberto who may be looking to enter the athletics world, even with the purpose of taking advantage of some lesser known athletes, by bringing them to race abroad before some of the bigger name agents get a hold of their talents. Athletes, though sometimes completely blindsided by these processes, may use the motivations of foreign agents or pseudo-agents, to their own ends. Some runners even used sport specifically with the intent to migrate to Europe or the U.S.



just to leave Ethiopia in search of steady work. Before she left Tigist acknowledged that she might be risking her chance to sign in the future with a registered agent, but that “it was a good chance.”

Tigist was also willing to take this chance because she had forgone a similar opportunity in the past. When she was much younger, around sixteen, her coach asked her to meet her in a café with some documents to discuss an opportunity to race abroad. She met him and he told her he would send her and five others to a competition. When she handed him his papers, he grabbed her hand and started to caress it, indicating what many women have learned to fear – that opportunities come with heavy strings attached. “I had some milk in front of me on the table,” she said. “I spilled it all over him. I tore the papers up. The other five teammates lost the opportunity as well and they all blamed me for it.”

Sexual harassment and abuse, particularly by coaches and other male athletes, was a well-known hazard of becoming an elite women runner. While getting a boyfriend or a partner would certainly prevent or decrease the likelihood that women may be taken advantage of in this way, even if people told me that they, themselves, had not been abused by coaches, *everyone* knew of stories that other women had. Names were seldom shared, and there was also a great deal of rumour and speculation, which I will address more thoroughly in the next chapter, about the circumstances surrounding these stories.

Indeed, I learned in the following years that another athlete with whom we lived was actually blamed for engaging in sexual acts with a coach. “One day she went into the room,” with him, Tigist told me. “She said Coach wanted to give her a ‘massage.’ But we all knew. Me and Kalkidan, we never trusted Mihret. We knew she was doing whatever Coach wanted to get a chance.”

#### **5.4.1 From Athlete to Asylum Seeker**

Tigist did not want to mess up the opportunity she believed she had squandered by not giving in to her previous coaches sexual desires, and therefore the opportunity to go abroad again,

even if it did not seem secure. She had come too far, she thought. If running did not work out, Tigist often said that she would likely move to the Middle East (Lebanon or Kuwait) like many women she knew had done to find domestic work, which was often underpaid and risked exposing them to sexual, physical, and verbal abuse, but could still enable them to send remittances to their families. Many women I interviewed mentioned this as a back-up plan of sorts. Going back the countryside to get married was a distant second, but having left the home their dreams were often oriented elsewhere. Tigist having hoped for years for a chance like this one, against the desires of many of her family members, an opportunity to race with Roberto's sub-elite club in Spain was a welcome opportunity.

Roberto and Tigist connected on Facebook before he returned to Spain and he assured her that he would be in touch. By the time he did, however, he did not know about Tigist's pregnancy, miscarriage, and knee problems. He assumed that she was still training full time and she reassured him that this was the case. Roberto's club had three races coming up in a few months and he wrote her that as long as she got a visa (an enormous hurdle for early-career athletes), his club would pay for the visit.

Tigist and her husband Chalu asked me to write to Roberto a long message on Facebook to ask him for a formal invitation letter to take to the embassy, necessary for even the most elite athletes applying for visas. Tigist's passport showed no evidence of international travel, so it was far from guaranteed that should would be issued the visa. It is often very difficult for athletes to get their first visa abroad, and even more difficult when the first country is a European one. Many athletes first race in China, both because the prize money is often lower and the barrier to entry much lower. From there, if they return, they may be able to get a visa to go to Europe, and later on the United States. The guiding principle, however, is that they must show that they have returned to Ethiopia from being abroad before being granted a visa to Europe. But Roberto phoned a friend who could

write her an invitation letter for the race, and the Ethiopian Athletics Federation also provided a letter of support. Tigist returned from the Spanish embassy one week later, visa in hand.

Tigist was relieved to get her documents in order, but also nervous. This was not only because she had not been training – and Roberto expected her to arrive in strong running shape – but also because she had not decided whether she would return to Ethiopia. She would eventually come back, a little more than two years past her three-month visa expiration date, and from Belgium rather than Spain.

Tigist left for Spain and when she arrived Roberto was surprised by the weight she had gained and her poor condition. In the first scheduled race she came in third; a race she would easily have won the year before. After the race, she walked with a limp. Roberto told her he was going to send her back home early because she was clearly injured and could not perform. He changed her return ticket and two weeks later, he dropped her off at the airport and her bags arrived in Addis Ababa, but she did not. She had gathered up as much money as she could and boarded a bus to Belgium – a place she believed she had some contacts through running in Ethiopia – where she spent the next two years living in refugee centers, attempting to navigate an exceedingly complicated labyrinth of immigration policies, strategies, and necessary deceit:

Everyone told me to lie. They told me to tell the authorities I was Eritrean, or Oromo. They also told me to tell them I had no family, they had all died, my husband, my father. I was so stressed, I got sick. I thought that if I lied and said those things they would be true. I don't like to talk like this, to zig zag. I was so stressed I lost so many kilos at that time.

When she was initially leaving for Spain, she had fretted about her weight gain, but now Tigist was concerned about her daily survival than pursuing an athletic career. She needed not to be so skinny so as to lose all of her energy, but needed to be thin to be light and run fast “outside.”

The pressure to perform well on one's first trip "outside" cannot be overstated. Although Tigist went by unconventional means abroad, the depth of talent and opportunities for growth in the transnational athletics market are limited for Ethiopian athletes. Underperforming abroad may be the last chance for a runner, or at least a very, very, long time (over a year) may pass until another opportunity.

Once in Belgium Tigist reached out to a Somali-born runner who represented Belgium and frequently travelled to Ethiopia to train. He visited her at the center and invited her to a training session. The coach was impressed by her trial run and she began coming regularly to training. Although she began to think that her purposes for going abroad were morphing into something new, having hoped for so many years to emigrate for athletics, meant that she still held on to the coveted aspiration of becoming an elite runner.

But the body does not forget, and Tigist's knee certainly did not. Because she was able to see a doctor at no cost, she got her first MRI and was told that without surgery, she would probably never be able to run competitively. But surgery was out of the question. Not only could she not afford it, but she also lacked a strong network of people or resources to support her after the surgery.

She called Chalu and "told him how depressed I was. I wanted to come home. But he kept telling me to stay and try to get work. That he would join me later on. But people, they don't believe you. They don't want to believe you." Tigist often reflects about how her husband and family members did not believe how difficult life was in Europe, which figured in Ethiopian imagination as a land of greater plenty. They were confused as to why she had not yet found a job, even though she had explained that she was not legally allowed to work. She spent two years without documents, meeting other asylum-seekers who had waited more than a decade to be legalized. She often remarked that people in Ethiopia whom she loved dearly did not *want* to believe her.

The lawyer whom she had consulted urged her to stay and wait to be granted asylum, thinking that her case would eventually go through. She had a former coach and employer write her a letter of support; they noted that she was smart and hard-working and would be an asset to Belgian society. However, when both her coach and her lawyer learned that she wanted to return to Ethiopia, they did not want to believe her either.

Regardless of the reason why people migrate, family members back home often do not fully appreciate the hardships faced abroad. The knowledge that many have, despite having never left Ethiopia, is that there are ample work opportunities and that life is much easier in Europe, the U.S., and Canada. However, the realities many immigrants – both documented and undocumented – face abroad make the opportunities far more bleak. Returning is uncommon, but not only because many immigrants do not want to; Tigist told me that other immigrants she knew expressed their internal struggles about bring in Europe to her as well. But, as she would often lament, “no one at home believes you,” they would stay for fear of being distrusted upon return.

In 2016, when I was in Ethiopia for my first pre-dissertation fieldwork trip, I went to visit Chalu at work. When I arrived, he told me Tigist had come back to Ethiopia three weeks before. Excited and shocked, I ran over to their house and we spent the next several hours catching up. She brought out a jar of Nutella and asked me, “Hannah, have you seen this one before?” I laughed and when I declined eating it by the spoonful, she said, “I love this one. But in Belgium, I did not eat it. Now already I’m becoming fat. But I need to start working again.” Work meant training.

Later, Chalu came home from work and we all had dinner. He noted that when she came back from Belgium, “her kilos had gone down too much. She wouldn’t eat there.” When they spoke over the phone shortly before Tigist returned, she told him that she could not eat. She kept hearing that she was too sad and her health was declining and finally agreed that she should give up on her asylum procedure and return to Ethiopia. That was the end of Chalu’s own dreams of a future life

for the two of them in Belgium. At once resigned and more relaxed, he said, “Now she’s starting to get fat. I think it’s enough training.” Even though her athletic pursuits had given them the desired chance at migrating, he wanted her to stop running. Here, too, he expressed a broader desire for her to be healthier in general, and not just in a condition to make money through running. And although Tigest would periodically express to me that he did not really believe making life work in Belgium was as difficult as it was for her, it seemed to be her bodily decline that convinced him to support her return.

In the following few months, Tigest slowly realized that her hopes of becoming a star would not come true. Yet, despite persistent and intense knee pain, she kept training. “I know I want to do something, but I don’t know anything but training,” she told me. “It would be nice to start a business, but that would be difficult.” When I stayed at her house and attempted to reduce the portion size of wots (Ethiopian stews) that she was serving me, she would urge me, “but this is good for sport.” And on the few mornings on which we went running together, neither of us in the shape that we had once been in, we still carried the mindset. “Running is more difficult when we’re fat,” she joked.

Being skinny was always stressed in running circles, but so was the need to fuel oneself with the proper foods, to handle the demands of training. Meat, as mentioned before, was seen as critical to success. So were certain foods like milk, *injera*, and *besso* – a barley drink that athletes would always joke was a local form of “doping” (performance enhancing drugs). Athletes would often bring copious amounts of this flour, to be mixed with water, in their bags when they travelled for competition. Another integral part of the diet was eating local honey, which I was frequently told would help me fend off sickness and make me stronger. Because I did not eat meat and drink milk, and because I was often told I did not eat enough, I was not going to be a strong enough runner.

That being said, counterbalancing eating a lot of the right foods with being skinny as an athlete was a complicated, and constantly treacherous endeavor.

After returning from Belgium, Tigist became pregnant again. She had terrible morning sickness, worrying about being "fat" enough to nurse. And though she did deliver a healthy baby, she spent the following month sick in the hospital, furthering her anxieties. Chalu was also worried. He often told me, "I was scared when her kilo would go down. Now she's fat" – they both laughed – "it's good for the baby."

When I visited Tigist shortly after her baby's first birthday, we looked through old photographs together. With nearly every picture, she remarked about how skinny she used to be. She missed being thin and fit and identifying as an athlete. "I want to start training again, but you know, when I say this, Chalu gets very stressed. He worries when I do not eat enough that I won't have enough milk for the baby. Maybe when I stop breastfeeding."

Tigist also realized that continuing to train would raise eyebrows about her mothering. Like training for athletes, caring for children is serious work that requires enormous physical and emotional commitment. If she was not training to be a professional athlete, engaging in intense exercise might come across as worse than a waste of time: she might be seen as irresponsible and selfish, damaging her body and not looking after her family. Yet her embodied memory of the occasional euphoria of endurance training remains with her. As much as it was also labor, Tigist sometimes just misses running.

Aspiring runners talk about training in the language of serious work. Exercise or jogging is an activity that a few wealthy people engage in, not for those from more humble backgrounds hoping to get a head. A friend once noted that, in a neighborhood of Addis Ababa where wealthy Ethiopian migrants living overseas have built second homes in their native country and spend part of the year,

“you see many people jogging here in the mornings because they are rich, so they want to live longer.” By contrast, would-be professional athletes in Ethiopia exercise to make a living.

### ***5.5 Productive Advantages of a Pandemic***

“Well at least now Bereket has an *advantage*,” Alem said, using the English word “advantage.” I looked confused. Often English words are be thrown in sentences spoken in Amharic to carry a particular or slightly nuanced version of the American English definition, and I needed explanation. “With all of the races being cancelled, now she has *advantage*. She can have a child and only miss one year.” Alem was explaining to me that Ethiopian women athletes usually need to take a break from running for two years to have a child – one for the pregnancy, and the following for recovery.

The few successful American and European women who have taken far more aggressive approaches to training through pregnancy and coming back more quickly, are dismissed by most Ethiopian women and men. On the one hand, this would be seen as shameful – not taking proper care of oneself or the baby. But, even if presented with evidence that training through pregnancy has not adverse medical effects, people reject these premises as incorrect and unsubstantiated. It is as if one must choose between running and motherhood, between being "thin" and "fat," with little possibility for reconciling these aspirations.

The balancing act between elite racing and child rearing remains almost impossible. This became even clearer when COVID-19 set in beginning in January 2020, and serious economic and psychological blows were being dealt to Ethiopian athletes. The cancellation of all races, beginning in China and then spreading to Europe and the United States, abruptly disrupted the preparation of athletes who were training. But more significantly, with the exception of top-tier contracted athletes, the competitions that were terminated meant that many athletes would not be receiving their next paycheck. In the transnational running world, many African athletes make their wages solely or primarily through winning prize monies at competitions. A global pandemic thus amplified not only



domestic concerns about a deadly virus entering Ethiopia; it also made clear how economic slowdowns in other geographical centers could render the lives of African workers precarious at home.

Doing ethnographic fieldwork in Ethiopia with women athletes before and during this global pandemic meant seeing the slowdown, panic, and concerned responses of athletes at different stages. Periods of uncertainty turned into periods of darkness laying bare the underlying precarious conditions inherent in the work of international athletics and global commerce. Despite the idealistic notion that running often provides economic and social, transformations for women in Ethiopia, the onset of COVID-19 made clear just how precarious athletic labor can be.

