

Piot, Charles (with Kodjo Nicolas Batema). 2019. *The Fixer: Visa Lottery Chronicles* by. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 224 pp. Pp.: \$25.95. ISBN: 9781478003045.

Book review by

Smoki Musaraj

Ohio University (USA)

During an interview at the US Embassy in Tirana, Albania, to secure the renewal of my International Student F1 Visa circa 2003, the embassy consulate official asked: “What do you plan to do after your complete your doctoral studies in the US?” I had satisfied all academic and financial requirements for the visa application and had been an international student on fellowships for six years in Canada and two years in the US. The question was meant to fulfill the criteria of demonstrating intent to return to my home country after my studies. Despite my desire to remain in the US, I answered with the first thought that came to mind: “I plan to come back and teach cultural anthropology in Albania.” Without skipping a beat, the immigration officer noted, “but there is no anthropology department in any Albanian universities.” She was correct. Fighting the surge of panic inside of me, I also replied without skipping a beat and taking a chance: “Well, I plan to establish a department of cultural anthropology.” Of course, we both knew this was far-fetched; nevertheless, the officer did not contest my response. Perhaps because my response aligned with the American can-do attitude, or perhaps because the question that the officer had asked was inherently unfair—asking about my intentions beyond my studies was a trick question; had I expressed my true desire to remain in the US, my visa would most likely not have been renewed. In other words, the question itself sets one up for disingenuity.

Similar criteria that assess an applicant's true intentions are legion in the US visa regime. These criteria inject ambiguity and arbitrariness into the US visa laws. They empower the immigration officers to be judges of one's soul rather than objectively assess their paperwork. In practice, such criteria impose a moral code that is culturally inflected and that inevitably leads to mistranslations and invites transgression. *The Fixer: Visa Lottery Chronicles*, by Charles Piot with Kodjo Nicholas Batema, takes a close ethnographic look at such mistranslations and transgressions that play out in Lomé, Togo. The book follows the cat-and-mouse games between the US embassy consular officers, visa applicants, and fixers (mediators) in the Diversity (DV) Lottery application process. *The Fixer* is situated in Togo, but it could very well take place in Albania or any other part of the Global South. As Piot emphasizes in the introduction, the DV Lottery is an annual global ritual that involves millions of dollars, endless paperwork, and an affective economy of anticipation, hope, excitement and/or disappointment. I was thrilled to read this book for both personal and professional reasons.

The Fixer is indeed a very timely ethnography that speaks to the rise of migration and of anti-immigration policies and rhetoric around the world but especially during the Trump presidency in the US. *The Fixer* helps to humanize a widespread practice—application to the annual DV Lottery—that is often represented in public discourse as an encroachment of the desperate and the needy on US wealth and generosity. *The Fixer* takes a unique approach to this global phenomenon by looking at the semi-formal economy of fixers and mediators that has proliferated alongside the DV lottery in Togo. In a nutshell, this economy is organized as follows: the winners of the lottery proceed to apply for US residence (otherwise known as the green card), and they are eligible to bring along their spouses and children in their application. This presents opportunities for creative kinship configurations. Driven by a desire to migrate to the US or by the need for money to cover application fees, many winners enter into false marriages with other individuals who are willing to pay for the winner's expenses for the visa application and travel to the US. It is a win-win deal. The winner, who often cannot afford the fees, gains access to the necessary cash while the spouse gains a green card. As this phenomenon has become widespread, US consular officials are on the lookout for fake marriages versus real ones. Therein ensues a complex set of strategies and assumptions that the consular constructs to investigate and assess the veracity of the marriages and the winners of the lottery hiring fixers to help them navigate the process. The main protagonist of *The Fixer*, Kodjo, also credited as a companion author to the book, is one such fixer who makes a living from helping DV winners complete the next steps of their green card application. Kodjo

matches winners with spouses who are willing to pay the expenses of the application process and of travel to the US.

Piot's access to Kodjo's everyday activities and the specific cases that he manages is incredible and makes for a thick description of practices that straddle the boundaries of legality and illegality. Piot follows Kodjo in his ventures within Lomé, Togo and in one failed endeavor in the neighboring country of Burkina Faso (Chapter 7). He takes a deep dive into the various steps of the DV application process, from the filling out of paperwork with Kodjo's help to the interview (Chapter 2). The book also moves through multiple spaces—from Kodjo's office where files are stored, and consultation takes place, to the streets where protests are held, to the US embassy offices where immigration officers determine which marriages are real or fake. The book also follows some of the winners in the US, where they struggle with cultural shock and isolation (Chapter 8). This multi-sited approach helps us gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the life cycle of the DV lottery. The ethnography explores ethical questions around the strategies and practices of actors working in the grey areas of immigration policies. The Fixer is empathetic to the decisions and practices of actors like Kodjo, who mediate and guide green card applicants through the maze of US visa policies and procedures. While the work of people like Kodjo may be seen by US immigration officers as shady and potentially illegal, Piot is empathetic to this work not just because it is undertaken out of necessity but also because it entails savvy business and legal practices and tireless affective labour.

Chapters 1 and 4 explore the economics of the green card application process within the broader context of Togo's postcolonial neoliberal economic system. These chapters follow several cases managed by Kodjo in which Piot describes in detail the financial considerations and constraints that lead applicants to seek Kodjo's help. Piot situates Kodjo's business alongside other economic practices at the margins, also known as "the bush" or "the street," in other ethnographies of African informal economies. Adding to this literature, Piot emphasizes Kodjo's skills and business acumen, his knowledge of the ever-changing US visa laws and his acts of cultural translation that he constantly needs to do for many applicants.

Indeed, one of the unique strengths of the book is its attention to the cultural and affective work that is involved in the US Visa Application process. Chapters 3 and 5 navigate the ambivalence of kinship forms and practices that have emerged around the DV application process, as well as the cultural mistranslations around marriage and kinship that play a crucial role in this process. Examining various cases, Piot shows the complex and

difficult to define forms of kinship and marriage that enfold in today's Togo. He also shows how conversations at the US embassy offices are suffused in cultural assumptions about marriage, love, and affection that do not correspond to local norms and practices. For instance, Piot notes that one common test question in the visa interview ("What side of the bed do you sleep on?") is imbued with middle-class American assumptions about couples' intimacy. In Togo, married partners do not have an assigned side of the bed. It is Kodjo who takes it upon himself to prep his clients with these cultural insights. These practices of cultural translation and affective labour speak more of the ongoing ethnocentrism of American policies and bureaucracy rather than the disingenuity of DV lottery applicants. Further, as he follows several cases of marriage before an interview, Piot also observes that while this process might be seen by the American consulate officer as a marriage of convenience, it often turns into "real" marriages. Thus, in addition to expanding the literature around the economic and legal aspects of migration, *The Fixer* also provides novel insights into studies of kinship and marriage in light of migration laws and practices.

While the key theoretical interventions of the book are spelt out in the introduction, the rest of the book is written in clear prose accessible to academic and non-academic audiences. The book makes a fine contribution to migration studies, economic and legal anthropology, African studies, and US studies; it would be a great case study for graduate and undergraduate courses in these fields.