Ghanaian Female Migrants and the Temporal Orchestration of Care

Rutgers University has made this article freely available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters. [https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/47638/story/]

This work is an ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT (AM)

This is the author's manuscript for a work that has been accepted for publication. Changes resulting from the publishing process, such as copyediting, final layout, and pagination, may not be reflected in this document. The publisher takes permanent responsibility for the work. Content and layout follow publisher's submission requirements.

Citation for this version and the definitive version are shown below.

Citation to Publisher

Citation to this Version:

Terms of Use: Copyright for scholarly resources published in RUcore is retained by the copyright holder. By virtue of its appearance in this open access medium, you are free to use this resource, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. Other uses, such as reproduction or republication, may require the permission of the copyright holder.

*Article begins on next page*
Mrs. Amponsah\textsuperscript{1} was a delightful woman to visit in a town in southern Ghana. Although she was physically weak and confined to her bed in a dark and airless bedroom in her family house, she became animated during my visits, speaking cheerfully of her daughter abroad in the United States. Unfortunately, shortly before I returned to the United States, I learned that she had died suddenly. A few weeks later, I was able to speak to her daughter, Akua. Akua expressed her regret about not being able to take care of her mother in the last few years during her decline. I attempted to reassure her, reminding her that there had been many people living in the family house to care for her mother and her mother’s older, blind sister. Akua asked me whether her mother had mentioned any desire for Akua to be there while she was alive, and I replied that she had only spoken with pleasure of Akua’s success as a university administrator abroad.

Akua and I met on several occasions in the United States in the two years thereafter to commiserate together. Akua’s pain about her mother’s death seemed to be compounded by guilt about her inability to care for her mother. None of Akua’s six siblings could replace her in caring for her elderly mother before her death, in part because four of them were abroad, in the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The two who remained in Ghana were both men employed in cities an hour or two away; the younger one, a teacher, was an alcoholic and erratic in his behavior. Because of their financial success, the siblings had been able to support a more distant relative to live with their mother, but clearly Akua, the oldest daughter at age forty-eight, felt guilty about not caring for her mother herself.

Akua was also concerned about her younger brother’s two adolescent sons, who had
lived with her mother since they were very young: the youngest nephew, aged thirteen at the time of his grandmother’s death, had come to live with her when he was two years old. Akua had been paying her nephews’ school fees for many years, with the implication that she was responsible for their general welfare and which drew her more deeply into inheriting her mother’s role of parenting them (see Finch and Mason 1993). Akua had long wanted to bring them over to live with her in the United States, but their status as the nephews of a permanent resident did not qualify them for family reunification. As her mother declined in health, she began to pursue a more uncertain process: international adoption.

Akua’s guilt, prompted by her mother’s sudden death and resulting in efforts on her nephews’ behalf, speaks to three inter-related arguments which I make in this paper. First, I argue that Ghanaian women are used to providing care by coordinating their life course with others, which I analyze using the biological concept of entrainment as a metaphor. Men, on the other hand, tend to act in ways which are more temporally independent. Women’s capacity to effect care entrainments are due to their economic and social precarity in Ghana. Secondly, as women migrate, they assume male roles of care-giving, by sending remittances to support other women to provide daily care. Thus, the global care chains described by Arlie Russell Hochschild (2001) serve as a tool by which female migrants manage the difficulties of orchestrating life courses due to their migration, although not always to their satisfaction. These issues lead to my third point, that time and timing are as significant as space and location to transnational migrants.

Migration is often spatialized and invites spatial analogies—it does, after all, involve travel across different geographic spaces. However, migration involves temporal processes in addition to spatial changes. Migrants’ imaginaries, described by
Alicia Schmidt Camacho (2008), are also temporal imaginaries. To the extent that migration is conceived as a mode of “getting ahead” (a spatial metaphor), it is also a metaphor of time: getting ahead *earlier or faster*. Migration can also involve engagement with new conceptions of the temporality of the life course. For example, Jill Collins White (2013) examines how teenagers of Mexican origin in the United States consider work a more natural activity for their stage of life than schooling which positions them as children. Lauren Heidbrink (2014) shows how Central American young people caught at the U.S.-Mexico border consider themselves to be labor migrants like adults, while U.S. officials consider them children and “unaccompanied minors.”