Amid so many negative conversations, it stuck out that Alem managed to find a bright spot in a dark place for her friend – an *advantage* of COVID-19 – which was that a global pandemic would be an ideal time to have a child. Indeed, after a break in fieldwork it also turned out that many professional women athletes in top training groups had chosen to have children when the reality that all competitions would be cancelled really began to sink in. The many women athletes who took advantage of these circumstances urged me to question: under what conditions was this considered advantageous? How does work in a capitalist world render opportunities within its shortfalls to be considered beneficial to some? And *who* could determine what was an advantage, and when?

I had been training with Alem and Bereket together a few times per week, along with a few other men athletes, for months leading up to COVID-19's spread. Bereket, an elite athlete with international wins to her name, was coming into excellent form and ready to race well in the spring. She had a World Major Marathon awaiting her on the schedule and was prepared to bring home a substantial paycheck for herself and her family. She lives with her husband in Addis Ababa and the two recently built a new house and brought her mother from the countryside to the city to take care

of her at her home. This would have been an opportunity to further support their new upscale lifestyle, but the race cancellation meant reconsidering their financial possibilities.

Alem thought Bereket could find some solace in being able to give birth – something Alem had done twice and Bereket had yet to do at all. In doing so Alem made clear both through her articulation of Bereket's *advantage*, and subsequent conversations reflecting on her own experiencing working in transnational athletics, was how important one's body was both to make a living in the sport of running *and* having a family.

In their essay on multiple bodies, anthropologists Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock sought to point out the existence of multiple and simultaneous bodies. They argued that there was an individual body, understood in the phenomenological sense as a body-self, a social body as a natural symbol with which to understand nature, society, and culture, and the body politic which incorporated regulation, control, and reproduction. This final body form, they argued, was dynamic in suggesting how certain kinds of bodies were socially produced.<sup>22</sup>

In other cultures, the concept of individualism is not only foreign, but also often seen as unnatural. Family units can be seen as a more fundamental unit of society rather than the individual. In Ethiopia, I would argue in many ways that this is both true within and beyond running. As noted before, the very style of Ethiopian running is contingent upon collective hard work. And as I will elaborate upon in the following chapter, energy in training is something that is shared, if contested, but sporting success in an individual sport is seen as a collaborative endeavor. The moments where runners learn to exercise their individual physical prowess, which causes friction with more natural forms of social order – having children – may be seen as putting individual needs above that of a certain familial order, having socially deleterious effects.

---

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1987): 6–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/648769>.

But the stresses surrounding ideal motherhood, the timing of childbirth, and the socially desired bodies of women athletes are constantly changing and in flux. While Lock and Scheper-Hughes focused a great deal on how the state also influences the body politic, making certain types of bodies to be subjected to paradigmatic control and regulation, capital also made demands on women's bodies.

That Alem saw Bereket's position as advantageous must be understood under hegemonic capitalist thinking exemplified through transnational sport where women's bodies, their contracts, and the value to capitalist production are always already in precarious standing. Alem, a former successful athlete herself, understood this all too well. Whereas Bereket was in top form at the onset of COVID-19, Alem was not.

### **5.5.1 When becoming fat is Unproductive**

It had been five years since Alem's prime. She was able to earn some great sums of money from winning high profile marathons, and began to provide for her husband, parents, and siblings. Then, she became pregnant and her shoe sponsor dropped her yearly contract. Although since then there have been changes in contracts to support women who get pregnant and give birth, at the time, nearly seven years before COVID-19, there did not seem to be recourse for any women – much less Ethiopian women – to voice concerns over these working conditions which provided no maternal leave or protection.

After having her first child Alem swiftly returned to training and upped her mileage and intensity too quickly. This is a common yet little recognized post-partum problem – a rushed return. For example, a nurse in Addis Ababa told me she was treating an athlete for complications after childbirth who had won one of the world's major marathons. She had resumed intensive training shortly afterwards, partly at her husband's urging. She had “gotten fat, which was necessary for the baby, but needed to become skinny again to work as an athlete.”

Not only does the body undergo changes through childbirth, the pressure to compete quickly thereafter can be profound. Most elite marathoners who have since come out to speak about their experiences agree it takes about 18 months out of one's training to have a baby and recover. And that is a best case scenario situation. The physical effects of childbirth are vast and varied, with some athletes being able to return to peak form and others having to adjust to new bodies that will never be quite the same. In 2019, a few high-profile American athletes broke non-disclosure agreements with their shoe sponsors about having reduced pay or losing their sponsorships all together due to pregnancy. America's most famous marathoner, Kara Goucher, was told she would not even be paid until she started racing again, and that enduring grueling training weeks and breastfeeding her baby was a choice she needed to make early on.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Stephanie Bruce shared a story about her forever altered body, after developing diastasis recti – a gap between the abdominal wall muscles that never returns to normal. It leaves saggy skin behind, which certainly effects the aesthetic of being an elite athlete, but also can lead to pain and complications in other parts of the body, like the pelvic bones.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike American athletes with their comparative privileges, Ethiopian women have limited outlets for voicing similar concerns. Thus, Alem's attempt to re-enter sport quickly resulted as it often does for athletes attempting to earn wages again – in injury. Just as it had been when she got pregnant, her body was again one that was deemed *unadvantageous* to capital accumulation. Achilles trouble completely sidelined her from training, and she became pregnant for the second time. Wanting more children, she figured that if she could not add value to herself as a worker in the transnational athletics market, she could gain full value from motherhood in Ethiopia.

---

<sup>23</sup> Crouse, Lindsay and Montañó, Alysia, "Nike Told Me to Dream Crazy, Until I wanted a Baby," sec. O, *New York Times*, May 12, 2019, Ilana Gershon, *Down and out in the New Economy: How People Find (or Don't Find) Work Today* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017); Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antivork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Stephanie Bruce, "My Stomach is All Over the Internet. Here's Why," *Runner's World*, April 1, 2016, <https://www.runnersworld.com/runners-stories/a20791347/my-stomach-is-all-over-the-internet-heres-why/>

Prior to the onset of COVID-19 Alem was again transforming her body, again, to one that could work in athletics. We started training together a few days a week in December 2019 and for a few weeks, after not running for over a year, could barely complete a twenty-minute jog. “*Sennete, sennete,*” “my body, my body,” she would lament. As she slowly began to get into shape and was able to complete hour long runs, she was still embarrassed to be seen out running with athletes who had known her in her prime. She knew expectations would be high.

When people saw Alem training, they would ask her about it. She would sometimes put her hands over her stomach, and look down, but then talk about how she was “*mastekakel*” “*adjusting*” her body. She had “gotten fat,” but was in the process of “*meqenes*” decreasing. Things had been going well, until the global pandemic. She was demoralized to see the gravity of the global situation worsened, that her clock for athletic opportunities was ticking fast, and that she might have to again face the reality that she would never compete again. “It’s difficult,” she said. “If there are not going to be any more races, then I don’t want to train. I spend so much time away from the house and the kids. If there aren’t going to be any more races, I’ll stay home and cook for [my children] and take care of them.” This sort of unwaged work of maintaining the household was more appealing to her than the unwaged work of training for races that might never be run.

Although Alem would never admit that she was getting back into training because she also enjoyed it, this often came across throughout training. There were several days where she told me she did not want to train because she was hearing that so many races were cut. “*Tesfa yiqoretal,*” literally “hope is cut” she would often say, as athlete morale was disappearing. And indeed, this may have been true. But as Alem was getting into shape, and at times feeling disheartened, it did become clear to me that she also enjoyed this alternative embodied state. Her attachment to her reproductive labor was tenuous; as Griffith et. al noted, reproductive labor is highly valued and often a deep source of satisfaction, but can often be just as often a source of pain. Alem’s desire to train, even in the midst

of race cancellations, and even as she claimed she was only doing it for work, demonstrated that there was more of an interpenetration of reproductive and productive labor than she would often care to admit.

Bereket, on the other hand, never really expressed a desire to have a child, pandemic or not. Occasionally Alem would ask her, and she would excuse a real desire with the need to focus on training. The subtle and unspoken notion Alem noted overtly, was that Bereket was not interested in having children, whereas Alem was. By saying that Bereket had an *advantage*, Alem later admitted that had *she* been in Bereket's position, *she* would see this as an advantageous time to have a children. Unlike the circumstances under which Alem had gotten pregnant, ceased running, had children, and tried again, Bereket oddly would not be missing out on quite as much as Alem did in her absence. My interest in these circumstances was not then about *who* was able to glean positive potential from Bereket's circumstances, but about *why* Alem considered Bereket's circumstances advantageous at all.

Alem understood in her own way what Bhattacharya points out in *Social Reproduction Theory* – that “it is the attack by capital on global labour to try and restructure *production* in the workplaces and the social processes of *reproduction* of labor power in homes, communities, and the niches of everyday life.” The only way to see positive light amid a global crisis was to find an advantage within these capitalist logics.<sup>25</sup> Alem had articulated not necessarily her own view about the value of motherhood; she did not declare whether or not it was reproductive or productive or both. Rather, the *advantage* she refers to, and interestingly the only word in English she used, is one that references how the transnational athletics market does not value the work of reproduction as it does the work of running under logics of capitalist accumulation. And COVID-19 had made this, for many, crystal clear.

---

<sup>25</sup> Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 183.

## 5.6 *Bodies at Home*

“*Tinnish wofri*,” Tigist urges me. “Become a little more fat.” “*Tinnish chemeri*,” “add a little bit,” she pleads, holding a spoonful of *shiro*, a chickpea stew, over my plate. “*Baka, baka*,” I insist. “I have had enough.” This is a typical daily exchange in Ethiopia; encouraging others to eat more food is as much a part of daily life as drinking coffee. But here, the context is more loaded. Before, Tigist would urge me to eat more because I would burn off the calories in training. Now, as she holds her baby girl and remarks that I will soon be ready to have children too, she insists that I need to become fatter.

As evidenced by expectations for the body, the transnational athletics market and familial and social demands in Ethiopia seem to conspire to keep spaces of biological reproduction and waged production separate. Indeed the experience of athletes like Tigist underscores how the demands of working as a mother and working as an athlete are actively made incommensurable. When the possibility to be productive and reproductive as an athlete presented itself to Tigist’s husband and some family members at home, they might desire a thin, wiry, and strong athletic body. This body type was predicated on going elsewhere, and making a lot of money to support the needs of many people in her social sphere. However, in tension with migratory opportunities were the constant expectations that doing the work of motherhood – reproductive and productive – demanded a different working body – a bigger body that conserves more energy and substance to pass along.

International sport and Ethiopia’s place within it bring together gendered work experiences, only a few of which inform the global public image of Ethiopian distance runners, which focus solely on athletes who finish atop podiums in major cities of the world. Missing from these images are the masses of other athletes, especially women, who contribute to international sport in both their sporting and non-sporting endeavors. In theory, Tigist could have worked as an athlete and a mother

at the same time, but spatially specific knowledge asserted that a skinny athletic body was for one purpose, whereas a bigger body was more proper for motherhood. As a result, she was urged to respond in kind.



## 6. Strained Solidarity

In 2020 I had a reunion with Tigist and Kalkidan. I lived with the two in 2013 when I came to Ethiopia for the first time, and remained close with them through their attempts, and eventual failures, to become successful runners. Tigist had left Ethiopia for two years and returned, and Kalkidan had moved in with her husband and his family in a small compound east of Addis Ababa. Both had two children, husbands, and a mutual respect for one another.

No longer taking public transportation because of COVID-19, I arranged a *RIDE* car to pick up Tigist from the northern part of Addis Ababa – *Addisu Gebeya* – and take us to Kalkidan’s house on the eastern outskirts of Addis Ababa yet again.<sup>1</sup> This time was a little bit different than our previous meetings, because Kalkidan’s mother had died months prior, and it felt like a much time had passed between due to the global pandemic and me being out of Ethiopia. We both felt guilty, Tigist especially, at having missed the *leḵso* – an important part of grieving in Ethiopian tradition.

When someone dies in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian family, several stages of ritual and grieving follow. Before the funeral, there is often a three-day mourning period in which friends and relatives come to visit the grieving family. Those who assist in preparation and execution often set up a white tent outside of the house and line up plastic chairs to receive many guests who come through the mourners’ homes and are always fed a plate of food. During the initial few days, loud ceremonial crying and wailing often reverberate throughout the house or the grounds with people.

Following the funeral, the tent may remain erected for several weeks or even months, as people continue to visit, sometimes staying there with grieving family members all night so that they are not alone. Women may shave their heads and don black scarves while men typically wear black clothing, shave their heads, and wear black hats and wear *gabi* – handmade cotton cloths to drape

---

<sup>1</sup> *RIDE* is an application-based taxi service in Addis Ababa, similar to Uber. There is also a basic number customers can call to quickly arrange a contract ride service

over the upper body. On the fortieth day of mourning, there is a usually an important memorial service with hundreds of people at the house.

The costs of mourning can be significant between tent rental, feeding guests, and taking care of the family. Funds come from one's involvement in an *iddir* – an informal type of mutual aid in which groups of people contribute regular amounts of investment to a pot of money which can then be used for funeral and ceremonial expenses.<sup>2</sup> *Iddir* covers the payment for priests, food, and other material necessities, and it ensures a community of mourners. Perhaps, most importantly, as anthropologist of Ethiopia, Tom Boylston, argues, *iddir* also functions as an institution of social cohesion; to attend a funeral is to establish oneself as recognized and socialized.<sup>3</sup>

Had there not been a global pandemic, Tigist would never have missed the *lekešo* following the death of Kalkidan's mother, even though they were not in the same *iddir*. Leading up to the visit she had told me that it was weighing on her heavily that she had not gone. When Tigist's father died about one year earlier, Kalkidan had made the journey to her home to accompany Tigist in her grief. Beyond a sense of obligation, Tigist and Kalkidan have a real connection, forged through sport, sharing the experiences of training and navigating the athletics world, and loving each other through hardship. These were qualities of friendship that I expected to see more of during fieldwork, especially having cultivated uniquely special relationships with other runners and athletes during my time as an athlete. I found, however, that while running enables women forms of sociality that many would not have the opportunity to experience in the countryside from where they grow up, it can usher in simultaneous relations muddled in distrust, jealousy, and skepticism.

