

## Legacies, logics, labors of love: Essays on the economic anthropology of Jane Guyer

We write to note the passing of world-renowned Africanist and economic anthropologist Jane Isabel Guyer, who died in Davis, California, on January 17, 2024, from complications from dementia. Born in Dunoon, Scotland, on New Year's Eve in 1943, she had just turned 80. Jane earned a PhD in anthropology from the University of Rochester in 1972 and went on to teach at Boston University, Harvard, Northwestern, and, finally, Johns Hopkins, from which she retired in 2015. Jane is survived by her husband, Bernie; their three children, Sam, Nathan, and Kate; five grandchildren; and legions of friends, colleagues, and admirers across the world (see Figure 1).

Jane's "extraordinarily profound and extensive contributions" (Ferguson, 2017, xvii) count among economic anthropology's most seminal works. Her extensive fieldwork in Nigeria and Cameroon—on household budgets, Indigenous currencies, intergenerational relations, taxation, and urban food supplies—inspired her lifelong interest in economic transformation in Africa and provided the foundation for her later work on global monetary and financial practices. Her husband, Bernie, remembers her as being "above all" committed to her interlocutors, "believing that knowledge emerged from real-life experiences." This approach resulted in meticulously documented individual and collaborative works that emphasized people's capacity for adaptation and invention in the face of economic crisis. Paying scrupulous attention to the stakes of individuals' lives, Jane had an extraordinary ability to look across scales of economic relation to consider the interplay between multiple "value registers" (Guyer, 2004) to discover how systemic processes articulate with and emerge from the lives of ordinary people.

Jane used this approach to take on topics as varied as the creation of value and wealth, currency exchange, kinship and marriage, gendered divisions of labor, the impact of devaluation and structural adjustment policies, and the interface between informal and formal economies. The breadth of her scholarship attests to her intellectual acumen and boldness as a scholar, fearlessly tackling the quantitative data sets of economists and historians' archives.

Trained at the London School of Economics in the traditions of British social anthropology, Jane's work helped transform the foundations of economic and anthropological thought, destabilizing notions of the household as a basic economic unit (Guyer, 1981), questioning what is real about the "real" economy (Guyer, 2016b; Neiburg & Guyer, 2017), and revealing that even counting may not be the simple, incremental act one might assume (Guyer, 2004). Critique was never her main ambition, however. Instead, she deconstructed economic concepts and fashioned new ones to explore fresh approaches to the data, opening "new methodological horizons" in economic anthropology (Hart & Ortiz, 2014, 474). This allowed her to explain, for example, "how new monetary relations are created without resorting to a single overarching narrative of what money is" (Hart & Ortiz, 2014, 474), giving us the tools to both reexamine capitalism and supersede its confining terminologies.

Jane's unflagging confidence in the potential for economic anthropology to speak across disciplines and beyond the academy resulted in innumerable honors and invitations to speak and serve on steering committees. She advised the National Academy of Sciences projects on Adolescent Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa (1993) and Lost Crops of Africa (2006–8), as well as the World Bank and the governments of Chad and Cameroon on their major Petroleum Development and Pipeline Project (2001–9). Earlier in her career, she was commissioned by the Ford Foundation and the US African Studies Association to traverse the country, meeting with university faculty, students, and administrators and analyzing the reams of data and documents they gave her, to write a report on "African Studies in the United States: A Perspective" (Guyer, 1996a). In it, she argued that Africa was not only being sidelined as a "special case" of poverty and stagnation but was furthermore being cast as a threat to the rest of the world's otherwise optimistic economic future. These assessments, she argued, were not only wrong on empirical grounds but obscured the inventiveness of economic practice on the African continent.

Among her formal honors and recognitions, Jane was elected to the US National Academy of Sciences (2008) and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2009) and was awarded an honorary chieftaincy by the town of Idere, Nigeria, where she carried out fieldwork.

Here we present reflections by Jane's colleagues on her life and legacy, centered around three pivotal moments of her career and the bodies of work that emerged from them, to redefine economic anthropology. Sibel Kusimba first reflects on the impact of Jane's work on "wealth-in-people." Caroline Bledsoe then turns to the time surrounding the writing of Jane's seminal volume *Marginal Gains* at Northwestern University, drawing on the contributions and memories of Jane's husband,



**FIGURE 1** Jane I. Guyer (1943–2024). Photograph by Kara Murphy.

Bernie Guyer, and of historian David Schoenbrun. Finally, Caitlin Zaloom considers Jane's later work on the real economy and the anthropology of finance.