Social life is characterized by temporal pluralism (Greenhouse 1996), with different time-scales generated in different social fields by human action (Munn 1992). For labor migrants, the inflexible rhythms and long shifts of work abroad may govern daily routines in a way inconceivable in their home countries (Rouse 2005). “Home” itself becomes temporally different, a vacation period filled with social occasions and festivities that allow people to hang out and bond more deeply (Smith 2006: 171-182). For migrants, time may seem to stand still at home (Stack 1996), or the period away may be represented as shorter in duration than its equivalent at home. In the prayers of invocation which open Nigerian Igbo association meetings in Chicago, described by Rachel Reynolds (2004), some telescope the time abroad through the phrase “Bless this little time we stayed here,” the little time in fact referring, perhaps, to a stay of twenty years, “understatements to express the pain of separation from the homeland” (ibid.: 174). Similarly, when Nicaraguan mothers migrate, they tell their children that they are coming back soon (Yarris 2014). “Collapsing time and space. . . is an important emotive balm” for migrants, Reynolds argues (2004: 175), to deal with temporal disjunctures and disappointments. For all these reasons, I consider migration to be transtemporal, in covering multiple temporalities, as well as translocal in involving
Attention to the temporal dimension of migration is significant for some of the same reasons that Pierre Bourdieu in his work in Algeria found time and timing critical to the development of his influential theory of practice (1972: 6-7). For Bourdieu, the meaning of human action depends on its timing and particularly its *kairos*, its timeliness, its occurring at the right or wrong moment as others understand it (ibid: 20). Bourdieu’s work further highlights how control of time is critical to the production of inequality. Not only do people manipulate the timing of exchanges according to the varying resources available to them (Barnes 1986), but time is also a resource, functioning as symbolic capital in which people invest to gain status (Bourdieu 1972: 176). Finally, because the construction of social reality is a major aspect of political power, to the extent that time becomes inherent in social reality—Bourdieu’s example involves the creation of the age categories of child, youth, adult, and being elderly—it is formative of political power. The converse is also true: the disorganization of the temporal and spatial order of existing societies is one mode of governance for colonial powers (Bourdieu 1972: 232 n.6).

Thinking about migration as transtemporal helps us see how immigration law imposes control through time in powerful ways. Although the U.S. government often thinks about immigration control in spatialized ways—as high walls along the U.S.–Mexico border, “the space of nonexistence” inhabited by those unauthorized to live and work in the United States (Coutin 2003), and deportation as ejection from the national body politic—the temporal barriers of U.S. immigration law and policy are also significant. These may involve the prolongation of family separation and the uncertainty of possible future family reunification; the “liminality and limbo” of K’iche Mayan immigrants in Providence who say they “have [a range of] different
plans because we cannot be sure of anything,” due to the risk of deportation (Foxen 2007: 124f.); and the lack of a future experienced by those who languish in detention (Dow 2004). Ruben Andersson (2014) notes the extended periods of waiting and stasis imposed on West African and North African migrants by European immigration policy. The fact that migrants cannot orchestrate various temporalities to care for others is in part due to the power of receiving states to impose their own temporal order on their lives.

Ghanaian immigrants in the United States provide one window onto the transtemporality of migration through their orchestration of care. I will first describe how care relies on the orchestration of life-courses, and how international migration supports the orchestration of life courses to support care, paradoxically through a temporal dislocation that enables the temporal independence and wealth accumulation. Then, through the concept of entrainment, I discuss the ways in which Ghanaian women in one area of southern Ghana coordinate the temporality of their life course, using data drawn from oral history interviews with a generation of women who grew up during a period of rapid urbanization during the 1960s and 1970s. I finally return to Akua and her failure to orchestrate the life courses of her family members in ways she considered herself obliged to do.

Time and Dependence: Reciprocities across the Life-course

I met Mrs. Amponsah through a survey on fosterage I conducted with Kweku Aryeh in Akropong, Akuapem, in southern Ghana in 2008 in which we interviewed ninety-three foster parents and eighty of the children they were looking after. What I learned from these interviews is that a normative life course has a certain progression, from dependency in infancy and childhood, to an adulthood with income and children, to an elderhood of weakness and sickness. However, interviewees recognize that people’s progression along this pathway is somewhat unpredictable. No longer working, needing financial assistance,
and losing physical strength are signs of elderhood, rather than age per se (Kodwo-Nyameazea and Nguyen 2008, van der Geest 1997). The vagaries of wealth accumulation and health affect the rate at which a person proceeds along this general chronology.

One’s position on this chronology matters because care flows between people in different positions (see Figure 1). People’s lifetimes are knitted with those of multiple others. Care is dependent not only on current differences in positions in the life course, but also on exchanges from the past when the parties were similarly in different positions, as well as on potential future exchanges. An often-quoted Twi proverb expresses this sense, metaphorically drawing on a person’s teeth as a physical sign of age. One elderly man in Ghana quoted the proverb to me in this way:

If your mother or father or someone looks after you while your teeth are coming in, look after him or her when his or her teeth are falling out.  

These forms of support constitute what Parker Shipton (2007) terms “entrustment”: care received makes one indebted or entrusted to provide care in the future out of a sense of gratitude or respect. Individuals who feel for one another and have a stake in one another’s wellbeing (Sahlins 2011: 2, Joseph 1994) have entrustments to one another.

Being a respected person means attending to these entrustments at appropriate times. Timely action entails helpful response in times of need rather than adherence to an age-driven schedule (Modell et al 1976). Engaging appropriately in the reciprocities of care thus involves attending to others’ chronologies in relation to one’s own. For example, George, a fourteen-year-old boy, told me that he and his younger brother hope that they have a chance to take care of their two fathers—their biological father in the United States and their father’s older brother, a sixty-three-year-old man who takes care of them in Ghana. This means that they need to become
adults before their fathers become weak:

    We pray to God, giving thanks, and pray for our father as well as the one who
    is here, that God lets them live for a long time, so that we can become adults
    first—and they can prosper. May they live long, so that we will have a chance
    to take care of them.

