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ETHNOGRAPHY ON THE ROAD: INFRASTRUCTURAL VISION AND THE UNRULY PRESENT IN CONTEMPORARY DAKAR

Caroline Melly

In his report on the 1966 UNESCO-supported First World Festival of Negro Arts, John Povey writes of the spectacular infrastructural and architectural improvements made by the host city of Dakar in anticipation of this international gathering of artists, intellectuals and tourists. Describing his arrival by plane in the ‘fresh, attractive, sophisticated city’ (1966: 4), the author appears as dazzled by the modern, urban landscape as he is by the artistic presentations and productions that were the intended focus of the festival. As he journeys along the seaside Route de la Corniche and into the heart of the city, Povey marvels at stunning new hotels, museums, theatres and government buildings, all built to preserve Senegal’s cultural heritage and to promote a vision of the future that was thoroughly in line with the dominant *négritude* ideologies of the time. Meanwhile, Povey notes, the nagging poverty and inequality that characterized this former colonial capital was carefully contained, deliberately and ‘neatly shrouded from visitors’ view by stretches of rush matting or corrugated iron’ (*ibid.*). What Povey encountered in the mid-1960s was a grand vision proffered by the highly visible and influential President Léopold Sédar Senghor of the post-colonial nation as reborn through its modern and capable capital city. The city he described was committed to promoting its own brand of intellectual and artistic expression, one that was both dazzling in its ambitions and limited in its scope, excluding vast geographical sections and populations even as it claimed a more encompassing vision of the future.

Arriving as a researcher exactly forty years later, I found myself surrounded by ostensibly similar efforts to reinvent and reposition Dakar through large-scale construction projects (*grands travaux*) promoted and overseen by the Senegalese state and aimed at building a truly ‘global’ capital city. By the spring of 2006, the city was steadily being transformed by a host of new spaces and structures that seemed to echo building projects launched decades ago: by an *autoroute* that would link the peninsular capital to the mainland and would someday include a toll portion; by the controversial Monument de la Renaissance Africaine, built in close proximity to the airport; by the reinvention of the well-travelled Corniche into a sleek seaside passageway; and by the construction of five-star hotels, restaurants and shopping plazas along this same storied road. Channelling the aura of Senghor and other post-colonial leaders, President Abdoulaye Wade

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claimed these projects as integral components of his own authoritative vision for the city and the nation, and as evidence that even his grandest dreams had the power to become reality (Fofana 2010; see also De Jong and Foucher 2010).¹ But these projects and structures also expressed a break with modernist approaches to infrastructural development that emphasized planning, calculation and 'rationality' (see Scott 1998). Drawing inspiration instead from the seemingly meteoric rise of global cities like Dubai, the President and his allies sought to lure international attention and capital and thus to reposition Dakar as both 'the most beautiful city in Africa' and as a global destination for foreign investment and leisure.² In contrast to the architectural achievements that captivated Povey in the 1960s, the contemporary spaces and structures that inspired this essay were not built to house national treasures or to display the talents and arts of a revitalized African spirit, one that was necessarily collective and firmly and explicitly rooted in a grand past. In contrast, Dakar's twenty-first century 'renaissance' was focused on the construction of professedly globalized spaces of consumption and circulation that had little to say to post-colonial ideologies like *négritude* and instead appeared thoroughly detached from histories and shared struggles of the past decades. Most of these projects were made possible through partnerships that linked together national leadership, foreign capital and expertise, and loans and guidance from international organizations. Targeting a new generation of foreign travellers called 'foreign direct investors', leaders hoped that a cosmopolitan elite might be lured to this African city – in some ways *despite* rather than because of its African-ness – because it could offer the sort of generic comforts that they would expect to find at 'home'. The President's vision was thus fixed squarely on reinventing Dakar as a new kind of African capital city, one that was attractive to residents and foreigners alike because it claimed a strategic location, used space efficiently, and reiterated the steadfast dedication to foreign investment and economic 'emergence' that the international community and voters had come to expect.³ Through concrete overpasses and roundabouts – as well as through the spectacular billboards, passionate speeches and public information campaigns that accompanied them – Wade and his allies projected an alluring if implausible vision of future possibility marked by wealth and abundance.

These infrastructural projects and promises also brought into sharper view the urgency and inescapability of the present moment. As large-scale projects were launched in quick succession around the city, traffic bottlenecks and detours multiplied, straining daily circulations, routines and livelihoods. For many in the city, life came to gravitate around avoiding traffic jams or locating alternative

¹As I write and revise this essay, dramatic change is under way in Senegal. Despite the existence of a two-term limit that he himself had signed into law, Wade ran for a third presidential term in early 2012. The election drew international attention, as thousands of voters took to Dakar's streets decrying Wade's campaign. Wade lost in the second round of voting to his former protégé, Macky Sall.

²While Abidjan was long considered the unofficial 'capital' of Francophone West Africa, a series of political coups and uprisings have led to a regional reorientation, one that has in large part favoured Dakar. This shift has solidified Wade's mission to turn Dakar into a regional centre for finance and banking, tourism, and technology.

³To get a better sense of the way this commitment to economic 'emergence' is cast for both international and local audiences, see, for instance, APIX S.A. 2011.

routes. Furthermore, while resurfaced roads and new highways linked together spaces of governance, global travel and elite consumption – in turn defining a new political, economic and social centre – the majority of urban residents were left to contend with dilapidated roads unfit for passage, ruptured sewage pipes, frequent power outages, and the seeming lack of state intervention and oversight in more ‘popular’ quarters of the city. As new highways and shopping plazas were unveiled elsewhere in the city, Dakar’s neglected side roads and spaces came into sharper view, splintering Wade’s sweeping vision for the nation’s future and centring attention on the uncertainty of the immediate present. At the same time that these pressing urban realities were decried and debated publicly, however, they were also ripped from their historical moorings and depoliticized – not only by state workers and elites, but also, at times, by those whose lives and futures were made more precarious by the projects.