## WEALTH-IN-PEOPLE

### Sibel Kusimba

How are people, persons, and personhood understood to have value? Wealth-in-people drew inspiration from ethnographic and comparative accounts of African cultures in which people were wealth—and in which rights to people were transacted against things in explicit ways. Schneider (1968) noted that for the Turu of Tanzania, negotiations around marriage and compensation for injury “are revealed to be a kind of exchange system” (375). Goody (1971) disputed the understanding of contemporary Africa as “feudal”—and argued that whereas European states sought power through territory, West African states needed people, and leaders grew in power by accumulating followers. Kopytoff and Miers (1977) considered slavery and marginalization: When people are wealth, inequality emerges through the dynamics of incorporation and belonging, rather than from differences in material accumulation per se. Those with wealth-in-people have status and resources because they hold rights to others, while dependents and subordinates belong to others or exist as the wealth of others (Kopytoff & Miers, 1977).

The works of Kopytoff and Miers (1977) and Goody (1971) met a mixed reception and barely survived some strident critiques—for some, the concept put diverse “African” settings in the same basket and seemed to blame Africans for inequality and the slave trade (Cooper, 1979) or even to excuse and justify colonialism (Candido, 2022).

In the 1990s, Jane Guyer and Samuel M. E. Belinga revived the wealth-in-people discussion, this time exploring wealth-in-people in Central Africa as an idea about personhood itself and about exactly what value people seek when they seek to be wealth for others or when they seek rights in others. For Guyer and Belinga, wealth-in-people focused less on strategies of accumulation and more on how societies assembled persons with diverse qualities, such as ritual expertise, knowledge, and

skill (Guyer, 1993, 1995b, 1996b; Guyer & Belinga, 1995). They also noted the exchanges between wealth-in-people and wealth-in-things and that people were often “the pinnacle, and even the unit of measurement, of ultimate value” (Guyer & Belinga, 1995, 92).

Guyer and Belinga’s work highlights the social and creative process of cultivating new and diverse embodied qualities and powerful attributes in individuals. Status and political authority came from demonstrating the ability to mobilize others to form a new collective, a “composition” (Guyer & Belinga, 1995) that brought together people with varied abilities, knowledge, and gifts as building blocks of solidarities. Wealth-in-knowledge was celebrated in literature and poetry from Central Africa and drove political consolidation.

Many people and scholars think of wealth as material and reduce it to money or assets. Guyer and Belinga (1995) saw wealth objects as repositories for human forces, for the spirit and powers of ritual specialists, artists, and leaders. The *minkisi* statues of secret knowledge societies (Guyer & Belinga, 1995, 113), like the Maori gift objects animated by the spirit *hau* of previous owners and givers (Mauss, 1925/2016, 71), and many other anthropological examples show how material wealth captures cultural values and human activities and is inseparable from “relational flows and life vitality” (Rakopoulos & Rio, 2018, 275). The concept is an effective way to define the social, relational, and embodied dimensions of wealth, which have important dynamics in cultural evolution that are distinct from those of material wealth—being far less predictable over time (Mulder et al., 2009). Wealth-in-people points to the reciprocities and ambiguities of social inequality—to be legitimate as a leader, one must also recognize and build the status and value of one’s followers (Smith, 2017).

Above all, Guyer and Belinga’s intervention emphasized the agency of individuals in actualizing and cultivating their wealth and value in others and for others, becoming particular kinds of people in the process. Today, the agentic search for incorporation and belonging is more consequential and more varied than ever. The exclusions and inequalities at the margins of wealth-in-people are greater than ever as well. How do digital fashionistas collect wealth-in-followers online (Majczak, 2023)? How can a community honor its wealth in ancestral achievements in a way that endures across generations (McGill et al., 2020)? Why do migrants send gifts home to relatives (Appau & Crockett, 2023)? Can alternative collectivities challenge forms of marginalization (Franzen, 2020)? In bringing ethnographic depth to a functionalist saw, Guyer and Belinga inspired a wealth of scholars.