As George eloquently articulates, the desire to provide and to receive care creates a temporal
awareness. Being able to act on another’s behalf requires paying attention to the movement of
one’s own life course in relation to another’s.

    Transnational migration allows for a speeding up of one person’s time while another’s
time stays still, allowing for some kinds of care to be provided and making others more
difficult. George poses the dilemma many young people feel in relation to aging parents, and
transnational migration proposes a way to generate new temporalities that allow one to take
care of another.

**Providing Care through Remittances: Traveling in “Development” Time**

    Migration has long characterized West African social life, and migrants and refugees
have historically been valued as sources of new knowledge, skills, and resources (Sisòkò
1992). Akropong people have traveled since at least the late nineteenth century to work on
the railroads, to the cities on the coast and in the interior, to the cocoa lands further to the
west, or to other parts of West Africa as skilled craftsmen and traders (Hill 1963). Many men
and women migrate within Ghana today, moving between different places over their
lifespan, as they cope with the contraction and expansion of economic opportunities.
Professionals such as teachers, nurses, accountants, and ministers are transferred to postings
all over Ghana, farmers seek fertile land, and traders travel long distances to buy and sell
commodities.
Transnational migration has been a known and valued phenomenon in Ghana since the colonial era, as Ghanaians traveled for work elsewhere in West Africa and for education in Britain, processes that continued after independence. In the 1990s, the opportunity to travel expanded beyond the elite of highly educated or well-off people who left as students in the 1950s or 1960s to study for professional degrees and qualifications (Manuh 2006: 24). Almost one million Ghanaians were estimated to be living outside their country in 2005, representing about five percent of the population of twenty-two million people. Most of them have gone to other West African countries that are part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which makes travel between these countries easy, similar to the European Union (Benneh 2004, International Organization for Migration 2009). The United Kingdom and the United States each receive five to seven percent of Ghana’s emigrants (International Organization for Migration 2009).

Transnational migration allows for certain kinds of orchestrations of temporal orders and makes others more difficult. Because financial support is one of the ways in which mature men can help their elderly relatives, as the young George hoped it would be possible to do for his two fathers, labor migration makes it possible to meet the obligations of adulthood in relation to others’ life courses. Roger Magazine and Martha Areli Ramirez Sanchez (2007) make a similar argument that young Mexican migrants are motivated to migrate by their responsibilities to help their parents.

Transnational labor migration in particular becomes a kind of time travel that enables accumulation in two ways. Peruvian transmigrants talk about “leaving to get ahead” (Takenaka and Pren 2010). The equation of spatial mobility with economic mobility relies on a particular vision of world-historical time, which anthropologists have largely renounced but live on in people’s social imaginaries of modernity and in development
reports. Thus, a linear model of progress, modeled after nineteenth-century evolutionary biology, posited that societies passed through various stages of development, in which some communities represented others’ pasts or earlier stages of civilization (Morgan 1909, Tylor 1889). As Johannes Fabian (1983: 11-12) notes in his critique of this approach, “Relationships between parts of the world. . . can be understood as temporal relations.” Ghanaians often make reference to this sociotemporal narrative through the language of development and civilization, comparing the U.K. or the U.S. to Ghana. Their migration is a recognition of their abjection within this sociotemporal order (Ferguson 1999, Lucht 2012) and reflects their longing for another kind of future, what Charles Piot (2010) calls “nostalgia for the future.” Migration to Europe or North America allows one to leap ahead in (development) time, creating a kink in the linear time of societal progress. Migration becomes a kind of time travel to enable progress in one’s own life. Jennifer Cole (2008) refers to a similar phenomenon among Malagasy youth as “jumping tracks.” Sending remittances is key to kinking societal temporalities: paltry earnings from abroad are translated into a house, school fees, or a business in Ghana (Mazzucato et al. 2008).

For women in particular, transnational migration opens up opportunities for work, and some find themselves more economically successful abroad than their husbands and male relatives (Babou 2008, Buggenhagen 2012). The workforce in rapidly growing sectors in healthcare and the service sector in the United States tends to be female, and so there are more job opportunities for female migrants (Mohr 2013, U.S. Department of Labor 2011). Because of their more stable and well-paid employment abroad, female migrants are less flexible in filling the care slot at home. Both male and female transnational migrants mainly provide care through remittances and long-distance communication, rather than through daily care activities. For example, when Abena Oforiwa (discussed further below) took care of her elderly cousin, one of her elderly cousin’s daughters, who was a migrant in London, called
and sent money regularly. International female migrants can assume the position of men in providing care for their parents by asking a more dependent and unemployed female relative like Abena to fill the care slot in their stead.