What distinguishes this particular moment in Dakar’s history from earlier modes of urban transformation, I suggest, is what Jane Guyer has described as an unsettling mix of ‘fantasy futurism and enforced presentism’ that guides macroeconomic policy and other facets of life (2007: 409). Once seemingly peculiar to the conditions of structural adjustment and military rule in Nigeria, Guyer argues, this particular temporal sensibility is increasingly used to frame and justify policy making around the world, in turn emptying the near past and near future of moral, economic or political worth and meaning. Gone, she insists, are past strategies ‘of planning and hoping, of tracing out mutual influences, of engaging in struggles for specific goals, in short, of the process of implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world that used to be encompassed under an expansively inclusive concept of “reasoning”’ (*ibid.*). In their stead arise preoccupations with responding to the exigencies of immediate, everyday life and offering long-term projections of growth and change.

In this essay, I draw on these theoretical insights to frame my discussion of infrastructural vision and chronic uncertainty in contemporary Dakar. I situate my analysis of temporality and infrastructural change within a growing body of literature that focuses on roads as profoundly ambivalent material and ideological structures (Dalakoglou 2010; Guldi 2012; Larkin 2008) that serve as critical sites for the accumulation and contestation of meanings (Giles-Vernick 1996; Masquelier 2002; Roseman 1996). In recent years, a number of scholars have paid keen ethnographic attention to the speculative and futuristic nature of large-scale urban renewal projects in ways that echo Guyer’s observations (De Boeck 2011; Khan 2006; Mains 2012). These important contributions have been particularly attentive to the futuristic fictions offered by these projects. They give us a glimpse into the ways that discourses and practices of global capital accumulation, economic partnership and neo-liberal governance shape everyday life and urban landscapes in various post-colonial contexts. Less explicit attention has been paid, however, to the ways infrastructural projects both evoke and generate a very particular conception of life in the immediate, inescapable present. I argue in this essay that Dakar’s infrastructural transformation made spectacularly visible not only distant (and highly implausible) futures but also a very particular vision of the present that rationalized, emphasized and even celebrated the everyday hardships wrought by infrastructural change. Avowedly ahistorical and centred squarely on the individual, these discourses of hardship cast infrastructural change as a future-focused project brought about through

'temporary' inconveniences and disruptions endured for the sake of the nation. These conceptions of the present circulated through bureaucratic offices, were affirmed in promotional materials, and were both echoed and eschewed in public spaces.

Moving through state offices, onto ailing side streets, and along emergent roads, the analysis that follows draws on ethnographic data collected over the course of twenty months during three separate research trips to Dakar.⁴ Each section is anchored by an ethnographic encounter that brings into view the complex relationship between infrastructural change, futuristic vision, and immediate, destabilizing hardship in 'structurally adjusted' urban Senegal. What emerges from this analysis is a more complex view of neo-liberal reform and urban change in contemporary Africa.

HARDSHIP AS POLICY FRAMEWORK

May 2006. Tucked away on a quiet and shady street just steps from the presidential residence, the stately headquarters of Senegal's national investment promotion agency, APIX,⁵ seems a world away from the urgencies and uncertainties of everyday life in the city. Gathered inside a well-appointed and air-conditioned meeting room of this quasi-state organization are a few APIX representatives and half-a-dozen Nigerian military officers of high rank, who have come to APIX to learn more about privatization efforts in Senegal. Speaking in perfectly accented English, Elhadji, a senior staff member at the agency, describes to his audience how ordinary residents coped with the devaluation of the franc CFA in 1994, a reform aimed at appeasing the World Bank and making Senegal attractive to foreign interests: 'Imagine – you wake up, and suddenly, the money in your pocket is worth half what it was the day before. This was what the devaluation was. It meant that the Senegalese people had to sacrifice, to endure difficult times. Devaluation affected everyone.' As Elhadji makes his case to the Nigerian visitors, staff members working down the hall are busy fielding inquiries from national and international media outlets about APIX's critical role in the recently launched autoroute

⁴Most of this research took place in 2006 and 2007, and was funded by the National Science Foundation (SES-0549003), the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Program, and the Department of Anthropology at UC Irvine. Also critical to the arguments I present here was a follow-up trip to Dakar that took place in January 2010, which was funded by the Committee on Faculty Compensation and Development at Smith College. As a whole, this research employed participant observation and semi-structured and unstructured interviews carried out within three different spheres of urban life: in state and other governing offices, located largely (but not exclusively) in the south of the city; in residential neighbourhoods primarily in the north of the city; and on the highways and side streets that connected north and south. Research was conducted in a mix of French and Wolof.