## MARGINAL GAINS

### Reflections by Caroline Bledsoe, David Schoenbrun, and Bernie Guyer, edited by Chelsie Yount

Arguably Jane’s most acclaimed book, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (2004) inspired conferences, panels, and special issues in multiple languages (Geschiere et al., 2007; Servet et al., 2005). The book emerged out of her Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, delivered at the University of Rochester in March 1997, which she described in the book’s preface as “both an honor and a challenge” (xiii). The invitation came at the height of Jane’s tenure as professor of anthropology and director of the Program of African Studies (PAS) at Northwestern University, a period her husband, Bernie, described as “her most productive.” She was so “totally immersed in her work in Evanston and traveling in Africa,” he declared, that mail would sit unopened for weeks. “Bills went unpaid. Students and colleagues and writing came first.”

While continuing to publish prolifically, at the head of the PAS at Northwestern (1994–2001), Jane revealed masterful “institution-building skills,” which her colleague David Schoenbrun described as “flow[ing] from her infectious enthusiasm for collaboration” (personal communication, August 22, 2024). A flurry of activity, Jane was deeply involved in grant writing, “the herding of intellectual cats” (at which, David notes, she was particularly adept), teaching, building others’ careers, and masterfully negotiating with university leaders to carve out special funds to welcome Africa-based students and scholars.

Colleagues at Northwestern saw Jane’s skills in collaboration and in career and institution building as deliberately inspired by the wisdom she had gleaned in the close study of building economic wealth in Africa, cultivating “wealth-in-people” through strategic investments in students and colleagues, and finding the funds for these investments through clever navigation of multiple “thresholds” for generating gain. Caroline notes that the model Jane applied to “creating knowledge within institutions” seemed to come directly from “African ideals of cultivating ‘originalities’ among their participants” according to very similar logics of “wealth-in-people.” As Caroline summarizes, her vision was one in which individual identities reflect “diverse ‘configurations’ or ‘repertoires’ of skill, knowledge, and social connection. ... These diversities were intentionally cultivated among the young and trainees through the careful ‘composition’ of education, nurture, and spiritual investment in each person. Whether the fruits of these efforts might benefit individuals or the collectives to which they belonged, each new achievement or relationship attained by this process became ‘catalytic’, capable of generating evermore wealth in the forms of capacities and connections.”

Trying to seize on what she saw as the bounty of ideas and connections that the opportunity she had been given might generate, however, nearly made *Marginal Gains* a masterpiece that never was. Caroline remembers “Jane sitting in despair in my office holding her Morgan Lectures invitation, feeling overwhelmed by all the administrative work she had piled onto her

plate, and wondering how she could generate several new papers on ideas that were just coming into view at the frontiers of her research. She had almost decided to call the whole thing off.” Happily, Jane did not call the lectures off but took up the challenge of penning the ideas that became the foundation of *Marginal Gains*.

The book that emerged was the clear result of Jane’s passion for collaboration and “painstaking effort to discover regular patterns in empirical data” (Geschiere et al., 2007, 37). In *Marginal Gains*, Jane set her ethnographic gaze on diverse data sets, from a museum’s collection of ancient currencies to historical archives and Ghanaian national statistics. She meticulously analyzed these varied strands of empirical data, weaving them together to illustrate and synthesize theories on modes of exchange and thresholds of value that she had been developing for years, in conversations with Africanist colleagues about money and currency exchange (Guyer, 1995a; Guyer et al., 2002; Stiansen & Guyer, 1999). Jane wrote and conceived *Marginal Gains* in close collaboration, “verging on co-authorship” (Guyer, 2004, xv), with her colleagues.

Caroline remembers working with Jane to analyze materials that would eventually become chapter 8: the chapter Jane had determined to devote to grappling with contemporary economists’ data, bringing them into conversation with new ideas in African history and ethnography. Caroline and Jane spent “literally hours on the phone, far into the night, wondering how to think about quantitative and qualitative data as the same thing, and how to wrest them into conversation in the same computer screen.” Using a late 1990s version of the public health program Epi Info to search for patterns in some World Bank data “we managed to download,” Caroline recalls having done “a number of deep dives,” once spending days trying to make sense of “tractor sales in Nigeria.” Eventually, however, they hit “so many walls,” including the meaning of data categories as well as the rules of “ownership” in the Bank questionnaires’ variables, that, as Caroline notes, Jane eventually decided “to scrap that whole section—rightly!”