Because of these substitutions, international migration to the Global North is usually conceived as helpful in fulfilling the social obligations of adulthood to take care of those who provided care at an earlier period of life. I want to propose a metaphor from biology—entrainment—which makes visible certain aspects of the coordination of care across the temporalities of different life courses and across the different temporalities generated by migration.

**Entrainment: A Metaphor from Biology**

Entrainment describes how a biological rhythm is modified in its phase and periodicity by powerful exogenous influences called external pacers (e.g., Beersma et al 2011). One example is how bodily rhythms become coordinated with—entrained to—light–dark daily cycles caused by the rotation of the earth around the sun (e.g., Duffy et al 1996, Tsai et al 2011). Thus, while periodic bodily rhythms are naturally somewhat longer than twenty-four hours, they become entrained to the temporal rhythms of light and dark in our external environment. In order to understand the concept of entrainment, which has nothing to do with trains per se, one might imagine an action film featuring Jackie Chan. In order for Jackie Chan to jump onto a moving object (such as a boat), he has to coordinate the speed of his vehicle (a helicopter) to that of the first moving object. Metaphorically, entrainment is the process by which Jackie Chan coordinates the speed of his helicopter to the boat. Entrainment signals the adaptability of biological processes.

The concept of entrainment has been applied to social life, particularly in
organizational studies, to understand how organizations create temporal systems which allow people to coordinate their activities. In extending the biological metaphor to social life, entrainment is re-defined as “the adjustment of the pace or cycle of one activity to match or synchronize with that of another” (Ancona and Chong 1996: 251). This literature emphasizes the significance of *Zeitgeber*, or social cues in the environment indicating when adjustments to pace, cycle, or rhythm need to be made (see also Bourdieu 1997 on cues). For example, faculty may help one another prepare for the beginning of a fall academic semester by bemoaning how fast the summer has passed. Temporal markers of events, like the beginning of the semester, need to be recognized as relevant, and people need to be able to adjust their actions in relation to those cues. Recognition of these cues depends on routinization and habituation to various temporalities. When temporal rhythms are part of the habitus of workers in organizations, they more easily recognize and act on the relevant *Zeitgeber*.

Social entrainment suggests an active process in adapting the chronologies of life courses. The metaphor, as applied to social life, highlights the importance of flexibility within a general set of routines or assumptions, such as how the life course is expected to unfold and the pacing of its moments and movements. Although biological entrainment suggests adjustments to an externally organized temporal order, it is important to note that people *create time* through their actions, rather than actions simply occurring *in time* (Munn 1992). Furthermore, the organizational literature presumes that workers *want to* coordinate their actions and thus does not examine when entrainment fails because *people do not want it to happen*. As a result, entrainment does not acknowledge power relations adequately or issues of conflict and differing perspectives on the right pacing or timing, which can disrupt care entrainments.

The metaphor of entrainment gives particular insights into the temporal strategies of migrants, despite its limitations. In this paper, I particularly focus on care entrainments, in
which people need to coordinate the temporalities of different social fields and life courses in order to provide care, and the temporal failures to entrain and thus to provide care in socially expected ways.

Female Migration and Care Entrainments

Women in particular have relied on entraining multiple chronologies to make their way in the world. In particular, such entrainment has enabled them to engage in urban and international migration, leaving behind their children in the care of their mothers. In the town of Akropong in the Eastern Region, young women in their late teens or early twenties tend to move from their hometowns in search of work, a similar trajectory to young women in southern Ghana in the 1950s and 1960s (Brydon 1979, Middleton 1979). Among the various forms of employment that women pursue, trading is the most common, whether in foodstuffs, used clothing, or other goods. Best pursued in urban areas where there are many customers with disposable incomes, this work requires regular travel to purchase goods more cheaply. Some women say that one should not pursue business in one’s hometown because so many people will ask for goods on credit that the business is sure to fail (Clark 1994). Some female migrants leave their children behind with their mothers in their hometowns to allow them to study or work more easily, visiting their mother and children at weekends and bringing cash and groceries. For example, one woman born in 1955 stayed as a child with her grandmother in Akropong while her mother traveled for work to Nsawam, a nearby large commercial town on the railway line and the highway linking Accra and Kumasi, the largest and second largest cities in Ghana. In Akropong currently there are many households made up of grandmothers and their grandchildren supported by remittances from those working elsewhere. Elder care and fosterage are thus
intimately intertwined across the temporalities of the life course.

Women are likely to return to live in their hometowns between the ages of forty and sixty after a change in their or another’s life circumstances. One woman returned to Akropong after her husband’s death, which distressed her financially, another woman when the company she worked for went out of business, and a third when she retired from a job in the formal sector. The hometown functions as a social safety net. One can live more cheaply in one’s hometown than in large metropolitan areas because one can stay in the family house, built by a father or family head, without paying rent. Other relatives live nearby, and they may be able to share labor and resources and provide companionship. In her hometown, a woman may also have access to family land, where she can tend a small food farm and thus reduce her requirements for cash.