Despite social conflict, how women runners come to define their social circles has largely been closely intertwined with who they train with, their level of success, and their subsequent level of

---

<sup>2</sup> Alula Pankhurst and Damen Haile Mariam, "The 'Iddir' in Ethiopia: Historical Development, Social Function, and Potential Role in HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control." *Northeast African Studies* 7, no. 2 (2000): 35–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41931342>.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast: Prohibition and Mediation in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018).

financial mobility. As women move up in the athletic and economic ranks, social status follows suit. Many feel pressured to maintain strong ties with other women runners. Similarly, toiling through difficult times early in one's career can yield close and lasting social ties with other women who understand their circumstances.

At the same time, especially as I formed close friendships with a few women athletes, something surprised, confounded, and even at times, disturbed me. I learned that not very many of these friendships were ones of trust and security. There was almost always an embedded tension in a way that mirrors the training styles of elite running. Running with others was critical in terms of getting stronger, fitter, and ready to succeed. But being an individual sport, and especially one so entangled with other networks of actors who played important roles in athletes' success beyond purely the physical training, meant that individual success always held some tension with that of the collective.

For women, who were often pressured to have men speak for them with coaches and agents, and who viewed training with men as a vital source of success, some of the circumstances surrounding this type of distrust were elevated. Women athletes generally seemed to have less time to socialize with one another, and often did not discuss their circumstances with coaches, agents, or the federation, with each other. Surprising, too, was that it appeared to be easier for women to tell me things than it was to tell each other, because I *was* an outsider of sorts, than each other. Often after they told me something either about their lives or circumstances with an agent I would ask them if they told the same information to another woman athletes. Almost always, the answer was no. As such, while class transformation is a driving force and a distinct possibility in their lives, it also raised the stakes of living a good life within Ethiopia that would not be mired in social, spiritual, and supernatural stigma.

Despite the ever-present goal of winning races and making money, it always seemed like economic advancement simultaneously had the power to also cheapen a person's social value and trust in substantial ways. This unique dynamic in which a profession so mechanized to achieve economic growth presented new social risks for women. The work of running – training, performing, and recovering – and the economic class athletes found themselves in were ones of great tension. Class mobility within the running world was so present and reinforced the possibility of success, but it simultaneously foregrounded, less explicitly, the precarity of the profession and the unstable and exploitative structures that make social solidarity difficult – although not impossible – at every stage.

### ***6.1 Social Lives of Iddir***

In late 2019, Mihret, who worked in the office of the ESMM, told me that the relative of a former athlete – Belaynesh Oljira – had died. I did not know Belaynesh because she had stopped training with ESMM by the time I started working with the group, but she was one of many incredibly successful women athletes who I had not previously heard of.

Whenever I had not heard of an athlete of such a high caliber, coaches and other athletes would give me a hard time – like I was not doing my homework. It was hard for me, however, to keep track of how many athletes had found success “*skiet magnet*” at various levels, and how many were well known within the athletics world. By contrast, non-runner Ethiopians usually knew of only few of the most successful Ethiopian runners – Derartu Tulu, Kenenisa Bekele, Haile Gebreselsie – and a few others who won several Olympic Gold medals. Few, for example, like taxi drivers who loved the novelty of speaking Amharic with an American woman, knew much about the current crop of Ethiopian stars vying for Olympic glory, or past podium finishers of major world marathons.

As such, outside of the Ethiopian athletics community, Belaynesh was not a familiar name or face to me. Born in Welega, Ethiopia, she rose to prominence in Cross Country and track in around 2010. A slew of victories allowed her to represent Ethiopia internationally, and in 2012, she was

chosen for the Olympic team. Shortly after, she transitioned to running half marathons and marathons, further cementing her place in a class of successful professionals.

Mihret told me I should come to the *lekso* at Belaynesh's home that evening because I was a new member of the ESMM family. It was actually Belaynesh's husband's mother who had died, but as was the case when going to any event tied to an Ethiopian athlete, it was the athlete's home that I was invited to – in this case, his wife's ("Belaynesh's home," they said, not that of her husband). They lived in in CMC – the wealthy neighborhood within Addis Ababa adjacent to the contrasting conditions within which Kalkidan lives – and it was a new type of upper-class *lekso* I had not yet attended in Ethiopia.

When I arrived I saw the three ESMM coaches – Moges, Kassim, and Haji – dressed in suits. This was a stark departure from their early morning Nike wind breakers and track pants. Athletes, too, were mostly dressed more formally than usual, while some opted for running clothes with black scarves over their heads. Coach Moges greeted me with a big smile and traditional handshake-shoulder bump, and acted as if nothing was wrong. But as soon as he entered the house, he ceremoniously began crying, wailing with his head in his hands. I sat beside several women from the training group on small stools surrounding the perimeter of the room looking at the white-marbled floor.

After a while, as people continued to enter and cry, and I went outside the home, but stayed within the compound. The house was a multi-story single family home with a big black gate and a concrete-tiled driveway with room enough for their Toyota Camry. The room we sat in had marbled floors, bright lights, and like so many successful athletes' homes, was lined with photos and trophies of her winnings around the world. When I went outside, I realized that this event was the first time I had attended a social event that was a "who's who" of the Ethiopian running scene. Many of the country's most famous athletes and coaches were there, including Derartu Tulu – Ethiopia's first

Olympic Gold medalist and president of the EAF – and countless top-ranking officials from the Federation, as well as the top coaches of all the elite training groups based in Addis Ababa.

Several of the attendees stood around in a circle writing down names in Amharic and corresponding money amounts. In contrast to most, this *iddir* was an exclusive one, which seemed to require a resume of winning at least a few major races, being incredibly fast, and having acquired a certain level of economic mobility.

*Iddir* is generally understood to be associations of people tied together usually through their job, district, or similar ethnic group, with the goal of providing insurance for situations, most notably taking care of the dead. Most view *iddir* as a central and critical element of arranging proper funerals and maintaining social ties.<sup>4</sup> Sociologist, Donald Levine has traced its beginnings to the Gurage group in Ethiopia and believes that the practice spread widely following the Italian invasion because so many were killed and were left without relatives to bury them.<sup>5</sup> Members would make regular contributions to a pot, which could then be used for funerary expenses of any member. While it evolved in cities to become mechanisms for the poor to properly grieve, over time, people in higher income groups began forming *iddir* as well. *Iddir* members have meetings, bylaws, and social expectations, and can dramatically vary in terms of the number of members and the amount of cash at hand based on the people involved in the *iddir*.

*Iddirs* are often considered more democratic and egalitarian than other forms of social organization.<sup>6</sup> Usually, if based on locality, membership is open to everyone regardless of class, ethnic, or gendered background. However, there are several different types that can require some

---

<sup>4</sup> Pankhurst and Mariam, “The ‘Iddir’ in Ethiopia.”

<sup>5</sup> Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Dejene Aredo, “The IDDIR: A STUDY OF AN INDIGENOUS INFORMAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTION IN ETHIOPIA.” *Savings and Development* 17, no. 1 (1993): 77–90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25830327>.

sort of baseline entry. While many are based on place of residence or ethnic backgrounds, there are also institutional *iddirs*, based on the place of work. Athletes, especially ones that had reached a certain level, would usually be allowed entry provided they could contribute regularly.

In the world of running, analyzing social institutions like *iddir* can be an illuminating way to understand how changes in economic and social life change for athletes as they progress in the sport. While running is certainly an occupational endeavor, it is also a uniquely social one, and especially distinct for women who often come from rural areas where active social lives and economic decision making are viewed as upending social norms. While women are not necessarily the most important decision makers in an *iddir*, unlike many other economic institutions, women can be prominently involved. And while some husbands of women athletes were in the huddle of this budgetary meeting to review funeral expenses, a handful of women athletes – mostly former – were there proffering their opinions as well.

For many athletes, an *iddir* is an avenue into seeing how running can truly be transformative – economically and socially. In addition to economic stability, *iddir* solidifies social ties. Although they do not speak about it explicitly in class terms, many regard the *iddir* as an institution of social continuity. As anthropologist of Ethiopia, Tom Boylston has noted, they often follow the logic of “*tezkar*, which says that funeral recognition is the basis of good social life.” As such, being a member of an *iddir* is important not only for securing the funerary expenses but also ensuring socio-economic ties that extend beyond grieving and ceremony.

Kalkidan and Tigist may have at one point been on the same path to be a part of this kind of *iddir*, but their lack of success in the sport meant that they have remained in separate, neighborhood- and lower-class-based *iddir*. Their friendship proved to be a mainstay because it was composed of real

attachment to one another, but unlike the lives of more elite runners, economic stagnation did not lead to newfound mobility that elite athletes in other *iddir* had obtained.

A few months after this particular *leksa* I moved in with Alem, a member of a different *iddir* also composed of several successful athletes and their families. In addition to other *leksa* obligations, we attended christenings, birthday parties, weddings, ceremonies, and various social gatherings. It was not surprising that athletes of certain economic class and success gravitated toward one another – after all, pursuing sport at a high level is a certain kind of lifestyle that few outside of it do not understand. What was surprising, was how often these relationships seemed to be ones of distrust.

## ***6.2 Consumptive Change***

When Alem, my friend who won several global marathons and had a successful career and then took a break to have two children, decided she wanted to return to running in late 2019, she did not tell many people. Alem’s friend, Bereket, Bereket’s husband, Ayob, me, and my partner at the time, formed a small training pod for easy training days. Bereket and Alem happened to be from the same area of Ethiopia, although they did not know each other in childhood. They met in Addis Ababa, as so many athletes do, and came up in the sport along similar trajectories.

Bereket and Ayob had recently bought a new car – a Hyundai van – with the help of Alem’s husband, who had built a business (after using Alem’s early winnings in sport) of importing and selling cars.<sup>7</sup> We all fit comfortably, with room for more passengers, and travelled regularly to the wide open meadows of Sendafa, outside of Addis Ababa, to train. Before COVID we would do this every other day, as everyone except Alem had a training program with a group. However, after COVID began, this would be our training pod every day.

---

<sup>7</sup> Hawi Dadhi, “Ministry Redefines ‘New’ for Vehicle Taxation,” *Addis Fortune*, July 21, 2021, <https://addisfortune.news/ministry-redefines-new-for-vehicle-taxation/>



Alem used to tell me about when she first came to Addis Ababa and rented a room in a Kotobe compound with a bed, a single-burner stove, and nothing else. As a single woman from the countryside, she was often afraid of just about everything. But she had seen a news story on television about Ejegayehu Dibaba, who came from a town not far from where she grew up, living a life of luxury in Addis Ababa. Like so many young athletes, she moved to the big city after local success to chase her athletic dream.

Alem was the lone girl in a family with two brothers, raised by a single mother who brewed *tela* – a local alcohol – to sell to her neighbors. She was terribly unhappy when she first came to Addis Ababa and did not have any money. When I asked her what her mother thought at that time she put her hands up and asked, “*Min merhat alleh? Lela option yellem. Rucha bicha*” (“What choice was there? There was not other option. Only running.”)

Alem was fortunate to get some money from her brother, who was a runner that fled to Norway when he failed to make a national team. “He was a really good runner,” Alem told me, “and was selected to the hotel for middle distance ahead of the 2000 Sydney Olympics. But he had really bad Achilles pain and was constantly taking pain killers.” When he went to the qualifying meet held in the Netherlands, he didn’t make the team, he decided not to return to Ethiopia, and ended up in Norway.

“Before that time, things were really difficult. Hannah, you’ve never seen the house we were living in before,” she tells me. I’ve visited the compound she moved her mother into later on with her prize money on numerous occasions, within which she is building an even newer house. “The old house was made of mud, and we all slept in one room, and he used to worry all the time at night that the house might fall down.” As she told me this story I worried she thought I could not believe it, sitting in her beautiful Addis Ababa home, far richer than myself.

Realizing that this was many years ago, and they probably did not have access to much technology, I ask, “Was he able to call? Did you know? Were you afraid?”

“We were so scared. We didn’t hear from him for over a year, then in Addis we were able to talk with him. He had a *huge* beard,” she laughed. “We asked him, ‘why did you grow a beard? And he told us that he didn’t have enough money to get it properly shaved. But he stayed there, and when he called, he finally had a little bit of money to send us.” In Norway, he later got a job driving school buses and made a modest living, but some meager remittances enabled her to cover basic expenses which helped her focus on running in her first few years training with a club. To think: an Achilles flare up could have been the difference between an Olympic position – a million-dollar career – and life as an underpaid school bus driver in Norway.

When Alem won her first international competition and was able to afford a driver, who later became her husband, Alem was seen, within the athletics community, as a responsible athlete. Hiring a driver was certainly a form of self-investing, but these groups also affected one’s social circles. I asked if she, too, had plans of staying abroad, and she told me yes, but that her coach suspected this, and delayed her journeys to richer countries. She was training alongside Ethiopia’s greatest, but her coach said, “*Teteafallesh* You’ll disappear” and she was only permitted to train in Morocco and eastern Europe for several years. Even then, her coach kept a close eye on her and took her passport in the hotel. Finally, the more she won and returned, and the more her life in Ethiopia became comfortable, she realized she was better off staying. She cites a high degree of luck in her decision to return; despite the challenges of living in Ethiopia, she has come to understand how difficult it is to live abroad as a runner without education.