David Schoenbrun (2024, 2) notes that in *Marginal Gains*, Jane examined multiplicity and composition. ... Set in Atlantic Africa over the last several centuries, the book revealed the “disjunction, thresholds, and multiple scales of value” Africans invented to engage the turbulence of the interfaces linking different Atlantic economies. Turbulence and uncertainty resulted from European mercantilist tactics of “inconvertibility.” In other words, European merchants desired to retain their own measures of reserve value so they paid Africans in inconvertible monies like cowries, glass beads, and brass manillas (Guyer, 2012). In response, Africans created and maintained multiple scales of value and reckoning such that in crossing them they could create gain (Guyer, 2004). The crossings included conversions of goods like brass manillas, to currencies and back. The gain lay in creating the “long-term wealth of generational succession and political reach” (Guyer, 2012). People conserved and augmented alternative ways to cross scales of value and reckoning, not as adherence to a noble pre-capitalist cultural difference, but as techniques for realizing gain in the plural territories of European and African interaction.

Jane’s rigorous analysis gave rise to elegant theories of economic practice in a process of “empirical ‘pattern recognition,’” building “outward from small insights” (Guyer, 2004, 23). She drew on concepts from linguistic anthropology—deixis, indexicality, registers—to articulate theories as flexible, creative, and emergent as the economic practices she described. Geschiere et al. (2007) note that in *Marginal Gains*, Jane did not “strive to produce closure or systematicity” but left so much open that the book remains “an inspiring piece of work, constantly offering novel starting points for further research and reflection” (37). In Caroline’s words, Jane’s “scholarly brilliance is so ‘big’ that it lifts the work far beyond its original moorings, and brings out implications that were barely visible—if at all—to us at the outset.”

## THE REAL ECONOMY

### Caitlin Zaloom

Jane Guyer was always looking “in both directions” (Guyer, 2004, 17). She turned her eyes toward development agencies and global economic actors, such as banks and governments, at the same time that she took in the strategies people used to get by, such as trading among family, friends, and neighbors. Exchanges, for Guyer, were always among economic agents who crossed institutional divisions and social registers. Guyer taught us that the search for gains required “conversions” among this multiplicity, no matter where the transactions were initiated (Guyer, 2004, 27–50). For Guyer, these essential economic processes were too often ignored by those scholars and practitioners who dealt primarily with money as if it were a unitary, abstract, fungible material and who did not examine its manifold and, frequently, contradictory uses. She held fast to empirical observation as her key inspiration and was careful to include the array of contributors to political and economic dynamics in a world of global exchange. In those ways and also in many others, Jane was a quintessential anthropologist and an inspiration.

With this perspective that combined wide angle with close-up, Guyer showed that the global economy should be understood as an ever-moving and jury-rigged construction. The fact that powerful and wealthy beneficiaries tout its efficiency and



rationality is, in practice, a claim on how the future should be as they work to make it so. Following Guyer's insights means attending to the heterogeneous "parts, labor, and craftsmanship" required to stitch these and others' desires together into these provisional and precarious economic systems (Guyer, 2016a, 4).

Time horizons are foundational to those assemblies because they fashioned links among economic systems and the subjects meant to inhabit them. In "Prophecy and the Near Future," Guyer (2007) drew attention to a profoundly split temporality—present action organized by a distant future—which she argued was especially powerful around the turn of the 21st century. In that essay, she explained how that split temporality was being crafted around two key nodes: first, in monetary theory and governments that manage around the object of long-term growth and, second, in global millennialist doctrine and worship. Both were reshaping the very foundations of reasoned calculation by evacuating an earlier temporality based on the near future and its interventions oriented around human lives. Instead, long-run doctrines privileged state and religious developments that could be apprehended primarily through faith. These principles contained and impressed new economic subjects, who must be "makers of our own fate," "rational, submissive, ingenious, and infinitely desirous at the same time" (Guyer, 2016a, 96–97). By creating unresolvable contractions, the elements of these temporalities created subjects who must believe and wait, either for the distant resolution of policies like structural adjustment or for the apocalypse (Guyer, 2016a, 105).