⁵APIX (L'Agence Nationale Chargée de la Promotion de l'Investissement et des Grands Travaux) is itself the product of an alliance between the World Bank and the Wade administration. It is a quasi-state body that exists outside Senegal's ministry system, and its director general and her staff answer directly to the President. APIX is dedicated to facilitating economic regulatory reforms, promoting private sector investment, and overseeing large-scale national infrastructure projects, and it continues to do so in close conjunction with the World Bank. APIX, in fact, remains a member of the World Bank Group's Multinational Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA).

construction project. It seems that, overnight, everyday circulations and livelihoods have been brought to a violent halt, and urban residents are growing anxious and impatient. Working to reorient the public's attention to the grand futures that await Senegal, staff members draw on discourses that are strikingly similar to those employed by Elhadji – discourses of private capital flow and alternative futures born through individual hardship and daily sacrifice. In internal planning sessions and meetings with 'partners', I note, APIX staff members cast the city's worsening traffic jams, puzzling detours and lengthening commutes as des épreuves – ordeals, hardships, tests of character – endured for the good of the nation.

By the spring of 2006, it seemed that all of Dakar's attention was firmly fixed on the city's roads. As urban residents worked to make sense of and navigate the constantly shifting landscape around them, they discussed and debated the promises and consequences of the road construction projects. But buried beneath these urgent contemporary concerns were seemingly forgotten anxieties and debates about restructuring efforts of another sort – namely, the 1994 devaluation of the franc CFA, an economic measure that deeply affected more than a dozen West and Central African countries. At first glance, it may seem that the devaluation has little to do with the urban revitalization efforts under way in Senegal's capital more than a decade later – a conclusion that my APIX colleagues would have endorsed. Indeed, urban residents and bureaucratic officials did not connect the two in any purposeful or explicit way in our interviews and conversations, and I initially paid little attention to devaluation in my research notes. But in my daily travels through state offices and along traffic-clogged roads, this apparent disconnect emerged as worthy of ethnographic scrutiny.

Instituted under the direction of the World Bank and other international bodies, the franc CFA devaluation was an effort at economic liberalization aimed at making African exports more competitive on the global market and at luring foreign investors to the region. This technical 'adjustment' was carried out six years before APIX became a formal institution, during the administration of Abdoulaye Wade's predecessor, Abdou Diouf. The impacts of devaluation were experienced most acutely by the region's poor, whose household budgets and daily routines could not absorb the sudden and unpredictable rise in prices for basic necessities that resulted (see, for instance, Bendeck *et al.* 1997). Senegalese with access to foreign currencies, through family members working in the diaspora or business connections abroad, were better able to weather devaluation than those without these connections. Moreover, while wealthier families could manage to increase their household expenditures, the poor had to cut back on cooking oil or rice, or do without meat or fish as inflation worsened. Devaluation efforts thus served to widen the gap between the wealthy and the poor in a very permanent way, offering new and lucrative opportunities to some residents while dispossessing others.

Likewise, the large-scale road projects initiated in 2006 reflected bold efforts by the state and its allies to make Senegal more modern, efficient and 'friendly' to foreign investors. Described as a difficult but crucial turning point in the nation's and the city's history, these projects brought sudden and disorienting change – road surfaces were uprooted, detours imposed without warning, incomes threatened, routines and livelihoods transformed – all in the name of macro-economic change. As with devaluation, these dramatic changes were experienced

in deeply unequal ways. Perhaps the most striking evidence of this fact was the forceful removal of people living on land designated for the future autoroute, a significant disruption of precarious lives on the city's margins. But the projects also highlighted more ordinary exclusions and inequalities. Not all of Dakar's neighbourhood roads profited from urban revitalization efforts; instead, elite coastal neighbourhoods receiving the lion's share of attention and resources to the exclusion of the city's popular quarters, where even sewerage and water infrastructures were not dependable. Moreover, while all urban commuters had to deal with traffic bottlenecks and barricaded roads, the city's poorer residents typically did so in road-weary, overcrowded vehicles that were poorly ventilated and had unconvincing safety records. Because buses moved along fixed routes, drivers could not invent new paths to dodge traffic jams as drivers with their own automobiles could. From this perspective, the city's elite not only stood to gain the most from the projects, which focused on developing sites of cosmopolitan living, consumption and governance; they also could better contain and manage the negative impacts of the road construction efforts on their routines, incomes and physical well-being.

Neither of these projects was implemented without controversy or public debate. As inflation worsened in the months following devaluation, an outraged Senegalese public took to the streets in (sometimes violent) protest, and the national media accused Senegal's leaders of betrayal (Creevey *et al.* 1995). And yet, these grievances seemed slowly to fade from the public agenda. Devaluation, it seemed, had gradually become a banal, apolitical feature of the economic landscape of contemporary Africa, and the public turned its attention to newer liberalization initiatives.⁶ By the time I arrived in Dakar in 2006, few urban residents were talking about the currency devaluation outside of bureaucratic offices. Within these spaces of economic governance, devaluation and its profound everyday effects were retrospectively rationalized and legitimized through a discourse, implicit or otherwise, of individual 'hardship', as Elhadji's presentation to his Nigerian guests makes clear. This perspective conceptualized disruptions that followed currency devaluation as temporary, and it celebrated individual burdens as sacrifices endured for the benefit of one's city, nation or region. Through these sanitized accounts, which circulated in various guises through other offices of economic governance in the city, devaluation became a sturdy and objective feature of the economic infrastructure, an apolitical technical adjustment, one that helped put the national economy on the path towards liberalization and development, even if it brought immediate turmoil as ordinary people struggled to make do. And the deep and quite visible inequalities that resulted from these ostensibly 'necessary' economic readjustments, it seemed, were hardened into bland realities.

What I witnessed in 2006 and 2007, I suggest, was a resuscitation of this particular explanatory logic. As worsening traffic jams and detours sparked public outrage and accusations of government deception and abandonment, officials called on urban residents to be patient and to focus on the brilliant futures that awaited the city and the nation. Towering billboards celebrating

⁶For an excellent foundational discussion of the depoliticization of development, see Ferguson 1994.

