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Response to "Adventures in Infrastructure: Making an Africa Hub in Paris" by Julie Kleinman

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Just as my research kicked off in Dakar, Senegal, in the early days of 2006, so too did a series of dramatic infrastructural projects. Financed by various multinational investment partnerships and overseen by the Senegalese state, these *grands travaux* aspired to transform the peninsular African city into a global hub for investment and travel. All at once, luxury hotels, shopping plazas, and apartment complexes began rising from the dusty earth, dramatically transforming the city's landscape. Perhaps most visibly, two separate road construction schemes were initiated. These highway projects aimed to facilitate movement within the densely inhabited metropolitan area and to better connect it with the country's vast interior. In the short term, however, these projects further strained circulations, prompting road closures, creating a bewildering labyrinth of sanctioned detours and illicit routes, and disrupting economic exchange and urban rhythms. In many ways, it seemed that urban life had come to a halt.

These strained flows and blocked routes had a particularly profound effect on Dakar's taxi drivers (*taksimann-yi*), who relied on the movement of traffic to make their livelihoods. They complained bitterly of the toll that traffic jams (*embouteillages*) had exacted on their bodies, their vehicles, their income, and their sense of presence and purpose in the city. But amidst these increasingly stifling conditions, other kinds of circulation and exchange flourished. In particular, I became fascinated by the circulation of *cartes de visites*, or business cards, in these spaces of congestion and breakdown. Cab drivers—particularly younger, savvier types—were crafting and distributing their own personal cards while also amassing small collections from others they met.

As an intern at APIX, Senegal's national investment promotion agency, I was quite accustomed to the ritualized exchange of cartes de visite. Even in a digital age, swapping business cards was seen as an indispensable means of building bridges between individuals and institutions both within and far beyond Dakar. Small wooden or plastic holders stocked with personalized cards were ubiquitous fixtures on associates' desks, regardless of their rank within the institution. The cards were regularly affixed to packets of paperwork, pamphlets, and dossiers that circulated within and beyond APIX's headquarters in Dakar. In these instances, the cards moved along established bureaucratic channels, from one institutional checkpoint to the next, standing in place of individual investors themselves. Meetings with potential investors, visiting dignitaries, state and nongovernmental officials, and private sector representatives invariably ended with an elaborate exchange of cards, which in turn frequently led to more intimate conversation, convivial networking, and collaborations that would extend beyond the initial event. For instance, at a meeting I attended in Brussels on the topic of diasporic investment in Africa, the exchange of cartes de visite was so valued by participants that it threatened to overshadow the scheduled panels.

While panelists tried to re-center attention on the formalized investment infrastructures that their institutions were developing, conference attendees were busy swapping business cards with the aim of assembling their own durable channels. Most of these tentative connections would surely dissolve, but perhaps some would lead to productive new alliances. Cartes de visites were such a critical part of this transnational bureaucratic landscape that I scrambled to have my own set printed soon after starting at my position. Through these card exchanges, I in turn became entangled in a complex set of relations that stretched beyond the confines of APIX's offices and the city itself.

I was nonetheless fascinated by the ways these practices and artifacts seemed to have seeped into traffic jams, transportation depots, market spaces, and sidewalk exchanges. It was not just elite Dakarois, I quickly realized, who were preoccupied with business cards and the social connections they cemented. How can we make ethnographic sense of these curious circulations? We might productively regard taxi drivers' cartes de visite as instances of postcolonial mimicry or performative display—as a means of asserting one's identity and social presence in an era of constant flux (Ferguson 2002; Newell 2012). We might also theorize that these cards are part of a rich history of visual signification and artisanal production in Dakar (see Becker & Zito 2014; Grabski 2017; Roberts & Roberts 2008), or as material objects that gather meaning and value through their lively movement and accumulation (Appadurai 1988; Steiner 1994). These varied scholarly perspectives would offer a wealth of useful insights into the cards and their transformative potential. But in this essay, I want to take a slightly different approach to sketch the kinds of complex relational channels these cards help to both illuminate and extend. Cab drivers'

cartes de visites exchanges, I suggest, hint at the contours of a much more elaborate infrastructure that emanates from points of congestion in the city.