Throughout her career, Jane also probed economic concepts as elements of governance and reasoning in ways that crossed among global arenas. Her essays on the "real economy," both individually and with Federico Neiburg, exemplified that work (Guyer, 2016b; Neiburg & Guyer, 2017). The real economy focused Guyer's attention because it is a key term for "public debates about the present and future of our collective existence" (Neiburg & Guyer, 2017, 1). Crucially, it denotes a realm of exchange organized around households. For this reason, real economy anchors index numbers, such as the Consumer Price Index, that governments widely employ to decide how and when to intercede with monetarist means—such as raising or lowering interest rates—that are themselves understood to stand beyond that realm of reproduction. The real economy also resonates in arguments around inflation, including during the most recent post-COVID-19 bout. This may be the latest iteration, but Guyer's interest lay in the way that the concept contained a centuries-long division between the real and fictitious in European and US philosophy and its economic expressions. As a result of this "legacy," as she named it, tracing shifts in the real economy concept across time helps interpret tensions within both current public uses and practical inventions. Although her own work on the real economy focused on its philosophical lineage and pointed to ways that the concept organizes financial institutions and their interventions, Guyer inspired economic anthropologists widely to examine parallel relationships among theories, devices, and practices and to examine the interfaces between institutions and locations where livelihoods are sewn together. For Guyer, examining such relationships opened the possibility for identifying novel social configurations, such as subjects and strategies. That is one important outcome of her form of anthropology.


One specific facet of her thought, however, intersected with another prominent body of work. Coming from the social studies of finance and grounded in ANT-Economy ideas, the "performativity" of economic theories has been one of the most influential ideas for understanding the foundations of global economic practice. Beginning with her work in the early 1980s, Guyer argued that development models needed to be understood as their own ethnographic terrain. They misapprehended the management practices of West African households by examining trade according to the erroneous assumptions built into their models. Still, international organizations sought to influence kin networks, extending or denying support according to their own misconceptions (Guyer, 1981; MacKenzie, 2006). By analyzing that dynamic, she anticipated and, later, nourished understandings of economic performativity that took root decades after. When, in 2006, Donald MacKenzie wrote that the Black–Scholes model formatted world-spanning financial markets and should be considered an "engine not camera," he echoed that key part of Guyer's oeuvre. She showed us that theories are not description; they are aspiration and polestar.

Jane's broad analysis did not, however, focus only or primarily on development economics. She began and ended with the strategic work of the targets of economic models, who never completely complied. That friction caused not only headaches for those development and other professionals devoted to their categories—especially "the household"—that they imported from European and US family life but also sparked creative adaptations among those who could gain from working with their foreign tools and funds. These models never entirely captured what they sought, and the tools that agencies used offered materials for improvised forms of getting by.

Guyer offered a novel way of understanding households both as concept and as object, following her own careful observations. A household, for Guyer, should be understood to be a constantly evolving "group constituted according to concepts, rights, obligations." As Deborah James and I have written (Zaloom & James, 2023), Guyer's household did not dictate actions but rather created opportunities for selection and recombination or "areas of freedom about marriage, parenthood, residence, work, and the constraints of making a living" (Guyer, 1981, 103). In this way, the possibility of change was at the heart of Guyer's work, including the drive to create new possibilities for household members to provide for each other and to reach for better lives and greater freedoms (Zaloom & James, 2023).

Throughout her writings, Guyer circled back to the household and familial relations as grounds both for strategies to build better lives and for formalized institutional interventions, often by governments or global financial institutions. She saw this as essential ground for anthropological research and directed us to look at the details of official programs and at their

implementation. Here, she and Neiburg argued, we can attempt to understand “people’s concepts and practices, their ‘realities,’ desires and expectations as they come to terms with them” (Neiburg & Guyer, 2017, 2). The fruits of her work were always embedded in understanding the specificities of historical conjuncture and the novel social formations they brought into being. Spanning eras, institutions, and forms of reasoning, her unique and astonishing intellectual range generated new ways of looking at today’s global economy, as a “platform” made up of parts and elements crafted together. She left her admirers with critical insights like this and, perhaps more importantly, also with tools to inspire those who will make over economic anthropology again and again.

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