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Acknowledging the 2018 Anthony Leeds Prize in Urban Anthropology

CAROLINE MELLY
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I am honored and humbled to accept the 2018 Anthony Leeds Prize for Urban Anthropology. It is an extraordinary privilege to be recognized alongside some of the scholars whose works have brought the city to ethnographic life for me. These are texts that have sustained me in the field, that have guided my teaching, and that have stirred in me a desire to write the world in order to change it. I am profoundly grateful to the Society for Urban, National, Transnational/Global Anthropology for this acknowledgment.

My book, *Bottleneck: Moving, Building, and Belonging in an African City* (University of Chicago, 2017), examines mobility as a highly valued but increasingly elusive cultural value in Dakar, Senegal. When I arrived in the city in 2006, I hadn't imagined writing about urban infrastructures or traffic jams. I was interested in studying how institutions, communities, and individuals had long weathered economic uncertainty through their connections to Senegal's vast diaspora. I was particularly concerned with how these migration-centered visions and projects had shifted, unraveled, or intensified in a post-9/11, post-structural adjustment era. I had envisioned a neat and tidy project, one that focused on two important spheres of urban life: the burgeoning residential neighborhoods in the northern reaches of the city, which were built and sustained primarily by capital from the diaspora; and a network of state and international organization offices that worked to govern migration as a development strategy, most of which were concentrated in city's southern limits.

But just as my research in these two sites began to really take off, a series of large-scale infrastructural projects were initiated, and overnight, the city seemed to screech to a halt. Initially, I saw these traffic clogged routes as an impediment to the project I had so carefully planned out, as a crisis to resolve. My fieldnotes, often jotted in the back of a taxicab or *car rapide*, reflected on wasted time, missed appointments, and deep doubts about my ability to execute the project I had planned.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons the book has resonated with some readers. It lingers in a place we've all been: in that moment when our presuppositions about the field give way—often quite achingly, and never without resistance—to new modes of seeing and engaging the worlds we inhabit. It is, perhaps, the true anthropological rite of passage: watching a carefully crafted project fall apart and having to figure out how to piece together a new approach. This sense of disorientation that results is sometimes felt even more acutely when we work in urban contexts. It necessitates learning to really listen to our interlocutors about

what questions are worth asking, what frameworks are worth tinkering with, and what it really feels like to inhabit these rapidly transforming landscapes.

This was a lesson I certainly learned as I navigated a city under construction. With time, my notes-in-transit slowly came to reflect on the material and social worlds swirling around me. As we sat stalled in traffic, I realized, urbanites were engaging deeply with precisely those questions—about migration, urban life, development, citizenship and state authority—that had brought me to the field in the first place. And they were sometimes using a very specific concept to do this: *embouteillage*, or bottleneck. Of French origin, the word *embouteillage* most commonly refers to overburdened urban roads and the traffic jams they produce.

But what I began to notice was that people were also refashioning this term to describe various other sorts of impasse, from stalled state projects and migration visa woes to electricity outages and densely populated neighborhoods. What urbanites were offering me, then, was a fresh ethnographic perspective and a novel entry point. With the help of residents, I came to understand that the infrastructural projects that I feared would unravel my research agenda were instead quite central to it. The city's snarled roads were not, perhaps, a classical site for theorizing migration. But for my interlocutors, these spaces were crucial transnational laboratories. Bottlenecks helped forge a vocabulary for thinking about mobility as both an imperative and an impossibility. They helped translate how abstract shifts in international migration policy become mundane, lived realities. And they offered unexpected opportunities to fashion prospectively transnational selves.

Perhaps the book has also found traction because it offers us a means of probing and conceptualizing the contemporary moment, one in which we all find ourselves stuck. It is a moment marked by heightened talk about the narrowing or shutting down of immigration routes into the United States—about building a wall along the Mexican border, ending DACA and the Diversity Visa Lottery program, ruthlessly separating families, and confronting the migrant caravan “onslaught” with a show of militarized force. While American media attention has largely focused on the impacts of these changes here in the US, we have also seen quick glimpses of their reverberations abroad: families divided by abrupt shifts in policy, visa holders stranded at airports, university students missing their first days school, refugees left with no hope of refuge. And yet, despite the seeming odds stacked against them, hopeful migrants continue to seek ways to make themselves mobile and secure safe passage. These unfolding events beseech us to ask: What does it mean to be stuck in a world that demands mobility? How do these restrictions and exclusions transform urban landscapes and livelihoods? And what unexpected possibilities and expectations do they produce? If *Bottleneck* leaves some small mark, I hope that it will contribute to these conversations so that we might work toward more just futures.

I want to offer my gratitude: to the partner who insisted I get back out on those bottlenecked roads when I felt defeated and bewildered. To the extraordinary Dakarois with whom I have lived and work—astute urban and transnational theorists in their own rights. To the many mentors, collaborators, and colleagues who have profoundly shaped my work and my being. To my students, who relentlessly pushed me to clarify the stakes of my scholarship and to write a more accessible book. And to the Leeds Prize committee, for seeing something of promise in my words. *Thank you.*