I take my cue here from Julie Kleinman (2014), who examines how West African migrant "adventurers" have transformed Paris' famed Gare du Nord railway station into a hub of African sociality and exchange. She fixes her ethnographic attention on the remarkable infrastructural tinkering in which these men are engaged—on a set of collaborative practices they have dubbed the Gare du Nord method. She details the ways they cultivate and transmit expertise about systems and timetables, generate unexpected connections where gaps exist, forge alliances across differences, and weld together material routes and social networks, all with the aim of making life in Paris more livable. As Kleinman's analysis suggests, tinkering is a mode of being in and acting on the world that is always deeply embodied, experimental, contingent, and relational. Through adventurers' creative efforts, this dense tangle of European rail lines becomes plugged into a complex web of African-based infrastructures in unexpected ways, resulting in an altogether new spatio-temporal arrangement.

As Kleinman astutely points out, many of these migrant adventurers are "translating the techniques they mastered" to the streets of cities like Dakar (293). These techniques, I suggest, include tactics like the circulation of cartes de visites. These were not particularly pervasive practices—acquiring the cards required a substantial financial investment for most cab drivers—but they are nonetheless quite ethnographically significant. Varying in style and level of sophistication, the small cards these drivers distribute are typically printed at local shops on cardstock and emblazoned with the driver's name and his phone number or other contact information, as well as an often eclectic list

(in French) of services offered. Unsurprisingly, most cards listed chauffeuring services, but they also often mentioned various other roles including tour guide, security guard, courier, laborer, tailor, musician, repairman, or technologist. These lively descriptions gesture to the kinds of social bridges the cards were intended to forge and to the gaps their creators hoped to address. In an increasingly inhospitable urban economy, and amidst ongoing infrastructural disruption and dislocation, many drivers explained to me that they could not depend on cab driving alone to support themselves and their households. Instead, they worked to cast themselves as flexible, adaptable, and capable of straddling occupational boundaries with ease. Like Kleinman's *hommes de l'aventure*, Dakar's taksimann-yi have worked to position themselves as urban experts uniquely qualified to navigate the city's difficult landscape, address gaps in services, facilitate networks, link outsiders with information or goods, translate opaque bureaucratic systems or urban networks, or perform tedious or time-consuming tasks on behalf of others.

There is a remarkable convergence between what I am describing here and the kinds of infrastructure-making practices Dinah Hannaford elaborates elsewhere in this issue. Like Chef Omar and Marie, many taxi drivers cast themselves as catering to an expatriate elite. It was in fact through a series of carte de visite exchanges that I met a couple of important interlocutors in the field. After learning I was a researcher, a handful of drivers eagerly handed me their business cards and encouraged me to get in touch if I needed anything. They often encouraged me, too, to pass their cards to (presumably elite) friends who might benefit from their services. They would highlight the alternative services they could provide and eagerly connect me with friends of theirs in the city who might have insights regarding visa practices, housing construction, infrastructure projects, development organizations, or clandestine pirogue trips. One taxi driver, named

Ousseynou, quickly became a frequent companion of mine on my journeys through the city, fashioning himself more as an urban intellectual and research assistant than a chauffeur, and introducing me to acquaintances he thought would be helpful. Some of his friends—a refrigerator salesman who'd attempted to migrate several times, a tech-savvy college graduate who cobbled together informal employment opportunities—then offered me makeshift cards of their own. Some drivers were also eager to show me the cartes de visite they had collected from people they'd met on their daily journeys through the city—from international business executives to NGO workers and traveling musicians. The drivers I knew during my research years were rarely in continued contact with those whose cards they had collected. Stashed in glove compartments or tucked into leather bags or pockets, these collections were instead regarded as visible proof of their accumulated relations. They were grounds upon which to build new social connections and negotiate potentially lucrative future opportunities. Drivers would share their collections with me as evidence of their strategic positioning within urban and global infrastructures. In this sense, the acts of giving, gathering, and displaying these cards represented a kind of "phatic labor," as Elyachar (2010) has described it, aimed at forging new relational channels that might transmit resources across rough urban terrain.