Senegal's dazzling future were strategically placed where traffic tended to thicken, and public service campaigns detailing project goals were sandwiched between popular evening television programmes. These nightly announcements typically began with spectacular, computer-generated images of a futuristic Dakar, but they quickly shifted attention toward identifying detours and problem zones and rationalizing the impossible present as enabling an alternative future. APIX officials and their collaborators thus acknowledged the disruptions posed by the projects, but they firmly insisted that these circumstances were transitory and would enable long-term growth and prosperity. Indeed, when I returned to the city in 2010, several of the officials with whom I spoke pronounced the urban component of the infrastructural projects complete and insisted that the disruptions they caused had come to an end as well. These hardships were further cast as evidence of the indispensability of the projects; urban reconstruction efforts would, with time, *ease* the daily movements and economic plight of the poor, officials insisted, even if they seemed temporarily to exacerbate their predicaments. These urban projects would also spark similar schemes in other sections of the city – roads would beget roads, creating a system of transit that would better integrate the entire city. Moreover, staff members frequently emphasized the hardships that they themselves faced as they navigated the city each day, complaining of time spent in traffic, flat tyres, missed appointments and angry motorists. In doing so, they effectively cast themselves as diligent, burden-bearing citizens who were personally invested in the charting of new futures. These everyday conversations also produced the process of infrastructural change as an equalizing, even democratizing, force that shaped quite different lives in remarkably similar ways.

Taken together, these ethnographic observations draw attention to an important paradox of neo-liberal reform in Senegal and elsewhere: at the same time that state officials emphasized and even celebrated individual responsibilities and hardships as the engine of economic change, they flattened and denied the multiplicity and complexities of these experiences, thus obscuring the inequalities that the projects were both built upon and produced (see Hill 2001). Moreover, these hardships were conceptualized as episodic, as fleeting disruptions that were wholly unrelated to past restructurings and exclusions. Although the 'enforced presentism' I describe here did not make for the sorts of appealing promotional brochures that futuristic highways and grand monuments did, short-term hardships were nonetheless integral facets of infrastructural change and macroeconomic policy in Dakar. How did urban residents encounter and conceptualize these temporal asymmetries in infrastructural ideology? How did they make sense of hardship as both an individual experience and a state-sanctioned value? And how did they experience the shifts in urban space that these presentist logics precipitated? Drawing on ethnographic encounters that unfolded on three quite different city streets, the final three sections explore urban reactions and interpretations of infrastructural transformation in the months and years following the initiation of the projects.

PROTESTING PRESENTISM

January 2010. Located just a few kilometres north-west of APIX, Marché Sandaga is Dakar's most expansive urban marketplace. It is afternoon, near lunchtime, and

my cab driver, Laye, inches slowly through the bustling intersection at Avenue Peytavin and Avenue Lamine Gueye at the cusp of the famed market. This intersection is the gateway to the country's informal economy, a place where urban residents of various backgrounds barter for textiles, vegetables, or bootlegged DVDs. Imported Chinese products are arranged on the streets and sidewalks alongside carefully sorted heaps of secondhand goods. Cars, buses, shoppers and vendors weave around and through the densely packed intersection with myriad goals and destinations in mind. There is no obvious formal regulation that guides traffic at this junction: no noticeable signs, no authorities directing traffic, no clear pattern dictating right-of-way. Instead, drivers and pedestrians alike must negotiate their passage individually, either with extreme caution or with reckless defiance.

As we proceed, Laye's mind is fixed firmly on the latest of Wade's controversial building projects, Le Monument de la Renaissance Africaine. It is a project whose goals and meanings he claims are dubious. As we approach the intersection, Laye's tirade comes to an abrupt halt as a moped veers into our path without warning. He slams on his brakes to avoid hitting the driver or the pedestrians that had followed in the moped's wake. 'This is the problem with this country!' Laye screams, gesturing wildly at the frenzied scene before us. 'You see, this intersection is like this country.' He explains that while Wade focuses his attention on developing orderly, modern routes for investors and diplomats, the rest of the country is left without guidance, without direction, without laws. People are only looking out for themselves, he says, and they make decisions without any regard for what is in front of them; there is no certainty about what comes next. We drive in stunned silence for a few moments, until Laye adds, almost philosophically, that the patterns of traffic at this intersection resemble the way that Wade's government itself functions: the police, the President, the ministers and other public officials look out for their own interests. There is no order, no regulation. Money changes hands, moves quickly, disappears. Laye adds angrily that Wade is 'mad'. He squanders national resources on monuments and highways instead of making realistic plans to deal with urban overcrowding or profoundly uneven access to quality medical care.

This lively intersection in the heart of the city offers an ideal vantage point from which to launch a discussion of the ways urban residents made sense of dramatic infrastructural change in contemporary Dakar. During colonialism, this section of the city was known as Dakar-ville or simply *la ville*, and was home to the city's European population and to *évolué* (evolved) Africans given the status of French citizens. As an experiment in assimilationist rule, Dakar-ville was strictly segregated from the so-called 'African' quarters, called Médina, on the city's periphery, which supplied labour to the European district. In contrast to the unpaved roads and ostensibly impermanent housing of Médina (see Ndione and Soumaré 1982; Betts 1971), Dakar-ville was distinguished by its grand boulevards, cafés, government buildings, tidy shops and multi-storey residences (Whittlesey 1948). After independence, Dakar-ville was renamed Plateau, and, as the heart of the now post-colonial capital city, it was rapidly transformed by the construction of new government ministry buildings, monuments and museums, all of which were intended to make materially present President Léopold Sédar Senghor's visions of *négritude* and post-colonial nationalism. Plateau also contained some of the city's liveliest commercial spaces, including Marché Sandaga, a thriving market originally known for its textiles and produce that

grew quickly both in terms of the area it encompassed and the products it offered (Ebin 1992). In the decades following independence, Plateau became home to international and non-governmental organizations as well as to APIX, and it was widely regarded as the city's economic, cultural and political heart.