### **6.2.1 Classed Transformation**

As runners find some success, their class status changes, most evident in their level of consumption. Because of the transnational dimensions of this work, relatively small paydays abroad

can be significant within Ethiopia. Having a car was a huge marker of a first stage of success, and an important display of upward mobility. It also crucially distanced athletes, spatially and socially, from those who rode the service bus to the training sessions, as discussed in Chapter 4. Sometimes carpools formed, or higher-level athletes would at least be more than happy to drive a few of the athletes home in their car, if they lived in the same neighborhood, but being able to get off of the service bus was seen as a big marker of class transformation.

Most women did not actually drive themselves to training, even if they or their husbands bought a car. By contrast, most of the male athletes would be behind the wheel. Many of the top women athletes, if they did not have husbands to drive them, hired chauffeurs to drive them to training sessions (there were a select few women athletes who did drive themselves, but several never even learned to drive). But buying a car was an indicator that one had achieved a certain level of success to not only afford a vehicle, but afford tools that could advance their training and recovery. Having a car enabled an athlete to sleep a little longer, avoid post-training cramps from squeezing into service vans, and allow some to even doze off on the way home after a long training. Achieving a certain level in the sport not only enabled an easier life, but also made it easier to continue training, recovering, and improving. Having a car was good for running economy

In addition to a home and a car, having access to foreign goods was also seen as a notable marker of upward mobility. Because athletes were able to travel abroad for competitions, bringing back tools to enhance their running – GPS watches, massage guns, compression socks – in addition to household appliances and technologies that could only be purchased outside of Ethiopia, were key to establishing status and sustainability in the sport. However, athletes would also bring back clothing, electronic devices, and household appliances both for convenience and displays of wealth. Earning money running was critically tied to consumption that would both enhance one's working

productivity, express economic growth, and lift social status. While women making consumptive choices expressed power and strength in some situations, it also could bring in judgment.

This also demonstrated having access to foreign currency, which has been in short supply for many years, but has been particularly dire since COVID and the Civil War. Because black market rates are so dramatically different than bank exchange rates, being able to exchange dollars for Ethiopian birr demonstrated an even higher level of potential growth. One friend once explained to me the reason why one of the main places in Addis to exchange foreign currency for Ethiopian birr was around the national stadium: “Because the athletes are the only ones bringing in foreign cash.”

Paying attention to consumption and class is an important part of thinking through how social worlds form in different historical periods of capitalist life. Several anthropologists have noted that following the 1980s consumption came to supersede other parts of the value production literature and its relation to class.<sup>8</sup> That said, class’s unstable epistemological nature – both thought about as an expression of a structural position in a mode of production and as one always tied to social conflict – makes for constant transformation.<sup>9</sup> For women athletes in Ethiopia, their place in the production process as workers in the transnational running economy is often an early place of collective consciousness in understanding their undervalued labor, but monetary gain and the ability to consume often bifurcated changing class relations in a teleological way.

Although class has to do with much more than simply consumption and identity, being able to purchase certain goods clearly indexed upward mobility. For women, especially those who were not yet married, this particular consumptive practice could be a huge shift in social relations. Being able to travel to training sessions independently would distance athletes from those who took the

---

<sup>8</sup> James G. Carrier and Don Kalb, eds., *Anthropologies of Class: Power, Practice and Inequality* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Susana Narotzky, “The organic intellectual and the production of Class in Spain,” in *Anthropologies of Class: Power, Practice, and Inequality*, eds James G. Carrier and Don Kalb, (Cambridge United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 53.

service busses, and other social experiences would likely follow suit. Membership in an *iddir*, invitations to ceremonies and parties, seemed to logically follow these changes.

Sometimes this materialized most clearly in the unspoken assumption that my relationships with Tigist and Kalkidan, and my relationships with Alem and her friends, would remain in separate spheres. Times when Tigist came to Addis to meet me, I would tell Alem I was going to meet with her; she knew I lived with Tigist years back, that she was trustworthy and an important person in my life, but that it would be strange if we all met. Tigist and Alem had dramatically different lives; in running, Alem had succeeded, Tigist had not.

The idea of Alem coming to any sort of important gathering with me in Tigist and Kalkidan's social sphere was unthinkable. I could traverse these numerous spaces despite my relative class status (as a white person, even though my relationships at times were strained due to monied differences, they certainly never barred me from entering social and cultural spaces). But if Tigist came to Alem's house, which was several times the size as Tigist's, had western appliances and cars and multiple televisions and hot water, it would be odd. Odder still, because they both knew that they both were athletes.

### **6.2.2 Threats of Regression**

Importantly, getting a car, and getting to a certain social status, seemed a point of no return. Consumption was viewed as a one-way street; if in the future, an athlete was unable to purchase the same goods and live a certain quality of life that success had afforded them, they risked not only a decreased quality of life and ease, but shame. I knew of one athlete who had won the Rome Marathon in one of the same years that Alem won, had two children, and bought a house in the same neighborhood. However, a knee injury prevented him from racing for a long time, and rumors swirled that he was looking to sell his car. When I heard about this, Alem felt sorry.

“It’s very difficult here,” she told me, “Because it is like shameful if he does this.” Alem was referring not to her own views, but how others might view this athlete’s need to sell his car, and how he might feel. Any regression was shrouded in Ethiopian fears about shame and insecurity.

Anthropologist Daniel Mains focuses on shame and social stratification through the concept of “*yiluñña*” in his book *Hope is Cut*.<sup>10</sup> In Jimma, Ethiopia, where he conducted fieldwork, men would often forgo employment opportunities to avoid having *yiluñña* and lowering their individual and familial social status. Describing it as the experience of “an intense shame based on what others may say or think about oneself and one’s family.”<sup>11</sup> Mains helps to elucidate how the choices of young men to not work in certain cultural realms is a strategic one.

Here, too, selling his car would have likely provided this athlete and his family significant and immediate relief, but he risked social stigma for what may be perceived weakness. Similarly, the choice to pursue running in Ethiopia meant forgoing other employment possibilities that were not nearly as respected. Even if there technically were other options for some athletes, it would lead them to naturally pose the question that Alem posited when I asked her about her mother’s feelings about her career: “What choice was there? There was no other option. Only running.” As such, when she decided to continue running, she did not want to be seen on any service vans, or even seen as out of shape. Alem felt she needed to do her early foundational training in the company of a small network of people, lose some weight, and get back into decent form, before she could come train with a group.

Alem frequently told me how athletes were complicated, and difficult to deal with and trust, “*especially* when they get money.” Despite that being the goal of athletics – one of economic transformation – it was a particular hazard that made seemingly anyone that fulfilled that teleology of

---

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Mains, *Hope Is Cut: Youth, Unemployment, and the Future in Urban Ethiopia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=784981>.

<sup>11</sup> Mains, *Hope Is Cut*, 11.

great suspicion. She also had a particularly strange and strained relationship with the other woman in our training pod, Bereket.

The two grew up in the sport together, came from the same region, and achieved high levels of success. Their husbands developed a rapport playing card games regularly and plotting out business ideas. Bereket's husband was also an elite runner, but was building side businesses to grow his winnings from running. Bereket and Ayob moved into an enormous new house, bought one of the cars that Alem's husband had imported, and bought a plot of land all in one year. They were *rich*.

In addition to training, we also went with them on a few weekend getaways – to hot springs in Sodere, to visit the crater lakes in Debre Zeyit, and we spent many holidays with them. Being that we were in the same COVID training pod, very often during a semi-quarantine they would come over and Ayob, Alem's husband, and my then-partner would play cards while the three of us sat around chatting.

Alem and Bereket had so much in common, but it was quite clear that they had no real loving friendship. Often their husbands would call to coordinate training plans, and I was told that if Alem called Ayob directly, Bereket would get furious (something that had happened prior). Alem would sometimes joke with me about Bereket's odd behavior, but if I pressed her to explain why they were considered friends, I was usually met with hollow answers and shoulder shrugs. Part of the sad truth it seemed, was that class transformation, while it enabled new potential, constantly met with simultaneous skepticism, that even very fraught social bonds could feel more cohesive if there was a shared level in the ability to consume.

So few people understood the necessary sacrifices and difficulties not only in training – the grueling works of putting one's body through hell – but also of being a woman in the athletics world. Nearly every woman noted this overtly – that there were so many difficulties and so many men that

would try to take advantage of athletes – but within these realizations, a sense of solidarity was nearly impossible to manifest.

### **6.3 Transnational Class and Solidarity**

The difficulty of achieving solidarity among women has been a topic of exploration for feminist theorists going back at least to Simone DeBeauvoir. I found myself asking this question too, quite often, during fieldwork. Why was solidarity so difficult to come by for Ethiopian women runners despite their considerable shared experience?

From bell hooks to Sandra Bartky and Veronica Gago, over the past several decades there have been countless attempts to rethink what a more expansive notion of solidarity could look like for women from an array of backgrounds.<sup>12</sup> Still, the scope of African feminist scholarship that is included in these conversations is limited; either it is not commonly cited or still forces us to consider how much we may be missing within certain academic frameworks.

Selina Makana has built on the work of Black feminists and decolonial thought that feminist ethnography must actually question certain theories that are based on Western assumptions and promote others.<sup>13</sup> But delving into Ethiopian feminist thought is problematic because the authorship of class, ethnicity, and educational background (and the language certain texts have been translated into) are highly problematic and variable. One telling example of the shortcomings of transnational efforts in feminist thinking perhaps comes from Aaronette M. White, who struggled teaching feminist theory to Ethiopian undergraduates who rejected notions of fluid sexuality and gender in Addis Ababa.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, *"Sympathy and Solidarity" and Other Essays*, Feminist Constructions (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Selina Makana, "Contested Encounters," *Meridians* 17, no. 2 (November 1, 2018): 361–75, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15366936-7176516>.

<sup>14</sup> White, "Unpacking Black Feminist Pedagogy in Ethiopia," *Feminist Teacher* 21, no. 3 (2011): 195, <https://doi.org/10.5406/femteacher.21.3.0195>.



Among Ethiopian feminists, there too have been accusations levied upon one another based on which ethnic group a certain public intellectual hails, and what her broader political alignments may be.<sup>15</sup> As such, while athletes are kept separate from this conversation, I believe engaging in these types of critiques that address questions of translatability, cultural dissonance, and linguistic belonging, are related to questions about how the goal of class transformation makes certain modalities of solidarity extremely difficult.

When I pressed friends about why there was such a lack of solidarity among women, they often mentioned the problem of “money.” “Once athletes get money, things are no good,” Tigist has said on many an occasion. Indeed, the pressure to consume, and consume certain items that carried a type of social capital that expressed not only athletic excellence, but an international sensibility to high quality commodities, was of pressing importance to athletes. Becoming a part of this selective class of runners was highly desired, but was also something always at risk of disappearing.

Hierarchies in the world of running were not necessarily articulated in relation to class belonging or consciousness, but in certain displays of consumption. As noted before, having access to facility – shoes, and the most up-to-date Nike or Adidas kits, indicated a potential sponsorship. Having a car indicated you had likely won at least one international road race. Bigger expenses – large homes, investment properties, western kitchen appliances – were to be displayed showing that you had won competitions and knew how to spend money well.

As I will go on to discuss, athletes never engaged with their class transformation in anything like the Marxist rhetoric of common struggle. However, some of the ways they negotiated hierarchical relations had been subsumed by capitalist logics. Sociologist Erik Olin Wright

---

<sup>15</sup> Burgess, Gemma (2013). A Hidden History: Women's Activism in Ethiopia. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 14(3), 96-107.

underscored the complexities and constantly changing relations of class.<sup>16</sup> As capitalism changes, and industries change, Wright noted that people can occupy different class locations at the same time, and in ways that are contradictory. As such, Wright thought that using theories of class, often seen as mutually exclusive, is short-circuiting which can be more nuanced approaches to the study of new formations of class. Rather, viewing class as generated by complex interactions in different approaches helps to think through ideas of evolving class and class mobility. Anthropologist James Carrier, too, has noted that movement on the class ladder does not indicate that a ladder is absent and that reproduction of inequality is not regularly occurring.<sup>17</sup> Further, just because a group of people does not necessarily have a robust language of class analysis or consciousness, does not mean we should ignore class as a category. In fact, I think exploring why that relevant absence exists should implore us to think through how people view themselves in relation to others.

The transnational elements in international sport make class a particularly unstable category for many athletes working in the sport. Winning a race abroad or getting a basic sponsorship may be transformative for athletes in Ethiopia, allowing rural children from the countryside to own properties and investments in Addis Ababa. However, many Olympic athletes have salaries of around \$20,000 – far below a living wage in the United States and far below their European counterparts. Just as managers slide up and down the class scale by not owning the means of production but controlling other workers, athletes too, may be exploited in certain contexts and own means of production in other geographic locales.

With the understanding that capitalist relations are able to subsume many existing cultural institutions, norms, and practices, I find it useful to think about how class and class transformation are affected by, and refashion, social relations and cultural institutions. This question is largely driven

---

<sup>16</sup> Erik Olin Wright, *Understanding Class* (London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Carrier and Kalb, *Anthropologies of Class*.

by a trend in seeing women's social circles and sociality change markedly over the course of athletes' careers, alongside new relationships shrouded in mystery, distrust, and gossip. As such, it is useful both to map the ways in which exploitation can still occur in opaque forms through these transnational dynamics that use gender, race, ethnicity, and other differences to reproduce inequality in this global running economy. Constitutive of this is also considering why class consciousness and solidarity is so difficult to form both within Ethiopia and beyond its country's borders.