Through phatic practices of this sort, taxi drivers reconfigured Dakar's traffic-plagued roads as vital entrepreneurial hubs. To envision the city's roads as linked to capitalist expansion was, in some ways, firmly in line with state-spun narratives about infrastructural development and national economic futures. As I have described at length elsewhere (Melly 2013, 2017), concrete overpasses and sleek new roundabouts became the language through which the state expressed its commitment to global mantras of neoliberal partnership and free market exchange. But from the

vantage point of many of my taxi driver interlocutors, the city's new road structures were deeply exclusionary spaces. Built atop the ruins of French imperialism and postcolonial nationalism, these new surfaces, many drivers griped, were aimed not at improving everyday life for the city's urban majority but instead at facilitating the interests and movements of a cosmopolitan elite. Taxi drivers drew my attention to the government's blatant neglect of more marginal roads and neighborhoods, where residents dealt with impassable surfaces, electricity outages, sewage system ruptures, and insufficient housing (see Melly 2013). They also expressed anger at the differential burdens they bore as taxi drivers, as described above. In doing so, these men offered a trenchant critique of neoliberal development logics and of the Senegalese state's increasing detachment from citizens' everyday realities.

And yet, I found myself constantly astounded by the ways drivers used these very same lulls and breakdowns to their own creative advantage. Amidst embouteillage, drivers would strike up conversations, forge alliances, initiate exchanges, conjure new plans, and promote their entrepreneurial capacity. One driver used a traffic jam as an excuse to take a detour to pay his monthly contribution to a rotating credit scheme; the woman who ran it sold fruit from a roadside market, situated squarely within one of the city's most congested stretches of road. Another driver took advantage of slowdowns to study his English language manual—a strategy, he said, aimed at better connecting with foreign passengers. Taxi drivers' cartes de visite practices were thus one small, interwoven strategy for effectively controlling or recuperating one's time (see Sharma 2014). But they were also aimed at reclaiming road spaces—maligned by many urbanites as a "gift" (*cadeau*) for a global elite—as key nodes in quotidian networks of communication and exchange. Like their adventurer kin at the Gare du Nord, taxi drivers used business cards alongside a host of

other "playfully defiant" strategies to "make new conduits through old channels" (Kleinman 2014). In this way, such practices helped to re-center Dakar's traffic jams not as marginal sites of failed connection but as lively transnational hubs where thickened flows, chance encounters across differences, and strategic self-fashioning converged to produce new circuits of exchange and communication. Kleinman insightfully describes the Gare du Nord as a "lateral work agency," alternative lending institution, and hub for global remittance transfers (296). In astonishingly similar ways, Dakar's traffic-clogged streets proved to be ideal sites for entering into and exploiting global circuits of capital, labor, consumption, and information. By circulating and amassing homemade business cards, taksimann-yi were not merely imitating or replicating cosmopolitan business networks; they were working to insert themselves directly into these global circuits and temporalities.

Indeed, it was the global relevance and reach of these techniques that my cab driver interlocutors found so alluring. Cartes de visite exchanges were, above all, a potential bridge to lives and opportunities beyond Dakar. Printed in French and attentive to established design conventions, these cards were seen as a tool for carving relational channels beyond the confines of kin- and religious-based networks. While such affinities have long facilitated economic and social success in Senegal, the collective sentiment during my research years was that one's continued presence in Dakar was increasingly contingent on engaging with difference and migrating abroad. Migrant remittances prop up the vast majority of Dakar's households, after all, and diasporic imaginaries saturate everyday life and policy in this growing city (see Melly 2017). For my taksimann friends, the streets of Dakar are directly and inextricably linked to those of Paris, New York City, Shanghai, Johannesburg, and Jeddah. And so, drivers strategically distributed the cards outside of their

personal networks in an effort to build future-focused relationships with the city's transnational elite, forging tenuous relational channels that might, in turn, lead them abroad. After learning I was an American citizen who would be returning to California after my research concluded, for instance, several drivers were eager to exchange business cards with me with the explicit hope that I might help them secure a visa to work as a chauffeur or a security guard in the US. Such propositions were, of course, a long shot for these men. These fleeting exchanges in fact hint at much more pervasive and persistent efforts among urbanites to forge and multiply possible paths abroad.

The Gare du Nord method Kleinman so vividly describes is not, then, merely *inspired* by strategies developed in Dakar. Rather, the cab drivers with whom I worked also engaged in these tactics with the unambiguous goal of becoming migrant-adventurers abroad. There is thus a remarkable recursiveness that characterizes the work of infrastructural translation, as Kleinman has termed it—an observation that helps raise lively new questions about transnational city-making and migratory temporalities. From this perspective, for instance, would we consider Dakar a sending or receiving community, a point of departure or arrival? Is it Paris or Dakar that is a migrant's aspiration and end goal? Or do these modes of framing miss the point altogether? By attending to the tensions, ambiguities, and inversions inherent in the process of infrastructure-making, we might find new ways to think and write about global mobility and urban life.

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