Women also return home to fill what Jessaca Leinaweaver (2010) in a different context calls “the care slot,” the adult who cares for the children and elderly of the family at the same time. The care slot in Akropong is usually passed from one woman to another: the woman who fills the care slot inherits the responsibilities of the elderly woman (or women) in the family home, who may be taking care of grandchildren but has now grown too old or weak to do so. Usually, the oldest daughter is called upon by others to live with her mother, although if other daughters or granddaughters are better positioned because of their unemployment or personal circumstances, then they may be asked in the first daughter’s stead. In their stories of return migration, women’s personal circumstances and the decline of an elderly person coincide, which suggests that the reason why they, of all their siblings, came to live with the elderly person or people is because they were available to do so. Although returning to the hometown entails a loss of financial resources, filling the care slot helps female family members justify financial support from their brothers, the children of elderly relatives, and their own grown-up children whose children may be staying with them.
Abena Oforiwa illustrates some of these general features. She lives in a family house in her hometown with her older cousin, Akosua Yirenkyiwa, whom she considers her sister, along with eight of their grandchildren, many of whom are toddlers, although the oldest is fourteen and has a considerable sense of family responsibility. In the late afternoon I often met the older children returning from the family plot, laden with firewood and produce. Now 48 years old, Abena had gone to work in a sugar factory in a nearby town in her youth, but she returned to her hometown around the age of thirty when the sugar factory closed. Her mother had been living in the family house but had died, leaving her cousin, an elderly woman, there alone. Abena explained how she “inherited” her mother’s care slot:

Abena: When my mother died, it meant no one lived here. My sister [Akosua Yirenkyiwa, now living with her] was in Accra. I was here for a little time—I lived in Akropong but I didn’t live in this house. But my mother died and no one—all the children, all our children had given birth so no one wanted to live at home. It isn’t good when there is no one in the [family] house, so I came to live here. And at that time, our one cousin lived here, and she was sick and no one lived here, so she couldn’t get up to go out, and no one was at home, so it wasn’t good at all. And I came to live here to look after her. That’s the only thing that brought me here.

The temporal strategies described by Abena and Akosua require flexibility and attention to the life courses of those in other generations, to relatives’ deaths, physical frailty, births, and need to earn a livelihood. Women’s flexibility is in part enabled by their relative poverty and difficulty in finding well-paid and secure employment in Ghana (Heintz 2005). This makes them more prone to be asked to help when care for kin needs to be “redistributed from time to time in response to death, illness, the birth of a child, the loss of a job” (Stack 1996: 105).
Akosua Yirenkyiwa commented, “The men go out to work, the women stay at home. You who are the eldest female will come home [to the hometown], and the children will go [to] work hard [in the cities] to look for something to make their living.” Women’s difficulty earning a good living makes them more likely to want to come home where there is a safety net and thus means that they tend to assume the caregiving position within a family, of caring for the elderly and grandchildren, and living in the family house. The woman in the care slot, by virtue of living in the hometown, may also represent other members of the family at funerals and other celebrations, ensuring that they too will be recognized on their deaths.

Women’s structural inequality makes them dependent on their brothers and grown-up children for support. Their need for assistance and their receipt of care from others in the past makes them more willing to assume the care slot in their family. Abena said that she had been prompted to move to the family house by her older brother:

My elder brother, the one I come after in birth order, said that no one was at home and the cousin also was alone at home, so if anything happened, no one lived here. So I should come with my children so that she would be happy. This is why I came to live here.

Although not mentioned, such persuasion was no doubt accompanied by his promise to help with the household expenses and support her in the family house.

Not all women are as content as Abena Oforiwa to entrain their lives for the care of others, because of the loss of personal income that it entails. A forty-three year-old woman, Yaa Ofosua, had traveled as a young woman: she had first apprenticed as a seamstress in the commercial town of Suhum, in the Eastern Region. There, she married and worked as a trader. Later, her husband died, and she became involved with another man in a relationship that was more short-lived. After that relationship ended, she returned home to take care of her mother, who had difficulty moving around and thus was unable to prepare food or fetch
water. In the presence of her mother, which made me more uncomfortable than it seemed to make either of them, she stated:

I would like to tell my siblings that I am exhausted of looking after my mother; I would like to go look for work in Suhum or Tema or Kumasi [all commercial towns or cities] and if I could find someone who could take me on [as an employee] or if I found work, I could bring money back to my mother, and she could look after my child or something like that. Or if I go with my child, I could bring something to my mother. And that would mean that my siblings would come; they are many.

She felt that the care slot could rotate among her ten siblings, allowing her to migrate to earn money to better support her child and her mother, who might remain at home together. Such public statements put pressure on her siblings, either to send more money to their mother so that Yaa did not have to suffer in such poverty, or to take her place so that she could go out and earn something to support those in the family house.