### 6.3.1 Floating Classes

Scholars who have focused on especially middle class formation have argued that understanding class as a social and relational category is a key way people around the world have come to understand stratification. Those working in the Global South, and Africa in particular, have been addressing this question closely following the 2008 financial crisis. Sociologist Goran Therborn noted that The African Development Bank's report in 2011 indicated that an African middle class ought to be better understood, as it had increased substantially.<sup>18</sup> However, many determined that there was a tier called "the floating class" – vulnerable to slip back into poverty. If being middle class requires only a measure of a certain income – which is largely the case in these development studies – then multinational corporations can more easily exploit workers around the world. More insidiously, argues Therborn, the measurement of class based on income enables a justification for the notorious 'trickle down' idea in the absence of any meaningful employment creation or local capital accumulation through value-added activities.<sup>19</sup>

This kind of hegemonic developmentalist thinking is propelled by athletic pursuits, while carrying risks and consequences for athletes involved. As the select few rise to the top and transform their lives, two concurrent things happen. First, most of remain part of an exploited class, and the

---

<sup>18</sup> Göran Therborn, "Dreams and Nightmares of the World's Middle Classes," *New Left Review*, 124 (July/August 2020) <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii124/articles/goran-therborn-dreams-and-nightmares-of-the-world-s-middle-classes>

<sup>19</sup> Göran Therborn, "Dreams and Nightmares."

reserve army of labor belies their condition. It is easy to see successful Ethiopian runners as comparable to NCAA athletes who make it to the NBA, and come into relative copious amounts of wealth, dismissing the idea of exploitation. While true in some instances, Ethiopia athletes who make up this floating class cast doubt on this narrative. When they ultimately secure a contract, while life changing, we should ask: how many years of work did they put in, unpaid, contributing to the global athletics economy? How extensively are their earnings distributed, taking care of family members and friends, having to sell their cars when race opportunities dry up? How long did they spend laboring to develop a multifaceted running economy, and what is its value?

Secondly, some athletes become local elites, further obscuring class character both at home and abroad. Their newfound status then may allow the multinational companies that control sponsorships – the capitalist class in this athletics economy – to operate unchecked, and further obscure gendered dynamics of exploitation that often occur behind closed doors. Having seen countless men take hold of a woman athletes' finances, sometimes even divorcing them leaving them with barely enough to get by, the racial and gendered hierarchies engrained in the transnational athletics market can allow even assumed exceptions to fall prey to these exploitative dimensions.

But that athletes are indeed a part of a floating class – in the sense that as they are able to be active consumers – the threat of having to sell their investments and retreat (a fairly regular occurrence) remains a lingering and ominous present. This is especially the case for women athletes, because their husbands often manage the finances and direct investments. There are numerous stories of certain world class athletes whose husbands used their money to build second homes, begin affairs with other women, and often divorce the athletes leaving them with little of what they earned. Even if people sympathized with the athletes who fell pray to injury, a malintentioned partner, or just an unlucky string of races, there were constant whisperings that incorporated notions of shame.

Oddly, as women speculated about status and class slippage, they employed a similar tool that they used to stay safe and succeed in the first place. As women rose in the ranks, sharing information and forming social bonds was imperative for social and economic survival. Athletes are constantly in discussions with one another about their perceived unfair treatment both within and beyond Ethiopia. Conversations regarding the exploitation of sponsorship companies, and more often, their agents, occur regularly. So do to questions about fair coaches and potential pacemakers. However, this seldom materializes into collective action. For women, in particular, their tool of protection, in my observation, which could lead to a collective consciousness, was often undercut by ideas about status, consumptive belonging, and class transformation. This tool proved to be a double-edged sword; the tool being gossip.

#### ***6.4 Yesetoch Wure***

In Silvia Federici's book *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, she argues that understanding attacks and subjugation of women requires one to trace the history of words used to degrade women. Her essay, "On the Meaning of 'Gossip'" historicizes the term to an early modern English understanding in which it evolved from the meaning of 'godparent' to a connotation that describe women's friendship.<sup>20</sup> "Gossip" had strong emotional implications, but ones implying attachment. Women would assemble "with their 'gossips' in public taverns to drink and amuse themselves," Federici writes, drawing on Thomas Wright – a mid 19<sup>th</sup> century historian.

Even as women were denigrated, it was a time, Federici explains, that women were far less dependent on men for survival and sociality. It was in sixteenth century Europe when women's social position began to deteriorate, that a change in the meaning of *gossip* to a denigrating connotation took

---

<sup>20</sup> Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018).

hold. Gradually, “women engaging in idle talk” was seen as negative.<sup>21</sup> And later, female friendships became the targets of witch hunts. As women were tortured into denouncing other women as friends, “‘gossip’ turned from a word of friendship and affection into a word of denigration and ridicule.” Women’s talk, as it were, became, and still largely is, vilified in such a way that women’s actual voices, ideas, and discourse, are seen as ill-suited for important decision-making discussions.

In Amharic, there are several words for gossip. Usually, people speak of *wurena* – a person who spreads gossip, or *shuksbukta* – a malintentioned form of gossip. *Yesetoch wure* – women’s gossip was sometimes used to expound upon the fact that it was women who were gossiping – though men were hardly absent in conversations about who was involved in what drama. Given that so many of these ideas are understood to stem from jealousy, some in Addis Ababa have added a new Anglo slang idiom to *Arada kuanka* (urban vernacular) – *jealouse* – to describe a close friend.

Gossip, in many ways, is at the heart of anthropological data collection. Zora Neale Hurston, in *Mules and Men*, underscored its simultaneous importance and how, rightfully so, those who hold the richest gossip are often weary about sharing it.<sup>22</sup> Gossip circles are often where anthropologists learn people’s unfiltered understandings of how their worlds work and operate, and when anthropologists feel they have gleaned into another level of insight. While some anthropologists, like Max Gluckman, have argued that gossip functions as a mechanism of solidarity, others, like Oscar Lewis, posited that rumors often rip society apart.<sup>23</sup> At times, as Orin Starn’s ethnography on Tiger Woods has made clear, gossip in the mediatized sporting world, can quickly become commoditized

---

<sup>21</sup> Federici, *Witches*.

<sup>22</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 1. Harper Perennial Modern Classics ed, Harper Perennial Modern Classics (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Max Gluckman, “Papers in Honor of Melville J. Herskovits: Gossip and Scandal.” *Current Anthropology* 4, no. 3 (1963): 307–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2739613>; Oscar Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*, 5. printing of the paperback ed, Illini Books 9 (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1972).

scandal worth millions.<sup>24</sup> Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern came up with various taxonomies and understandings surrounding gossip – situating it as a transcultural phenomenon that shifts its shape and form in different contexts.<sup>25</sup> It is a way of coming to terms with social situations through discourse. Deeply intertwined, rumor is said to arise among people who do not necessarily know one another but become vehicles from transmission of a piece of information, whereas gossip depends who is talking to whom and at what time.

While doing research I found a few modes of gossip in tension with one another. One was information gathering. In the lower ranks especially, it was important to gossip to figure out who to trust, which male coaches might demand sex for entry into their club or races, which male athletes would demand relationships for training assistance, and who would actually provide opportunities. Women *needed* to gossip, in many ways, to both survive and thrive. Gossip was used to avoid some of the worst forms of exploitation that one could experience in the athletics economy.

This is not to say that gossip is only about securing vital information. It is also fun and entertaining. When I would try and verify information I overheard in some circles with others, my friend Alem would sometimes tell me, “Hannah, you know athletes only do four things: train, eat, sleep, and talk.” Indeed, this was true. Many romanticize the lives of professional athletes, but on a daily basis, their lives are, quite frankly, boring. Because rest is seen as productive time, doing very little and engaging in meaningless gossip could even be considered part of the job.

However, just as gossip was a central tool for safety and survival among lower-level athletes, even as they progressed gossip was a useful tool to hear about which management agencies were more professional and would lead to better opportunities and which races one should try to get into.

---

<sup>24</sup> Orin Starn, *The Passion of Tiger Woods: An Anthropologist Reports on Golf, Race, and Celebrity Scandal* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*, *New Departures in Anthropology* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

In reclaiming gossip's older origins as something less stigmatized, I think it is useful to reframe gossip as something more complicated. This is because, like running economy, gossip is a taken-for-granted concept that many think they can identify, and think they can encode with meaning in its most basic existence. I want to insist that gossip can be idle, negative talk, *and* a vital part of information gathering, and interrogate under what structural conditions this is the case.

Because so much of the business side of athletics was kept behind closed doors, women (and often men for that matter) were not in negotiations with race directors and sponsors. As such, often the explanations as to what they were being offered was not elucidated. To learn what an appropriate appearance fee, or bonus structure might look like, for example, athletes had no choice but to gossip.

Through gossiping I learned about stories of coaches to steer clear of, because they had a reputation of taking advantage of young women. I learned about deceptive agents who might steal money or make promises on which they could not deliver. I learned about husbands, and former husbands of women athletes who were there to seize control of money making decisions and redirect a woman's earnings to his selfish ends. And I also learned, just as often, about other women athletes who might be suspect. And sometimes, these suspicions arose through rumors and accusations about witchcraft.

### ***6.5 Witchcraft and Class***

Anthropologists working in Africa have been keen to show how witchcraft, gossip, and rumor have been used to express suspicions, posed by the dominant against the dominated, and sew rifts between class and ethnicity-based groups. Early approaches from E.E. Evans-Pritchard often approached understanding these dynamics through functionalist and intellectualist tendencies – centered on understanding social and cognitive processes.

As compelling as this notion is, and as compelling as attempts to avoid functionalist understandings of witchcraft might be, we would be remiss to ignore the potential effects that global



capitalism and transnational class formation have presented on witchcraft, rumor, and gossip. More recently, ethnographic work has attempted to chart how monetization creates and expanded market both in lethal forms of witchcraft and charms against, exacerbating frustrations and desires as money and commodities are often seen to be accessible but are in practice unattainable – “the basic circumstance of capitalist consumerism.”<sup>26</sup>

Anthropological analyses on occult economies have been formative here; drawing on several examples throughout the world many have argued that the volatile swings in fortunes generate frustrations among people competing to succeed in late capitalism, often projecting frustration onto others. This includes a dual attention to the ways that intimacy, disease, governance, and urban anxiety come to inform how witchcraft is shaped and perceived as economic realities also morph and change.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, the act of doing anthropology – interviewing, writing, and analyzing, can be seen as forms of sorcery or witchcraft as well.<sup>28</sup>

Charles Piot makes this connection clear in drawing on friends and collaborators in Togo. In line with dramatic changes to economic privation in the 1990s following the Cold War, Piot writes “witchcraft imaginaries exploded to consume the public sphere.” This follows, according to Piot, after a focus on witchcraft studies lost their salience between mid-twentieth-century Africanism anthropology until relatively recently. Piot writes that ethnographic attention to witchcraft has resurface, “ironically, refigured to address global rather than local inequalities and antagonisms.”<sup>29</sup>

However, listening to how Ethiopian women make sense of their place in the transnational capitalist market at times, makes this return seem quite sensible, and in line with global trends of

---

<sup>26</sup> Stewart and Strathern, 73.

<sup>27</sup> Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2014); Peter Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Harry G. West, *Ethnographic Sorcery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future*, 119.

economic dispossession. We see experiences of similar perception of haunted elements of daily life, or the occult, all around the world. One could draw similar connections to an African feeling of spirit possession as they could to neglected rural Americans experiencing alien abduction.

Gossip also conveyed various hazards of working as a women in this transnational industry. Indeed, this was a line of work in which enormous rewards could follow, and a consumerist lifestyle could take hold, but the volatile swings made it such that understanding this haunted tension was present in the lives of women along economic lines.

In Ethiopia, there is perhaps no better example that illustrates global capital's effect on forms of local social ordering than the way accusations of *buda* and *metat* often get levied in the world of athletics.

### **6.5.1 The Evil Eye**

A few months after I left Ethiopia in 2013, Kalkidan left Sululta to live with her husband and join another training group. Tigist had stopped training because of her pregnancy, which later resulted in a miscarriage, and neither of the two were particularly happy with the training arrangements at the time.

I returned to Ethiopia in 2014, shortly before Tigist was to get the opportunity to race abroad and was introduced to another cohort of young women who had come from the countryside to Addis Ababa and joined the same training camp, chasing their dreams of becoming runners and changing their lives. One of these women was Lemlem, an extremely petite and promising athlete from Tigist's region, who had clearly experienced a traumatic eye injury. Lemlem does not remember much from the day the goat punctured her eye. She was playing with her family members near Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, where she was born, one minute, and awoke to wailing screams from her mother, as she opened her eyes to see a white cloth. Draped over her face and coming into consciousness, she realized her family had put the cloth over her body, thinking she may have died. Earlier that day,

while playing outside with her brothers and sisters, a goat lunged at her, and its horn went directly into her eye, forever changing her field of vision. But becoming blind in one eye would be the least of her problems.

Up to that point, Lemlem remembered a happy childhood. She was excelling in school, especially in sports, and her family was relatively supportive and happy. At 14 years old she was the best runner in the *noreda* (district), was winning regional competitions, and enjoyed the emotional support from her family. When Lemlem was knocked unconscious by the encounter, her mother immediately assumed she died. They laid a white blanket over her small body, but she rose up after a while only to see horror on her mother's face. Traumatic as it was to Lemlem – physically and emotionally – her mother was ineradicably scarred.