Yet despite the quarter's continued relevance to daily life, many of Plateau's thriving spaces did not play a particularly prominent role in Wade's vision for the city's and the nation's future. Absent from Wade's soaring oratory about economic emergence, for instance, were the thriving street markets and shops whose religious trade networks span continents and whose wares draw scores of urban residents each day.⁷ These spaces, too, received little direct financial investment from the government. For Laye, Wade's vision was one that focused on certain streets and populations and that left the majority of the city's residents – who frequented markets like Sandaga instead of the up-scale shopping and dining venues of the Corniche – to fend for themselves. What this cab driver noted from his vantage point within this crowded and unmonitored intersection was a startling sort of withdrawal of the state from the very space in which it has for so long been rooted. Indeed, on the majority of the city's roads, his reflection suggests, the state seems nowhere to be found, its attention fixed instead on grand projects in other sections of the city. Motorists and pedestrians must instead move alone through these spaces, navigating vehicles and bodies through dangerous intersections and toward unpredictable futures (see also Simone 2004; Khan 2006). From Laye's perspective, Dakar's roads did not profess a vision of national futures achieved through personal hardship; rather, they revealed a fragmented sense of the present, one in which everyone was driven by individual goals and desperate circumstances. Within these spaces neglected by the state, Laye suggested, people became focused on finding ways to get by on their own, using tactics that were often extra-legal, opaque or detrimental to the well-being of the community. Urban life became a matter of responding to immediate urgencies and unexpected shifts in traffic, policy or prices.

Laye's impassioned critique thus implicitly rejected sanitized notions of hardship endured for the good of the nation. Instead, the cab driver pointed out the state's complicity in the production of inequalities, insisting that the refocusing of state commitments came at a grave cost for many in the city, who were forced to endure the consequences of restructuring projects in everyday ways, alone, without safety nets once provided by the Senegalese government. As we drove, for instance, Laye described to me his own efforts to fulfil obligations to his aging parents while caring for his own family who still resided in the countryside. He complained, too, about his own ailing health, made worse by the long hours he worked and the poor conditions of the road. The profound physical consequences of infrastructural projects were a very common topic of discussion during my time in the city. Cab drivers and other commuters complained bitterly about the toll that exhaust fumes and traffic jams had exacted on their health and well-being, and they frequently offered estimates of income or time lost to bottlenecks or detours. In this sense, the inequalities Laye and other urban residents noted were inherently corporeal, inscribed upon and suffered by bodies, both in the city and in Senegal's vast rural hinterland. These quiet protests make

⁷For more on transnational Murid trade diasporas, see Diouf 2000.

clear that, in an age of monumental urban construction projects, caring and providing for selves and communities become burdens borne quietly by individuals, families and households rather than the responsibilities of the paternalistic state. Moreover, Laye's assessment pushes against official efforts to decontextualize and depoliticize experiences of present hardships. Instead, this urban motorist puts his own travails into a context of ongoing hardship and more widespread state neglect. In doing so, Laye also questions the purportedly temporary nature of infrastructural upheaval. These 'temporary' shifts indeed have deep histories and long-term effects.

My encounter with Laye offers one final observation about the nature of popular resistance in an age of visionary public works projects. In many ways, Laye's incisive critique of Wade's projects reflects a rich history of political engagement with and on Dakar's streets. Just as generations of disillusioned urban residents before him had done, Laye protested the state's apparent absence from the everyday affairs of its citizens, using the social and material space of the street itself as stage and substance for his claims.⁸ Yet, in stark contrast to previous street-centred dramas, the particular form of protest I describe here tended to take place in more contained spaces – inside cabs, buses, homes, or on call-in radio programmes – and often as people were en route elsewhere. Despite palpable public outrage, the road projects did not seem to inspire the kinds of organized, collective protests that other acts of state neglect – like university budget cuts or unpaid public sector salaries – had managed to ignite. Instead, I found, urban residents frequently voiced their opposition during the course of their everyday routines and conversations, and did so in highly individualized ways. How do we make sense of the conspicuous absence of purposeful, collective protest against the projects? And what does this have to tell us about infrastructural articulations of the present? Turning attention to one of Dakar's emergent routes, the next section considers one urban resident's startling acceptance of the large-scale changes under way.