As Sjaak van der Geest (2002) has noted of another southern Ghanaian town, the provision of care for the elderly is improvised and never fully settled. In kinship relations, normative care obligations matter less than negotiated care commitments, informed by previous entrustments (Finch and Mason 1993; see also Baldassar, Baldock, and Whiting 2007). The temporal cues (Zeitgeber) which people recognize as requiring action and coordination are often quite dramatic, entailing the death or illness of an old woman (see also Baldock 2000). Men are the ones who most often ask women to come home, illustrating how control over the entrainment of life courses is gendered. Both men and women are attentive to the needs of others’ life courses in relation to their own, but women are asked to be flexible by their male and female relatives because their role is associated with daily and practical care of the
elderly, while the male role in this regard involves sending remittances, visiting, and organizing funerals (van der Geest 2002).

The difficulty of orchestrating life courses and the flexibility and improvisation required are illustrated through another way of managing care entrainment: substitution. A seventy-year-old woman explained that she had taken the place of her father and his brothers when she was a child to fill the care slot:

"On my father’s side, they were all men, so they didn’t have anyone, they didn’t have a woman to stay with their mother, so they brought me to live with her.

Essentially, a daughter of the brothers substituted for a non-existent sister. Women who want to postpone their return to the hometown (perhaps indefinitely) can find another person to take their place: a daughter who has not yet grown up, a more distant relative, or hired help. It is becoming more difficult to substitute a young adult because of the longer period of schooling that is seen nowadays as a young person’s right, but so long as the young adult has the opportunity to go to school, the practice is not stigmatized. Thus, one recourse to entrainment difficulties is to substitute another caregiver for oneself, creating a care chain.

Another strategy to delay return migration is to foster the children an old woman is looking after. One teacher took her brother’s adolescent daughter away from the care of her mother in a neighboring town because she thought her mother was looking after too many children and it was a burden for her as she became weaker. Furthermore, she thought that it would be better for her niece, who was becoming a woman, to have a stricter caregiver; in Akropong, grandmothers were criticized as lax disciplinarians (Coe 2008). The teacher’s fosterage of her niece showed timeliness in relation to her mother’s chronology and her niece’s chronology, as well as her own: her daughter had recently given birth, leaving her with a toddler, whose care her niece could assist with."
This paper focuses mainly on female migrants, because it is primarily women who are expected to entrain their lifecourses to those of others to provide care because their biographies put them in positions of under-employment and reliance on others, and they have generated entrustments which obligate them to provide care in return (see Finch and Mason 1993). Female migrants are expected to end their migrations and return to their hometowns to provide daily care to their mothers and grandmothers who have helped them in the past. Men, on the other hand, because of their higher earnings, are expected to provide remittances to support women’s care, and as described above, migration becomes a way for men to better and more easily provide care to others, if they want to. However, as women migrate abroad and earn more, they find themselves having difficulty creating positive care entrainments.

**Entrainment, Care, and Transnational Migration**

Temporal coordination across life courses is clearly tricky in all circumstances. According to the stories that transtemporal migrants told me about their lives and their care of others, their difficulties with entrainment came from three sources. One was the economic success of female migrants in Europe or the United States in comparison to their male counterparts and in comparison to female migrants who traveled within Ghana or West Africa. Such economic success made them both more reluctant to return to their hometowns and less likely to be called home by senior male relatives. Some women did return home to care for an aged parent, and like Yaa Ofosua, had financial difficulties as a result. Usually, like transnational mothers from Cape Verde (Drotbohm 2013), they were able to find substitutes among remoter relatives, and thus this problem was the least troublesome of the ones I note here, although even a substitution made Akua feel guilty at her mother’s death.
A second difficulty was the ability to monitor the temporal cues—the *Zeitgeber* noted in the entrainment literature—of others’ life courses. The fact that transnational migrants would have difficulties in monitoring temporal cues may come as a surprise given the relative ease and cheapness of long-distance communication and air travel compared to previous generations (Foner 2005). Yet studies of phone calls and skype communication within transnational families show that they are complicated: they can create a sense of the migrant’s distance and absence rather than of proximity and closeness (Wilding 2006, Yarris 2014). They can increase conflict and rupture because of ambiguities in meaning and lack of social cues to interpret communication (Madianou and Miller 2012). Because transnational migrants are further away, they cannot as closely monitor the cues that would allow them to time their actions in relation to another’s ill-health (Baldock 2000). They call other relatives to inquire about an elderly person’s health or wellbeing if the older adult is prone to downplay his or her troubles, or may visit home more often, if they can afford it and if their legal status allows it, to see for themselves how their relatives are doing (Baldassar 2007). Visiting is expensive, in terms of both airfare and the time away from one’s work. Those who do not have authorization to live and work in the host country often decide not to travel to Ghana because they will not be able to re-enter the United States. Furthermore, a death can come suddenly, particularly in West Africa, through a heart attack due to undiagnosed high blood pressure, and decline and sickness are more difficult to monitor over a long distance. In studies of transnational elder care (Baldock 2000), an unexpected death often functions as a *Zeitgeber*. As Michael Jackson (2007: 206) notes, “Every life crisis involves, in some sense, a crisis of agency,” in which the loss of autonomy represented by a death mobilizes action in response. But after a death, the care entrainment is usually too late.