“Whenever she [my mother] saw her friends she would cry and get emotional. She even used to say that she'd rather die than watch me go on without my eye. She thought it was *buda*,” Lemlem remembers.

*Buda*, or *ayn og* – the evil eye – is a spirit that one can be or have, and impacts the lives of countless Ethiopians. Most note that it originates in the Amhara region, where Lemlem is from, but it can spread throughout the country. In fact, in Addis Ababa certain neighborhoods can even come to be associated with *buda*. It is easy to get *buda* – as one can just suffer the evil eye of someone who already has it, and then be given *buda*. And once one has *buda*, there are a range of accusations that may follow. They may attack, eat, or even kill other family members.<sup>30</sup>

*Buda* exists in Addis Ababa, too, and prominently so. In the world of athletics, seldom does a training week pass where at least utterings of *buda* are rumored to pass around. *Buda* is an incredibly malleable concept, and seems to emerge in nearly every circumstance. Although it often becomes knowable through conditions of sickness, gossip about *buda* also arises from changes in wealth

---

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Remnick, “The Evil Eye Belief Among the Amhara of Ethiopia,” *Ethnology*, 13:3 (1974): 281

accumulation and class formation. Often, craftsmen who become wealthy from means other than land ownership, are accused of *buda*. And in athletics, coming into wealth, or performing well, can introduce rumblings of a *buda* presence.

Anthropologists who study Ethiopia have conducted explored the phenomenon of *buda* through multiple registers. A lot of attention has been given to the Beta Israel – often called *Falasha* or “Ethiopian Jews” who have endured disproportionate *buda* accusations, but artisan groups that see members and traders become suddenly wealthy are often suspected of being *buda* as well.<sup>31</sup> Some have observed that *buda* can be distinguished from lay craftspeople because they are not just making products, but selling them in markets. As such, exchange principles and class transformation form a critical dimension of *buda* ideology.

Boylston argues that *buda* is an incredibly malleable power, and one that transcends traditional boundaries, which gives it great power. Some believe *buda* people change into hyenas and roam the countryside at night, attacking people from this amorphous stature, or just turning their evil gaze upon a person and giving them *buda*. There are no sure ways to recognize *buda*, but often physical deformities – specifically eye deformities and emaciated statures – can raise the eyebrows of onlookers. Although parents who fear their child is weak may seek the advice of a *debtara*, a witch doctor, give them holy water, or bring them to a wizard, the fear of *buda* and subsequent ostracization can have real material and emotional effects on families. It can ostracize not only the individuals assumed to be *buda*, but those who live or socialize with them.

“So instead of watching my mother struggle, I ran away,” Lemlem finished telling me.

---

<sup>31</sup> For more on the Falasha, see: Hagar Salamon, *The Hyena People: Ethiopian Jews in Christian Ethiopia*, Contraversions 13 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

Lemlem, like many young women I have met in Addis Ababa from over the years, arrived with no more than a small carry-on sized bag of clothes and shoes looking to keep running and better her life. Many come not to escape *buda* accusations or seek help, but because they have a dream of running and cannot progress in the countryside. Even if *buda* is not a threat of ostracization, the simple act of running outside as one nears the age of puberty or marriage can render young women athletes deviant.

With no money, plans, or connections, Lemlem ended up in what she now knows to be Arat Kilo – a round-about where an erected obelisk commemorates Ethiopia’s liberation from the Fascist Italian Occupation with the Lion of Judah standing prominently at the top – her first day in Addis Ababa. When night began to fall Lemlem, scared, did not want to be among the dozens of homeless people who spend their nights around the traffic circle, and started to climb a tree. An older woman approached her with as she began scaling the branches and asked her what she was doing. When Lemlem explained her circumstances she offered her a place to stay in her house in exchange for helping with domestic work. The woman said that she could continue to train and live for free, if she helped her take care of the house and children. Knowing she did not know where to run, the following day the woman brought her over to Meskel Square, where dozens of athletes train long before the sun rises.

“I told her I wanted to continue my education and that I was a good runner,” she said. “So the woman showed me the place around stadium where I could run. I met a friend training there from the Oromia region. And after we would run I would usually just sit there. And the friend asked why she was sitting there? And again I told her my whole story. She asked me if I had breakfast and I told her no. She bought me breakfast and found me a different place to stay and work – a good friend of that girl. So I went back to the woman and I told her that I could stay at a new place. And we’re still friends.”

This was truly a fresh start for Lemlem, and a welcome change from her life in Bahhir Dar. Though she still missed her family, she could run. And she was not constantly followed by accusations of *buda*.

Before becoming friendly with Lemlem, other women in the group cautioned me about her. Indeed, I found myself often cautioned *against* trusting many other women athletes (and almost all men athletes, though this was far less surprising to me). Things like *buda* were by no means the only justifications given to be wary of someone else, but they were certainly among the more prominent ones.

### **6.5.2 Stolen Energy**

In tension with the new material wealth they could share was the simultaneous conflict in how their newfound wealth might go directly against acceptable ideas about gender hierarchy particularly prominent in Ethiopian Orthodox Culture, but that extend out to other parts of society. In their article “Vertical Love: Forms of Submission and Top-Down Power in Orthodox Ethiopia” anthropologists, Diego Malara and Tom Boylston, trace how the exercise of top-down power in Ethiopia co-exists with asymmetrical and hierarchical understands of love between a range of relationships of people and religious figures and entities.<sup>32</sup>

The two anthropologists point out that hierarchy within Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity is widely accepted, followed, and unquestioned, and impacts the social relations of everyday life. Like other scholars who have centered their analyses on Amhara society, Malara and Boylston note that most models of social relationships involve asymmetric power relations that are not confined to

---

<sup>32</sup> Niall Finneran, “Ethiopian Evil Eye Belief and the Magical Symbolism of Iron Working,” *Folklore* 114, no. 3 (March 2003): 427–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587032000145414>.

private life, but are in fact publicly situated with legal, political, religious, dynamics, which can lead to deleterious social ramifications.<sup>33</sup>

In Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, excessive self-confidence and putting yourself on a high level, can be seen as undercutting a system of hierarchy overseen by God. This rubs directly against common gripes about the marketability of Ethiopian athletes discussed earlier, who often do not engage in the same kind of grandiose celebrations of many western competitors. Further, important to the overall scope of their argument is that voluntary submission to power “can be a form of agency or self-possession.” As such, many people actually experience their own value and connection to institutions and other individuals by being submissive. Respect to God, and women to men and elders, in their reading, has the ability to enhance self-worth.

Gendered distinctions are clearly written, spoken about, and embedded in these vertical conceptions of love and submission. Priests are known to say “*inatib tiwedaleb, abatib takaberaleh*” (“You love your mother and honor your father”). Daily routine helps to cement these feelings and formulations as well. For example, it is customary for the men to eat first at meals and women and children to wait and eat later. More bluntly, however, the same priest will say, “God is the head of the Church; the Church is the head of the man; the man is the head of the woman” (*Igzzyabihér ye béta kristiyan ras nen; béte kristiyan ye wend ras nen; wend ye sét ras nen*).<sup>34</sup>

Often if I ran into athletes who were far less successful training with much more elite ones, the social interactions felt awkward. While teamwork, collective struggle, and shared understandings are central to Ethiopian training styles and sporting beliefs, an inherent skepticism and distrust

---

<sup>33</sup> Messay Kebede, *Survival and Modernization--Ethiopia's Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1999); Donald Nathan Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, Repr. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast*.

among nearly all other women competitors made it difficult to form relationships. In particular, many athletes feared a stolen energy would thwart their progress.

Tigist, who had also been accused of *buda* early in life in her hometown, told me later that *metat* was more of a concern in the world of sports. “Back when I was in a club there was the other runner who was complaining that she did not have the proper shoes for asphalt training,” Tigist said. “I had an extra pair at the time, so I offered them to her. But she would not take them because she thought they had *metat*.” Tigist was offended by this resistance but had already made clear at this point through earlier conversations that most athletes way could not be trusted to share clothes and shoes even though it was materially necessary to do so. While it was understood that male figures in the running world – coaches, pacemakers, etc. – may try to use their structural and physical leverage to get what they want from women – women generally cautioned me to be trusting of other women for these kinds of occult hazards.

A common instance through which suspicions arise, too, is if an athlete begins to perform poorly. As Michael Crawley notes in his book *Out of Thin Air*, “there is a widespread belief that it is possible for runners to steal each other’s energy through a form of witchcraft called *metat*, usually by taking an item of their clothing like a sweaty sock to a *debtera*, or witchdoctor, who uses this to take energy and bestow it upon someone else.”<sup>35</sup> The possibility that someone might steal another athlete’s energy was always possible among men and women, but always existed in gendered and separate domains.

In addition to clothes and shoes, as more foreign products made their way into the running world through consumptive change, *metat* accusations could increase as well. Alem told me that in the elite training group there was always fear and suspicion surrounding energy drinks. If an athlete had a bad training session, or their stomach turned in the middle of a long run, they might accuse another

---

<sup>35</sup> CRAWLEY, *OUT OF THIN AIR*, 174.



athlete of doing something to their drink. More often than not, the assumption was that it was another woman runner.

This dynamic tugs at the strings and is reflective in the embodied, social, and tactical tensions of distance running. Contrary to how many people run recreationally, and even how some elite runners train in the west – alone – running in Ethiopia is just about *always* seen as a collective endeavor. Because I occasionally did run alone and would explain about all the individual running myself and others do in America, I was frequently chastised for this behavior.

Running with others was important for adaptation and becoming stronger. When I asked one athlete to explain to me why it was so important to train with others she emphasized how important it was for learning about rhythm, breath, and endurance. “If you train alone you won’t learn as much about your performance. If you are tired, you might just stop, but when you work with a group you can see other runners moving past you and it encourages you to catch up with them. Working with a group is really good. Others give you strength.”

In addition to learning about her own performance, she stressed the need for training with others because these trainings would prepare you to compete against others. She continued, “If you only work alone and then you go to a competition you cannot adapt to others because there are different conditions. But doing a lot of work together you learn about other people’s endurance and their breath.” Every now and then, she and others reminded me, it was good to get a feel for being in the *gebinya*.

In Amharic, *meqbat* means “to enter” or more colloquially to “get in.” People use it often because in my experience most people would not enter new spaces without being invited. You might show up to someone’s home, or peek your head into a café before someone quickly said, “*geba*” (for a man), “*gebi*” (for a woman), or “*gebu*” (for several people). Even as you approach mini buses to move

around the cities the conductors, once establishing that you want to travel on their line, will smack the side of the bus, and tell you, sometimes rather aggressively, to “*gebi!*” Similarly, as running in rhythmic pace in Ethiopia is so integral to the training style others are invited to “get in” to the training line.

As I was more often than not the slowest runner in the group, others often beckoned me to “*gebi!*” “get in” to the middle of the line. Like the front, being last in line was reserved for the stronger runners who did not need the extra strength and support. Being behind someone meant that one only needed to forward on the feet in front of them and knowing that someone was right behind you on your heels provided some constant bodily awareness to stay up on your toes. While this did not necessarily mean I never got dropped and fell off the pace on runs, I can certainly attest there were several training sessions I held remarkably quick paces compared to my ability. I would never have been able to maintain those efforts while running alone.

Being in the *gebinya* was the apex of this kind of training style. The *gebinya* among most Ethiopians refers to the front seat of a minibus or van. In general, transport minibuses in Addis Ababa are overstuffed, with at least a third person encouraged to join seats built for two. The front of vans, by contrast, are reserved for two next to the driver; and the seat next to the door, especially on longer bus trips outside of the city, are coveted. They are much more comfortable and frequently given to elders and guests. I have been the beneficiary of this form of hospitality, making long bus rides noticeably more comfortable having been given the *gebinya* because of my foreignness.

But in training, being the *gebinya* the popular psychological and phenomenological state of “flow” coined by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.<sup>36</sup> If an athlete had an excellent training session where she was able to get in line right behind the pacemaker, stick with the pace, and

---

<sup>36</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Nachdr., Harper Perennial Modern Classics (New York: Harper [and] Row, 2009).

feel an effortless flow, she might have been in the *gebinya*. I remember when a close friend nailed a training session and said to me in the bus ride back she had been in the *gebinya mulu ken* – all day.

Still, running remains an individual sport, and athletes were always keenly aware that often their most important training partners would also be their greatest competitors and obstacles to success. With competition so steep and opportunities so few, athletes were always also aware that their greatest training assets – their relationships – could be central to their professional downfall. And because so many elements of explanation were shrouded behind opaque norms – sponsors and agents not being transparent or clear about what was allowed entry to certain races, how much the entrance or prize money would be – and because women could be depicted as taking advantage of using their bodies in different ways for advancement within the running world, suspicions about friends and others, ran very deep.

While these dynamics are true for men, too, the particular forms of gendered hierarchy within many facets of Ethiopian culture mean that women's' success in running yielded greater social conflicts. Beyond the fact that getting a chance to join a new club or go abroad could be attributed to a taboo relationship with a coach, even if a woman were to be trusted to have gone through the stages based on ability, simply coming into a lot of money and power yielded as many social hazards as they did benefits.

In various social settings, elite athletes often fall into these roles, especially around coaches and other men. I went to numerous social gatherings in which women who won World Marathon Major Marathons, and could run under 2:20 in the marathon, would be serving food, and carrying water to men and guests for them to wash their hands. But even as they would situate themselves in submissive roles, the way in which class transformation was attributed to their success was simultaneously seen as a celebrated exception and implicitly disparaged in other ways. In many ways,

it just felt that no matter what one achieved, the expression or feeling of floating was present. No one was ever really settled.