THE CONCRETE PRESENT

January 2010. 'This is where the city is now,' Baba states matter-of-factly, as he winds the sputtering taxicab along the Route de la Corniche. We are headed north

⁸Over the past half-century, ardent nationalists, university students, union workers, political party adherents, street vendors and others have taken to Dakar's streets to protest funding cutbacks, living or working conditions, new government restrictions, or controversial elections. Moreover, it was on the city's streets – particularly those of Dakar's popular neighbourhoods – that Abdoulaye Wade initially rallied disenchanted youth in the 1990s behind his calls for change (*sopi*) and party turnover (*alternance*), and achieved public visibility as a future-minded leader. Perhaps most notable among Dakar's street-centred dramas was the *set-setal* movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which disaffected youth confronted the state and the ruling class, declared public spaces their own, and struggled to install new visions of morality and political accountability (Diouf 1996). Through violent attacks on 'outsiders', and more positively through mural painting and urban clean-up operations, Dakar's youth publicly called into question the discourses and practices of post-colonial nationalism. The roads themselves – neglected, crumbling, insalubrious – were indexed as evidence of the state's broken promises and became crucial platforms and canvases on which youth expressed their demands and alternative visions of nation.

from Plateau towards the neighbourhood of Les Almadies, famed for its towering villas and up-scale nightlife. 'Dakar is no longer Plateau. And it's certainly not the suburbs [les banlieues]. It's the Corniche.' Two and a half years have passed since Baba and I first met, and he is eager to show me the dramatic transformations the city has undergone since our last encounter. I marvel at the ease of our journey and at the luxury hotels, discreetly sited, which have emerged along the coast since my last trip. The road is smooth, the view of the glittering Atlantic astounding. A native of the suburb of Pikine, where he still lives with his parents and siblings, Baba positions himself as an urban expert and as an outspoken critic of Wade. As we drive, I'm reminded of a conversation we had had years before, when large sections of the Corniche were barricaded as the seaside route was spectacularly reinvented. Baba had blasted Wade and dismissed his infrastructural ambitions as impotent, describing how, instead, he would have gone about revitalizing the city through the construction of youth centres that would offer training workshops. So, as we drive and chat, I am struck by what seems now like his quiet acceptance of the changes brought about by the Corniche project. Years before, Baba seemed to me a revolutionary, the roads his battleground. Today, he is more subdued. 'Corniche—the new Dakar,' I jot quickly in my notes, not yet quite sure what to make of this tiny revelation.

Baba's reluctant but powerful statement – that the heart of Dakar had shifted to the elite coastal highway – complements Laye's accusations of state neglect and reorients our discussion toward the grand new spaces afforded through global partnerships. But it also offers additional insight into how infrastructures were used to make certain kinds of claims on the present. Making sense of these complex assertions first requires a more thorough discussion both of Abdoulaye Wade's 'vision' and of this particular coastal neighbourhood. The election of Wade in 2000 is typically assumed to be a watershed moment in Senegal's political history, as it was the first time a member of the opposition party had successfully claimed the office of President. Unlike his predecessor Abdou Diouf – who was often rebuked for his 'technocratic' approach, protectionist policies, and focus on management at the expense of future-oriented planning (see Diouf 1997) – Wade positioned himself as a charismatic leader committed to populist issues and open-market economics. His rallying call of *sopi* found notable support among urban youth, who had felt increasingly marginalized by the structural adjustment policies implemented during Diouf's administration. After his election, Wade focused on creating economic opportunities through a commitment to liberal economic reform and private sector investment, particularly in infrastructure (Galvan 2001). Over the next several years – in ways that seemed in some ways to belie his commitment to 'decentralization' – Wade centred much of his attention on reimagining the 'emergent' nation from and through the capital city: Dakar's hopeful new airport, improved and expanded highways, and modernized spaces of consumption would better connect Senegal globally, he insisted, and would in turn spark the infusion of capital into rural areas as well.

In many ways, the revitalized Route de la Corniche Ouest – long central to the imaginary of Dakar – stood as an emblem of Wade's grand vision for the city and the nation. What began during colonialism as a 'macadam (and dusty) . . . road' (Whittlesey 1948: 627) that connected the city's northern airfields with the colonial settlement in the south gradually became a 'romantic' route that boasted bougainvillea-shaded villas and exceptional views of the majestic

Atlantic Ocean (Bigon 2009; Roberts and Roberts 2007). For decades, the neighbourhoods surrounding the Corniche had hosted dignitaries, embassy offices, NGO and IO offices, well-heeled expatriates and the country's prestigious Université Cheikh Anta Diop. But in 2006, the Corniche achieved new visibility and status. The Organisation de la Conférence Islamique (OCI), a global collectivity of 56 Islamic/Muslim majority states, launched an ambitious effort to refashion the aging coastal route into a showcase boulevard befitting the organization's Eleventh Islamic Summit, held in Dakar in March 2008. Wade appointed his son, Karim, to preside over Senegal's newly founded Agence Nationale de l'Organisation de la Conférence Islamique (ANOCI) and the construction projects more specifically. This move sparked a great deal of controversy in the media and among urban residents, who saw Wade's selection of his son as an effort to shape him as his successor. But it also revealed Wade's desire to claim as his own a project launched and financed by foreign interests and organizations. More specifically, the Corniche project reflected a strengthening of ties with Islamic countries and organizations; the increasing importance of 'South-South' alliances and capital flows; the continued role of international organizations and governments in shaping African futures; and the saliency of discourses of 'partnership' aimed at neo-liberal investment.

By the time of my return in 2010, the sleek new road was firmly established as a fashionable destination for travel, up-scale living, and consumption. No longer did tourists need to head to Plateau to locate cosmopolitan restaurants and hotels, as once was the case. Even the World Bank had abandoned its downtown headquarters for a brand-new home along the Corniche, joining various embassies and private companies already located here. These moves, along with the Wade administration's commitment to narrating Dakar's future through the construction of these emergent 'global' spaces, produced this road as a site of intensive moral and economic investment, as a space where the city, the nation, and the administration could be reborn and restaged through neo-liberal logics of global capital flow. While the presidential palace and most official state offices remained firmly situated in the city's centre, just as they had been during Povey's visit, narrations of the nation's present and future were no longer dispatched exclusively from these spaces and institutions. In this sense, Baba's assertion that 'This is where the city is now' was an acknowledgment of the spatial shifts and realignments that had transpired in the capital since the road projects began.