Finally, even for those with authorization to live and work in the United States, U.S. immigration policy works against the flexibility of Ghanaian family life through its rigid
categories of persons, its narrow definitions of family, and the slow pace of its bureaucratic processes. As the entrainment literature notes, the routinization of temporal markers helps people to entrain their temporal rhythms. Most Ghanaians have only arrived in the United States in the last ten to fifteen years (Arthur 2008). Accordingly they draw on routines of entrainment utilized by their mothers and themselves from internal and regional migrations to manage their international migrations and have not yet developed effective temporal strategies in relation to U.S. immigration regimes.

To return briefly to Akua’s story, her own success abroad—as a university administrator—made return migration to fill the care slot in her late forties unattractive. Akua thought of other ways to fill the care slot: she had wanted to adopt her nephews for a long time but realized that they were her mother’s main companions. However, as her mother’s health began failing in February 2005, Akua began the process of getting approval to proceed with an intercountry adoption from her state’s social services, including having a home study done by a social worker, and applying for visas for her nephews. By November 2005, immigration services had denied her application to adopt a family member. She appealed the decision, but the appeal was denied in September 2006, by which time the oldest nephew had turned seventeen and thus was no longer eligible for adoption.

After her mother’s death in July 2005, while waiting for a response to her adoption application, Akua considered moving back to Ghana for her adolescent nephews who had lost their caregiver. Maybe she could start a private school in Ghana, as her brother was urging her to do. She was certainly well-educated and passionate about education. Weighing the difficulties and feeling she had exhausted the legal possibilities of international adoption in the United States, two years after her mother’s death, she ended up selling her house in the United States and moving to
Britain, finding work at a university. As a holder of a British passport, she thought she would have a better chance of bringing over her nephews if she applied for them in Britain. She remained unsuccessful in adopting her nephews in Britain; the British authorities said that she could not adopt her nephews because they had not previously lived with her and because the oldest nephew had “aged out” of the age range of potential adoptees, becoming an adult technically.\(^5\) She also was working on sponsoring them as relatives, at which point I lost touch with her. In the meantime, the nephews grew up, faster than the slow temporality of bureaucratic immigration procedures and their paternal aunt’s decision-making and re-organization of her life, including migration to another country.

At the critical juncture of her mother’s physical decline which culminated in her death, Akua felt she needed to fill the care slot in her family to fulfill her care obligations to her family by taking on the responsibility of parenting her nephews. Migrant women’s solutions of returning to their hometowns, fostering the grandchildren of the family, and finding a substitute caregiver, developed by previous migrant generations, were either not available or not attractive to Akua as a transnational migrant. The temporal disorder made Akua feel she was failing at her entrustments because her mother and nephews were not receiving her care, which she had committed herself to providing.

**Conclusions**

Ghanaian transnational migrants try to entrain multiple life courses because doing so is key to being a respected person who fulfills his or her entrustments. One way to do this is through international migration because one can accumulate the necessary resources to demonstrate the social maturity of caring for others in more precarious situations. Transnational migrants draw on entrainment strategies developed within the context of widespread urban migration in southern Ghana—strategies used by their mothers,
grandmothers, and perhaps even themselves earlier in their lives—and extend them
creatively into contexts of international migration (Coe 2013). Migration to Europe
and North America in many ways allows Ghanaians to live out their ideals of being a
respectable person.

However, international migration also complicates these entrainment
strategies, particularly for the care of the elderly, when a migrant daughter is expected
to replace her aging mother. Female migrants’ improved economic position makes
them reluctant to return to their hometown or home country in middle age, the height
of their working lives; immigration regulations define families in limited ways and are
not open to rapid changes in life-course circumstances; and it is more difficult for
migrants to monitor biological and social changes due to increased distance, the
limitations of long-distance communication, and the cost of travel home.

In pointing out these temporal constraints, I am following the lead of other work in
the anthropology of time which stress the ways in which temporal conceptions are
intertwined with power. As Nancy Munn (1992: 109) points out, “control over time is not just
a strategy of interaction; it is also a medium of hierarchic power and governance.” Care
entrainments are gendered in that female migrants are called on to return home and “inherit”
the care slot in exchange for the promised remittances of others and previous support from
the past. Men use their authority and relative wealth as leverage over their sisters and
daughters to fill the care slot. Migration to the Global North has changed these dynamics in
that female migrants assume male practices of sending money home and finding a more
economically and socially precarious female relative to take their place.

Many scholars have noted the existence of global care chains in which women
migrate to provide care (domestic work, child care, care of the elderly) in the Global
North, leaving behind the care of their own elderly relatives, children, and households
in the hands of a poorer woman, not necessarily a relative (Constable 2007, Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002, Parreñas 2002). My work here highlights the temporal dimensions of these global care chains. In a sense, global care chains are strategies by which women have coordinated care across the temporality of diverse life courses by substituting other, poorer women for themselves. These substitutions are possible because of their own greater financial power, but raise questions about whether elder care will be provided through relations of domestic service in southern Ghana as the population ages and if women begin to refuse to go “home” to fill the care slot.