## ***6.6 Min Yshalal?***

This lack of settling was made clear in a brief return trip in 2022. Alem had another baby and had moved with her family into a much bigger home in a new neighborhood in Addis Ababa. She and her husband had invested in the property years prior, but things took a while to finalize, and I was welcome with the question, “*Min Yshalal?*” “Which house is nicer?”

The question in Amharic is actually very contextual. “*Min yshalal?*” most closely translates to, “Which is preferable?” I might be asked this about what food I liked or where I wanted to go. Even if the referent is not explicitly pointed out (in this case the former house), the listener must understand that the question is relative and pick up on the relevance.

I had well learned at this point in time that overtly celebrating upward mobility was critical. While humility was valued in some contexts, when someone was able to buy something nice – a car, a home, even new clothes – it was appropriate to note that was the case. Rather than say, “You’re old home was nice, too,” it’s much simpler to just say, “This house is better,” as a way of acknowledging their savviness.

As noted before, Alem and her husband were smart to have multiple investments because the industry of importing and selling cars had changed dramatically since Alem’s husband began doing so. However, because they had bought this property earlier and were already working on renovations, they were in fine shape.

When they left their previous neighborhood, where they had lived for a long time, they heard through friends of friends that there were a lot of rumors. Alem told me of one athlete with whom she used to be close friends, but then only began to gossip about her, aided in spreading this rumor by, as I understood it, deceitfully speculating. “Fati said, ‘Oh, Alem hasn’t raced in a while, I

wonder if that's why they had to sell the home and move.” Alem enacted how she imagined her former friend may have insinuated.

Alem, however, felt the need to contextualize, referencing the athlete who did have to sell his car because his money was drying up. It turned out that they also moved out of our previous neighborhood, but to Tafo, outside of Addis Ababa, because it was more affordable. Alem expressed regret, “Most athletes, you know they don't have any education, so they don't know what do when they get money. So if they hear you are not racing, and that you sold your house, most people assume you're losing everything. It happens to many athletes.” Alem knew the following day I was heading to a training session and so, she told me, effectively, to gossip about her circumstances. “Tell them about our new house!” she instructed me. “Make sure you tell them they we've upgraded.”

The next day, I did.

In contrast to many other studies of gendered work under transnational capitalism, the work of running is one oriented to dramatic class and status transformation. And although these transformations do occur, the threat and reality of slippages are always present. Situating one's decisions in investments – in properties, coaching relationships, romantic relationships, and social relationships – are impacted by both the precarious conditions of work under transnational capitalism, and local conceptions of gossip, witchcraft and value. All of these interrelated factors expand into new registers depending on the material conditions of those involved.

In many instances witchcraft and gossip can be important tools of social ordering. Gossip, in particular, can be a vital way for people, in many cases women, to stay as safe as possible. However, because the material stakes are so high (and extend far beyond the individual, but into her family and friends from where she has come), idle talk can be something that fractures a sense of solidarity as much as it does provide a tool for it to exist. These incredibly precarious working conditions then

both simultaneously show why a sense of solidarity could be really important and helpful and why it is so difficult to foster.

## 7. *Finishing*

A few days after I arrived in Ethiopia in spring of 2022, Yalemzerf Yehualaw, one of Ethiopia's top talents, ran the sixth fastest marathon in history in her debut. Her time of 2:17:23 was the fastest women's debut marathon ever run. EBS, Ethiopian Broadcasting Service, played numerous of her completing the race with arms held high in the air touting her to be the potential next Ethiopian sensation.

Alem shook her head as she watched on TV. Even having been a successful runner, one of the world's fastest a decade before, the shoe technology and training prowess meant that the times had gotten faster than she had ever run. For Alem, this meant the prospect of ever returning to running continued to seem more unrealistic. But she also seemed to take some pride in being able to recognize Yalemzerf's potential.

"It's more than her time," Alem said, "She has good *finishing*."

*Finishing* was a word I heard often during fieldwork. Coaches and athletes used the English word, *finishing* as a noun that described finishing speed. One could run 99% of a race with a dozen other athletes, but if they did not have *finishing*, they could miss the opportunity to qualify for races, win prize money, and continue to get opportunities to run.

To be great in the sport of long-distance running, athletes need to have both enduring strength – they need to be able to labor, intensely, for long durations – and speed. Speed comes at the end of races, when aerobic systems have nearly reached their peaks and tight and cramping muscles make it difficult for runners to move their legs. When the lactic acid builds so aggressively it's visible; it is not uncommon to witness top athletes "tie up" and even fall down because their leg muscles are devoid of oxygen. The athletes with great running economy are both aerobically strong, and have "finishing" speed.

Ethiopians talk about “finishing” often. At the end of even easy training sessions, athletes often run some type of intervals – shorter, hard and fast efforts – to cultivate speeds to have “finishing.” They know and well learn that a mere second over the course of the career can be life changing.

But “finishing,” much like running economy, I have learned is tied to much more. To even get to the point where “finishing” can be monetarily assessed, one must progress through stages of sporting development that necessitate a continuous and shifting array of complex social relations. I have tried, throughout this dissertation, to show what those stages look like, and how their gendered and racialized dynamics are present – whether or not they are readily clear or not.

To have “finishing,” means being able to get faster, develop relationships with the right coaches, agents, and boyfriends, while maintaining a sense of self. To have “finishing” nowadays means getting a pair of the right type of shoes and getting the right type of monetary support from shoe companies. Even if one has “finishing” it does not mean she can exercise it or benefit from it if she cannot avoid predatory men. Or the “finishing” might be seen as socially destructive, if others assume that an athlete has cheated (by lying about her age, exercising witchcraft, or even doping), changed her nationality, or that she fails to live up to other gendered expectations of family and friends.

The notion of “finishing” highlights the stakes that women face in pursuing careers as athletes. Races have preset distances and unshifting finishing lines. To arrive to the finishing line at all requires a skillful balance of high intensity training, emotional maturity, and intellectual prowess. To not only have “finishing” but be towards the front requires much more. One must have excellent “running economy” (which can also signal potential) to have “finishing,” but the former prerequisite does not guarantee the latter in order to find success. And, if she has both, there are no guarantees.





## References

- Aalen, Lovise. *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilisation under Ethnic Federalism*. African Social Studies Series 25. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- Adi, Hakim. *Pan-Africanism: A History*. London New York Oxford New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
- Alkalimat, Abdul. *The History of Black Studies*. London: Pluto Press, 2021.
- Amdur, Neil. "Keino Breaks Olympic Record in 1,500-Meter Run, with Ryun of U.S. Second." *The New York Times*, October 20, 1968.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013.
- Appel, Hannah. "Toward an Ethnography of the National Economy." *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (May 12, 2017): 294–322. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.2.09>.
- Ashforth, Adam. *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Baer, Drake. "How Nike Got An Insane Deal on the Swoosh Logo," *Business Insider*, July 25, 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/nike-bought-swoosh-logo-for-35-2014-7>.
- Bahru Zewde. *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991*. 2nd ed. Eastern African Studies. Oxford [England] : Athens : Addis Ababa: James Curry ; Ohio University Press ; Addis Ababa University Press, 2001.
- . *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement, c. 1960-1974*. Eastern Africa Series. Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2014.
- Barnes, Kyle R, and Andrew E Kilding. "Running Economy: Measurement, Norms, and Determining Factors." *Sports Medicine - Open* 1, no. 1 (December 2015): 8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-015-0007-y>.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. *"Sympathy and Solidarity" and Other Essays*. Feminist Constructions. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.
- Bayly, Lucy. "Despite criticisms of 'technological doping,' Nike Vaporfly shoes avoid global ban," *NBC News*, January 31, 2020 <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/despite-criticisms-technological-doping-nike-vaporfly-shoes-avoid-global-ban-n1127386>
- BBC, "Agnes Tirop: Husband arrested in Kenya after Athlete's Death," BBC, October 15, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58919391>.

- Bear, Laura. *Navigating Austerity: Currents of Debt along a South Asian River*. Anthropology of Policy. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Berardi, Franco. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009.
- Besky, Sarah. *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India*. California Studies in Food and Culture 47. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.
- . *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India*. California Studies in Food and Culture 47. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.
- BESNIER, NIKO. “The Athlete’s Body and the Global Condition: Tongan Rugby Players in Japan.” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 3 (2012): 491–510.
- Besnier, Niko, Domenica Gisella Calabrò, and Daniel Guinness, eds. *Sport, Migration, and Gender in the Neoliberal Age*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021.
- Blaut, James M. *The Colonizer’s Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*. New York: Guilford Press, 1993.
- Bohannan, Paul. “The Impact of Money on an African Subsistence Economy.” *The Journal of Economic History* 19, no. 4 (December 1959): 491–503. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050700085946>.
- Borenstein, Hannah. “The Marginalization of African Runners,” *Africa is a Country*, April 9, 2019, <https://africasacountry.com/2019/04/the-marginalization-of-african-runners>
- Boylston, Tom. *The Stranger at the Feast: Prohibition and Mediation in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018.
- Braun, Lundy. *Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Bruce, Stephanie. “My Stomach is All Over the Internet. Here’s Why,” *Runner’s World*, April 1, 2016, <https://www.runnersworld.com/runners-stories/a20791347/my-stomach-is-all-over-the-internet-heres-why/>
- Caillois, Roger, and Meyer Barash. *Man, Play, and Games*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Carrier, James G., and Don Kalb, eds. *Anthropologies of Class: Power, Practice and Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Chappell, Robert, and Ejeta Seifu. “Sport, Culture and Politics in Ethiopia.” *Culture, Sport, Society* 3, no. 1 (March 2000): 35–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14610980008721861>.
- Chavez, Chris. “Nike Removes Contracts Reductions for Pregnant Athletes After Backlash,” *Sports Illustrated*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.si.com/olympics/2019/08/16/nike-contract-reduction-pregnancy-protection-athlete-maternity-leave>.

- Clapham, Christopher. "The Ethiopian Developmental State." *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 6 (June 3, 2018): 1151–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1328982>.
- . "The Political Economy of Ethiopia from the Imperial Period to the Present." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Ethiopian Economy*, by Christopher Clapham, 32–47. edited by Fantu Cheru, Christopher Cramer, and Arkebe Oqubay. Oxford University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198814986.013.6>.
- Cole, Jennifer. *Sex and Salvation: Imagining the Future in Madagascar*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Cole, Jennifer, and Christian Groes, eds. *Affective Circuits: African Migrations to Europe and the Pursuit of Social Regeneration*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Collins, Jane Lou. *Threads: Gender, Labor, and Power in the Global Apparel Industry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Collins, Tony. *Sport in Capitalist Society: A Short History*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso, 2014.
- Craven, Christa. *Pushing for Midwives: Homebirth Mothers and the Reproductive Rights Movement*. Philadelphia, Pa: Temple Univ. Press, 2010.
- Crawley, Michael J. *Out of Thin Air: Running Wisdom and Magic from above the Clouds in Ethiopia*. London Oxford New York New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Sport, 2020.
- Crouse, Lindsay and Montaña, Alysia, "Nike Told Me to Dream Crazy, Until I wanted a Baby," sec. O, *New York Times*, May 12, 2019.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Nachdr. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. New York: Harper [and] Row, 2009.
- Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, and Selma James. "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community." In *Class*, edited by Stanley Aronowitz and Michael J. Roberts, 79–86. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119395485.ch7>.
- Dadhi, Hawi. "Ministry Redefines 'New' for Vehicle Taxation," *Addis Fortune*, July 21, 2021, <https://addisfortune.news/ministry-redefines-new-for-vehicle-taxation/>.
- Daniels, Jack, and Nancy Daniels. "Running Economy of Elite Male and Elite Female Runners?" *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* 24, no. 4 (April 1992): 483–489. <https://doi.org/10.1249/00005768-199204000-00015>.
- Daniels, Jack T. "A Physiologist's View of Running Economy?" *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* 17, no. 3 (June 1985): 332–338. <https://doi.org/10.1249/00005768-198506000-00006>.

- De Boeck, Filip, and Marie-Françoise Plissart. *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*. Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2014.
- Denison, Jim. *The Greatest: The Haile Gebrselassie Story*. 1st ed. Halcottsville, NY: Breakaway Books, 2004.
- Donham, Donald L. *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=19192>.
- Donham, Donald L., Wendy James, and Thomas Leiper Kane Collection (Library of Congress. Hebraic Section), eds. *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*. African Studies Series 51. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University press, 1986.
- Duménil, Gérard, and Dominique Lévy. *Managerial Capitalism: Ownership, Management and the Coming New Mode of Production*. London: Pluto Press, 2018.
- Eckert, Andreas, ed. *Global Histories of Work*. Work in Global and Historical Perspective, volume 1. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016.
- Ellison, James. “‘Everyone Can Do as He Wants’: Economic Liberalization and Emergent Forms of Antipathy in Southern Ethiopia.” *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 4 (November 2006): 665–86.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2006.33.4.665>.
- Elson, Diane. “Labor Markets as Gendered Institutions: Equality, Efficiency and Empowerment Issues.” *World Development* 27, no. 3 (March 1999): 611–27. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(98\)00147-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(98)00147-8).
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E., and Eva Gillies. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. Abridged with an introduction. by Eva Gillies. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Featherstone, Liza. *Students against Sweatshops*. London: Verso, 2002.
- Federici, Silvia. *Wages against Housework*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975.
- . *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018.
- Ferguson, James. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Finn, Adharanand. *Running with the Kenyans: Discovering the Secrets of the Fastest People on Earth*. New York: Ballantine, 2013.