But we might also read Baba's statement as an effort to come to terms with the concrete realities of the lived present. In his work on Nigerian infrastructures, Brian Larkin (2008) notes the tension between grand futuristic visions and the immediate present, demonstrating how seemingly authoritative visions became mundane as spectacular highways and roads became routine spaces of everyday circulation and breakdown. The vision imposed by these infrastructures was constantly reinterpreted and contested in unforeseeable ways by the city residents who travelled them, laboured to build them, or otherwise came into contact with them.⁹ Indeed, urban residents used the Corniche and other emergent surfaces and structures as a means to understand their place in the city's emergent cosmology and to assemble and circulate powerful counter-readings

⁹See, for instance, Sembène 1960.

of the state's efforts. For instance, several residents gestured to the materiality of the new roads and their management as proof that Wade's plans for the future did not include them, as Baba had during numerous conversations in 2006 and 2007. Another taxi driver pointed out slight cracks in the brand new concrete as evidence that Wade and his cronies were guilty of brokering illicit deals with foreign firms and pocketing cash that could be used for real urban renewal efforts. Several critics pointed out the illogicality of the road's design, while others criticized the administration's failure to adequately plan detours: for many, this was a sign of the state's disorderly approach to development and lack of foresight.

Wade and his projects were not without supporters, however. Some cab drivers, for instance, would marvel aloud at vivid billboards celebrating project goals, at the legion of polished-looking youth the project employed to direct traffic, and at the dusty roads that were supposedly a *tabula rasa* on which Wade's administration could write the city's future. One driver's future-oriented optimism is particularly illustrative here: 'After these roads are built,' he exclaimed, 'Dakar will be a grand city – like Paris! Like New York!' And yet, I found that declarations like these were nearly always accompanied by an acknowledgment of their fears that these large-scale projects, slated to continue for several years, would eat at their meagre incomes and damage the prospects of those who depended upon their salaries, at least in the short term. At the same time that these urbanites found the futures proposed by Wade's schemes alluring, they also reluctantly acknowledged the very personal and immediate toll that these infrastructural transformations had taken on their lives and routines.

Given this culture of open criticism, my reunion with Baba in 2010 left me perplexed and unsettled. During our previous encounters, I had viewed him as a dedicated revolutionary who regarded criticism and public debate as a way of being and as a tool for social change. How was I to make sense of Baba's quiet acquiescence to the changes wrought by the new roads, of his seeming acceptance of his own peripheral positionality, just a few years after he had blasted the projects and spoken of concrete alternatives? I suggest here that, as roads become mundane spaces of transit, they not only open up spaces for contesting authoritative design and ideology, as Larkin makes clear, but they also can become taken-for-granted physical structures that depoliticize and depersonalize everyday experiences of exclusion and hardship. From this perspective, the once-charged spaces of the Route de la Corniche had become unremarkable features of the urban landscape. During my absence from the city, Baba had certainly travelled along the Corniche hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of times, slowly coming to accept the physical road as well as the social, economic, and political realities that this new structure cemented. Baba had not been won over by grand futuristic visions, I argue, as much as he had resigned himself to the realities of the present. Relocating to the city's margins, the next section offers a final perspective on how urban residents come to terms with the gap between presentist logics and futuristic promises in contemporary Dakar.

NAVIGATING AN UNRULY PRESENT

January 2010. After hailing a cab in Plateau, I am headed toward Parcelles Assainies, a densely populated residential section in the northern part of the city that

I had called home in 2006. I am returning to visit the generous hosts I now call family as well as other neighbourhood friends. The cab moves with surprising ease along smoothly paved roads, up the connector segment of the autoroute, a road I had always associated with traffic bottlenecks and dense exhaust fumes. As soon as we exit the autoroute and then enter Parcelles, however, the road surfaces change dramatically. I realize quickly that little has in fact changed here since 2006 and 2007. Infrastructures are often overwhelmed and woefully under-financed. In some sections of Parcelles, motorists habitually avoid the designated road surfaces, driving instead along the unpaved shoulders of the road because they're less treacherous.

As we approach the home in which I once lived, built with funds from the diaspora, we pass the shuttered Sandwich'rie shop, and I'm immediately reminded of the profound ambivalence that has characterized Wade's 'vision' from the start. The small snack shop was once owned and operated by Laurent, the son of a Togolese mother and a Senegalese father. He had been born and raised in Dakar but had spent the past several years working and studying in Europe and the United States. He returned from Paris in late 2005 because, he said, Wade had given him hope. It wasn't so much Wade's political party or platform, Laurent explained, but instead his concrete commitment to change. He had read while abroad of Wade's plans for the city – of his desire to build new roads, in particular – and he returned with his wife, filled with optimism, determined to open a business and eager to start a family in his natal Dakar.

But by late 2006, Laurent's optimism had deflated. He pointed to the insalubrious street as evidence of despair as we spoke one summer afternoon, worried that the sewage that constantly overflowed just outside the restaurant was discouraging customers. Drivers had to navigate carefully around the mess that it made. Pedestrians increasingly avoided the segment of road altogether if they could. Laurent no longer indexed Wade's roads as a source of hope but saw them instead as a sign of the President's questionable priorities and empty promises of long-term 'change'. By early 2007, around the time of Wade's re-election, Laurent abruptly abandoned his enterprise and returned to France to work at a ski resort. Nearly three years later, the Sandwich'rie sign remains affixed to an empty storefront, and I hear from my Parcelles 'family' that the sewage problems persist as well.