The state is also involved in care entrainments and intimate relations (Boehm 2012) by imposing its own temporal order. U.S. immigration regimes frustrate attempts to entrain care in timely ways, creating lags and delays that are insensitive to the biological temporal processes of children becoming adults or elderly people declining in health, or social temporalities in which being together sustains intimacy in relationships. Its temporal inflexibility creates little room for the maneuvers and movements required by care entrainments, as Akua’s story shows.

Humans are adaptive and creative. Out of their frustrations and pain at these temporal disorders, Ghanaian transnational migrants may begin to create other strategies for care entrainments as they grow more familiar with U.S. immigration practices and the Zeitgeber entailed in international migration, just as they developed strategies for care entrainment during periods of rapid urban migration. However, these strategies are likely to lead to new configurations of hierarchy and inequality, between men and women, between differently positioned women, among family members, between families, and ultimately between nation states.
Acknowledgments

I am grateful to all those who participated for this project, and to the rest of my research team: Kweku Aryeh, who assisted with the individual interviews; Joe Banson and Margaret Rose Tettey, who co-facilitated the children’s focus-group discussions; and Rogers Krobea Asante, Joe Banson, Bright Nkrumah, and Emmanuel Amo Ofori, who completed the arduous task of transcription. All provided advice at crucial points. This research was funded by the National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in 2011 as part of a panel entitled “Time Out of Sync: Imagined Futures, Legacies of the Past, and Chronotopic Disjunctures.” I am grateful to Caroline Bledsoe, Carol Brandt, Cynthia Coe, and Rachel Reynolds for their suggestions and much-needed encouragement. Three anonymous reviewers and the editor of American Anthropologist provided excellent suggestions for revision. All flaws and faults, of course, are my own.

Notes

1 All names are pseudonyms.

2 This emic perspective on the life course in southern Ghana is very close to the evolutionary perspective on the production and consumption of energy across the life course (Hill and Kaplan 1999).

3 All quotes are translated from Twi. The emergence of teeth in a child’s mouth is often taken to be a significant sign of child development in West Africa (e.g., Gottlieb 2004).

4 The care slot is sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of “the sandwich generation” of middle-aged women in the West who care for their children and their parents.
simultaneously, but I use the term to refer to a caregiving position in which a woman takes care of the elders and young children in the family while living in the family house, as in the case in southern Ghana and which seems similar to what Leinaweaver (2010) describes.

5The problems Akua encountered with intercountry adoption are discussed more extensively in Coe (in press).
References Cited

Ancona, Deborah and Chee-Leong Chong

Andersson, Ruben

Arthur, John A.

Babou, Cheikh Anta

Bakhtin, Mikhail

Baldassar, Loretta

Baldassar, Loretta, Cora Vellekoop Baldock, and Raelene Wilding
Baldock, Cora Vellekoop

Barnes, Sandra T.


Boehm, Deborah A.

Bourdieu, Pierre

Brydon, Lynne

Buggenhagen, Beth

Clark, Gracia
Coe, Cati


Cole, Jennifer


Collins White, Jill


Constable, Nicole


Coutin, Susan Bibler

Dow, Mark


Drotbohm, Heike


Duffy, J. F., R. E. Kronauer, and C. A. Czeisler


Ehrenreich, Barbara and Arlie Russell Hochschild, eds.


Fabian, Johannes


Ferguson, James


Finch, Janet and Jennifer Mason

Foner, Nancy

Foxen, Patricia

Geest, Sjaak van der

Gottlieb, Alma
2004  The Afterlife is Where We Come From: The Culture of Infancy in West Africa. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Greenhouse, Carol J.

Heidbrink, Lauren

Heintz, James

Hill, Kim and Hillard Kaplan
Hill, Polly


Hochschild, Arlie Russell


Joseph, Suad


Kodwo-Nyameaeza, Yale and Peter V. Nguyen


Leinaweaver, Jessaca B.


Lucht, Hans


Madianou, Mirca and Daniel Miller


Magazine, Roger and Martha Areli Ramírez Sánchez

Mazzucato, Valentina, Bart van den Boom and N. N. Nsowah-Nuamah


Middleton, John


Modell, John, Frank. F. Furstenberg, Jr. and Theodore Hershberg


Mohr, Adam


Morgan, Lewis H.


Munn, Nancy D.


Nieswand, Boris


Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar


Piot, Charles

Reynolds, Rachel


Rouse, Roger


Sahlins, Marshall


Schmidt Camacho, Alicia


Shipton, Parker


Smith, Robert Courtney


Stack, Carol

Takenaka, Ayumi and Karen A. Pren
2010 Leaving to Get Ahead: Assessing the Relationship between Mobility and Inequality in Peruvian Migration. Latin American Perspectives 37: 29-40.

Tsai, Shao-Yu, Karen A. Thomas, Martha J. Lentz, and Kathryn E. Barnard

Tylor, Edward B.

United States Department of Labor

van der Geest, Sjaak

Wilding, Raelene

Yarris, Kristin Elizabeth