- Finneran, Niall. "Ethiopian Evil Eye Belief and the Magical Symbolism of Iron Working." *Folklore* 114, no. 3 (March 2003): 427–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587032000145414>.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books. Winchester: O Books, 2009.
- Fortun, Kim. "Ethnography in Late Industrialism," in *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology*, ed. Orin Starn (Durham: Duke University Press), 119-136.
- Foster, Carl, and Alejandro Lucia. "Running Economy: The Forgotten Factor in Elite Performance." *Sports Medicine* 37, no. 4 (2007): 316–19. <https://doi.org/10.2165/00007256-200737040-00011>.
- Foster, Robert John. *Coca-Globalization: Following Soft Drinks from New York to New Guinea*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Freeman, Carla. *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work, and Pink-Collar Identities in the Caribbean*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Gebissa, "Lelisa's Message," *Jacobin*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/ethiopia-feyisa-lelisa-marathon-oromia/>.
- Gershon, Ilana. *Down and out in the New Economy: How People Find (or Don't Find) Work Today*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- . *No Family Is an Island: Cultural Expertise among Samoans in Diaspora*. Expertise. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012.
- Geschiere, Peter. *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison*. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Getachew, Adom. *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. 1st University of Minnesota Press ed., 2006. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Goldblatt, David. *The Games: A Global History of the Olympics*, 2018.
- Graeber, David. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.
- Gramsci, Antonio, and Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Repr. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2012.
- Griffith, David, Kerry Preibisch, and Ricardo Contreras. "The Value of Reproductive Labor." *American Anthropologist* 120, no. 2 (June 2018): 224–36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12973>.

- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms." In *Culture, ideology and social process: A reader*, eds. Tony Bennett, et al (Worcester, UK: Billing & Sons, 1981), 19-38.
- Hamilton, B. "East African Running Dominance: What Is behind It?" *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 34, no. 5 (October 1, 2000): 391–94. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjism.34.5.391>.
- Hannig, Anita. *Beyond Surgery: Injury, Healing, and Religion at an Ethiopian Hospital*. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.
- Harding, Sandra G. *Science and Social Inequality: Feminist and Postcolonial Issues*. Race and Gender in Science Studies. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- Hart, Matt. *Win at All Costs: Inside Nike Running and Its Culture of Deception*. First edition. New York: Dey Street Books, 2020.
- . *Win at All Costs: Inside Nike Running and Its Culture of Deception*. First edition. New York: Dey Street Books, 2020.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. 1. publ. in paperback, Reprint. (twice). Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011.
- . *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford [England] ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1989.
- Ho, Karen Zouwen. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Hoberman, John M. *Mortal Engines: The Science of Performance and the Dehumanization of Sport*. Caldwell, N.J: Blackburn Press, 2001.
- Hollister, Geoff. *Out of Nowhere: The inside Story of How Nike Marketed the Culture of Running*. Aachen: Meyer et Meyer Sport, 2008.
- Hoogkamer, Wouter, Shalaya Kipp, Jesse H. Frank, Emily M. Farina, Geng Luo, and Rodger Kram. "A Comparison of the Energetic Cost of Running in Marathon Racing Shoes." *Sports Medicine* 48, no. 4 (April 2018): 1009–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-017-0811-2>.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Nachdr. Pluto Classics. London: Pluto Press, 2001.
- Huizinga, Johan, Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Eric Voegelin, and Markus Knut Ebeling, eds. *Das Spielelement der Kultur: Spieltheorien nach Johan Huizinga*. 1. Aufl. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2014.
- Hunt, Joshua. *University of Nike: How Corporate Cash Bought American Higher Education*. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2018.

- . *University of Nike: How Corporate Cash Bought American Higher Education*. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2018.
- Huntington, Ellsworth. *Mainsprings of Civilization*. New York: Wiley, 1945.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men*. 1. Harper Perennial Modern Classics ed. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2008.
- IAAF, “IAAF Label Road Races: Regulations 2019,”  
<https://media.aws.iaaf.org/competitioninfo/37136688-ca01-44da-8d15-7b0584b10694.pdf>
- Ingle, Sean. “No record is safe with IAAF posed to allow arms race in shoes to run and run,” *The Guardian*, October 21, 2019,  
<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2019/oct/21/shoes-nike-world-records-technology>
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. 11. printing in paperback. Post-Contemporary Interventions. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005.
- Jegathesan, Mythri. *Tea and Solidarity: Tamil Women and Work in Postwar Sri Lanka*. Decolonizing Feminisms. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019.
- Kebede, Messay. *Survival and Modernization--Ethiopia's Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1999.
- Knight, Philip H. *Shoe Dog: A Memoir by the Creator of Nike*, 2018.
- Krieger, Jörg. *Power and Politics in World Athletics: A Critical History*. Routledge Critical Studies in Sport. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021.
- Lepselter, Susan Claudia. *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016.
- Levine, Donald Nathan. *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*. Repr. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Lewis, Oscar. *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*. 5. printing of the paperback ed. Illini Books 9. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1972.
- Llewellyn, Matthew P., and John Gleaves. *The Rise and Fall of Olympic Amateurism*. Sport and Society. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016.
- Luxton, Meg, and Kate Bezanson, eds. *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006.
- Mains, Daniel. “Friends and Money: Balancing Affection and Reciprocity among Young Men in Urban Ethiopia: Friends and Money.” *American Ethnologist* 40, no. 2 (May 2013): 335–46.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12025>.



- Malara, Diego Maria, and Tom Boylston. "Vertical Love: Forms of Submission and Top-Down Power in Orthodox Ethiopia." *Social Analysis* 60, no. 4 (January 1, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2016.600403>.
- Marcus, Harold G. *A History of Ethiopia*. Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Marx, Karl, and Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Edited by Friedrich Engels. Modern Library Giants 26. New York: Random House, 1906.
- McCrone, Kathleen E. *Playing the Game: Sport and the Physical Emancipation of English Women, 1870-1914*. Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1988.
- McKnight, Michael. "A Brush With Greatness: The Puma Shoe that Upended the 1968 Olympics," *Sports Illustrated*, November 15, 2019, <https://www.si.com/track-and-field/2019/11/15/puma-shoe-upended-1968-olympics>. Michael Girma Kebede. "Beyond Exception and Supremacy: Adwa in the Black Radical Imaginary." *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities* 17, no. 1 (March 3, 2022): 23–49. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ejossah.v17i1.3>.
- Mintz, Sidney W. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Mitchell, Timothy. "FIXING THE ECONOMY." *Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (January 1998): 82–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095023898335627>.
- Montaño, Alysia. "Nike Told me to Dream Crazy, Until I wanted a baby," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/opinion/nike-maternity-leave.html>.
- Mooses, Martin, and Anthony C. Hackney. "Anthropometrics and Body Composition in East African Runners: Potential Impact on Performance." *International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance* 12, no. 4 (April 2017): 422–30. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijspp.2016-0408>.
- Nader, Laura. "Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained From Studying Up." In *Reinventing Anthropology*, 284–311. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.
- Narotzky, Susana, and Niko Besnier. "Crisis, Value, and Hope: Rethinking the Economy: An Introduction to Supplement 9." *Current Anthropology* 55, no. S9 (August 2014): S4–16. <https://doi.org/10.1086/676327>.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Pankhurst, Richard. *The Ethiopians: A History*. The Peoples of Africa. Oxford ; Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.
- Piketty, Thomas. *Das Kapital im 21. Jahrhundert*. Translated by Ilse Utz and Stefan Lorenzer. 2. Auflage in C.H.Beck Paperback. C.H. Beck Paperback 6236. München: C.H. Beck, 2018.

- Pine, J. "Economy of Speed: The New Narco-Capitalism." *Public Culture* 19, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 357–66. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2006-041>.
- . "Economy of Speed: The New Narco-Capitalism." *Public Culture* 19, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 357–66. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2006-041>.
- Piot, Charles. *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- . *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Podium Runner, "Family of Abebe Bikila Sues Vibram," *Podium Runner*, February 11, 2015. <https://www.podiumrunner.com/events/family-abebe-bikila-sues-vibram/>.
- Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. 2nd Beacon Paperback ed. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001.
- Pun, Ngai and Duke University Press. *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*. Durham [NC]; Hong Kong: Duke University Press: Hong Kong University Press, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386759>.
- Redini, Veronica. "Commodity Fetishism Again. Labour, Subjectivity and Commodities in 'Supply Chains Capitalism.'" *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (November 1, 2018): 353–62. <https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0032>.
- Redmond, Shana L. *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.
- Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where All of Life Is a Paid-for Experience*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000.
- Roberts, Dorothy. *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Crete Race in the Twenty-First Century*. New York; London: The new Press, 2012.
- Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- Rofel, Lisa, Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, Simona Segre Reinach, and Robert John Foster. *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism: A Collaborative Ethnography of Italian-Chinese Global Fashion*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures. Durham London: Duke University Press, 2019.
- Salamon, Hagar. *The Hyena People: Ethiopian Jews in Christian Ethiopia*. Contraversions 13. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Sayles, Justin. "The Once and Future Sneaker King," *The Ringer*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.theringer.com/nba/2020/5/4/21246027/air-jordan-1-nike-michael-jordan-sneaker-king-legacy-the-last-dance>.

- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, and Margaret M. Lock. "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1987): 6–41.
- Schultz, Jaime. *Qualifying Times: Points of Change in U.S. Women's Sport*. Sport and Society. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014.
- Smit, Barbara. *Pitch Invasion: Three Stripes, Two Brothers, One Feud: Adidas, Puma and the Making of Modern Sport*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations*, 2013.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.
- Starn, Orin, ed. "CHAPTER 6. Ethnography in Late Industrialism." In *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology*, 119–36. Duke University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822375654-007>.
- . *The Passion of Tiger Woods: An Anthropologist Reports on Golf, Race, and Celebrity Scandal*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Stewart, Pamela J., and Andrew Strathern. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*. New Departures in Anthropology. Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Styles, Megan A. *Roses from Kenya: Labor, Environment, and the Global Trade in Cut Flowers*. Culture, Place, and Nature. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019.
- Tanser, Toby. *More Fire: How to Run the Kenyan Way*. Yardley, Penn. : Hove: Westholme ; Roundhouse [distributor], 2008.
- Taylor, Jonathan "Nike Vaporfly 4% was only the beginning. A 'super shoe' revolution is afoot," *Fast Company*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90610034/nike-vaporfly-4-was-only-the-beginning-a-super-shoe-revolution-is-afoot>
- Taussig, Michael T. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980.
- Tekie, Christina. "Brewing Development: Multinational Alcohol Companies, the Neo-Concessionary State, and the Politics of Industrialization in Ethiopia," (Ph.D. diss, Duke University, 2019)
- Teeple Hopkins, Carmen. "Introduction: Feminist Geographies of Social Reproduction and Race." *Women's Studies International Forum* 48 (January 2015): 135–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.06.002>.
- Teshale Tibebu. *The Making of Modern Ethiopia: 1896-1974*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995.

- Thompson, E.P. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." In *Class*, edited by Stanley Aronowitz and Michael J. Roberts, 27–40. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119395485.ch3>.
- Tolesa, Dawit. "EAF bans women marathoners for three months." *The Reporter*, October 5, 2019, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/eaf-bans-women-marathoners-three-months>
- Tolesa, Dawit. "EAF fines Hussein Makke USD 25,000," *The Reporter*, November 23, 2019. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/eaf-fines-hussein-makke-usd-25000>
- Tilley, Helen. *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870-1950*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- . *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an out-of-the-Way Place*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Virilio, Paul. *Speed and Politics*. 2006 ed. Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2006.
- Visperas, Cristina, Kimberly Juanita Brown, and Jared Sexton. "Introduction." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (November 30, 2016): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v2i2.28797>.
- Vogel, Lise. *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*. 1. paperback pr. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Pr, 1987.
- Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Weiss, Margot Danielle. *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- West, Harry G. *Ethnographic Sorcery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- West, Paige. *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
- World Athletics, "Basics of the World Rankings," *World Athletics*. <https://www.worldathletics.org/world-ranking-rules/basics>.
- Wright, Erik Olin. *Understanding Class*. London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2015.
- Wrynn, Alison M. "'A Debt Was Paid off in Tears': Science, IOC Politics and the Debate about High Altitude in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 23, no. 7 (November 2006): 1152–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523360600832429>.

Yanagisako, Sylvia Junko. *Producing Culture and Capital: Family Firms in Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

———. *Producing Culture and Capital: Family Firms in Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

## Biography

Hannah Borenstein began her research journey at NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study where she received her B.A. in 2014. Then, she began her doctoral work in Duke University's department of Cultural Anthropology. At Duke, she received certificates in both Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies, and African and African American Studies. Hannah also served as a fellow in the Migration Lab, Kenan Institute of Ethics, and received small grants for research and training from the Center for International and Global Studies, Duke GSF, the Versatile Humanities.

Hannah's dissertation research in Cultural Anthropology received funding from: The Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Olympic Studies Center, the Duke Graduate School, the Society for the Anthropology of Work, the Center for French and Ethiopian Studies. At the time of completion of the degree she has published two peer-reviewed articles – “Tracking Work from the Wrist: The Surveillance of Ethiopian Women Athletes for Capital” in *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* (April 2021) and “Running for Ethiopia: A Performance of Social Reproduction.” *Recreation and Society in Africa, Asia, and Latin America* (Volume 7, 2019). Additionally, she has published two chapters in different edited volumes: “Laboring Athletes, Laboring Mothers: Ethiopian Women Athletes' Bodies at Work” in *Sport, Migration, and Gender in the Neoliberal Age* (Routledge. 2020), “Naturalized East African Runners in the Middle East” in *Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East* (2022) and one currently in production: “Feyisa Lilesa's 'Special Skills' of Late Capitalist Sport: The Transnational Protest of Ethiopia's most Enduring Olympian” in *Sports and Protest in the Black Atlantic*.