This ethnographic encounter juxtaposes brief glimpses of two dramatically different spaces and temporal configurations: the city's sleek and futuristic new autoroute, which was a site of intensive financial and ideological investment during Wade's administration; and the burgeoning neighbourhood of Parcelles Assainies, located on the cusp of Dakar's *banlieues*. It was the construction of the autoroute that my colleagues at APIX were working so hard to manage and promote. Touted as one of the first of its kind on the continent, the ambitious project aimed at improving circulation between Dakar's northern and southern extremities and providing a direct link between the peninsular city and the Senegalese mainland. Estimated to cost 500 million dollars (200 billion FCFA), the autoroute was financed through a 'public-private partnership' between the World Bank, which provided a loan to the Senegalese government; the African Development Bank; the French Agency for Development; the International Development Association (IDA); and an 'unidentified' foreign group (World Bank n.d.). The new road was intended to ease congestion within the densely populated peninsular city, to better integrate the country's rural and urban

regions, and, by extension, to attract potential investors to the capital city with its promises of efficiency and modernity.

Parcelles Assainies ('Improved Plots of Land'), too, was born from an alliance between the Senegalese state and the World Bank, though one whose sheen had long since faded. The neighbourhood formally emerged in the early 1970s as an experiment in providing affordable land ownership opportunities to some of the city's lower-income residents (Bop 1983). This effort was premised on the assumption that land ownership among the urban masses was a necessary prerequisite for the construction of a strong democracy and a liberalized economy. The project also focused on improving or extending road structures, electricity networks and drainage systems. Over the next few decades, Parcelles grew steadily, as lots were divided and sold for profit, as migrants to the city sought affordable housing, as autoconstruction practices became popular, and later as diasporic Senegalese built homes for family or for profit (Melly 2010; Tall 2009). By the time I arrived in Dakar in 2006, Parcelles was a thriving, if geographically and economically marginalized *quartier*. It was home to a rapidly expanding population of youth and to an increasingly diverse cadre of new arrivals from all over West Africa. It boasted lively markets and was a key site of political mobilization and economic growth, as Laurent's story suggests. But the Parcelles of 2010 also seemed strikingly lacking in organized governmental intervention, and life for many in the quarter was precarious and uncertain at best. Once a site of deep moral investment by the state, once a darling of international organizations, Parcelles Assainies was now kept afloat by an expanding informal economy and by remittances sent from abroad (Simone 2004; Tall 2009).

This final ethnographic encounter with an itinerant urbanite, an underfunded infrastructural system, and a pulsing popular district on the city's frontiers reiterates many of the points already made in this essay: that contemporary infrastructural projects are as much about rationalizing present impossibilities as they are about asserting spectacular expectations for the future; that weary bodies and vehicles must bear the brunt of the uneven allocation of resources; that road projects involve practices of collective forgetting as often as they conjure histories and memories; that individuals' interpretations of the present and the future shift as they come into physical contact with concrete infrastructures. Like the other urban residents whose perspectives I have shared, Laurent's itinerary was profoundly shaped by the roads themselves – by their promises and their failures, by the possibilities they opened up and by those they foreclosed. His story further serves as an illuminating example of how, in some ways, the Wade administration's road-centred visions inspired global connections and a flow of foreign capital after all – though perhaps not always in the way the administration had anticipated they would – and of how the state and its allies profited in indirect but important ways from the spectacular hardships quietly endured by individuals and their families. Like Laurent, many urban residents strategized to escape the impossibilities of the present and conjured alternative visions of the future – forging new personal networks, inserting themselves into informal economies and sometimes-shadowy networks, or endeavouring to migrate abroad (see Simone 2005). But while Laurent was able to trade his predicament in the city for the (quite different) hardships of displacement, Laye, Baba and others remained thoroughly enplaced, forced to contend with the urgencies of the present.

When juxtaposed, the four encounters I have described in this essay bring into view what happens when the ‘temporary’ disruptions and exclusions wrought by infrastructural change become enduring experiences of hardship: just as new and controversial roads become taken-for-granted features of the urban landscape with time, so too do the inequalities and exclusions they reinforce. Dakar’s large-scale road projects were just as much about rationalizing present hardship, I argue, as they were about professing spectacular expectations for an impossibly distant future. The architects of this historical moment saw roads as apolitical facts, disruptions as temporary, and near-future planning as unnecessary – once built, the roads themselves would effect long-term change. Nonetheless, these ethnographic encounters make clear the limits of these rationalizing agendas, highlighting instead the unruliness of the present moment and the incompatibility of Dakar’s experiences and narratives of urban change and state commitment. These observations thus underscore the need for ethnographic research that is attentive to the presentist logics that accompany futuristic visions of infrastructural change. This kind of work might, in turn, illuminate the broader temporal shifts and displacements that result as the once ‘exotic’ rhetorics of neo-liberal restructuring (Guyer 2007) are cemented as standard elements of the global economic landscape.

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ABSTRACT

During his term as President, Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal sought to make tangible and proximal his 'vision' for the country's future through the construction and rehabilitation of vital arteries in the capital, Dakar. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research, this essay takes as its focus these ambitious road projects and their local interpretations and everyday effects. I argue that Dakar's infrastructural transformation made spectacularly visible not only distant and implausible futures but also a very particular vision of the present that rationalized, emphasized, and even celebrated the everyday hardships wrought by infrastructural change. Avowedly ahistorical and centred squarely on the individual, these discourses of hardship cast infrastructural change as a future-focused project brought about through 'temporary' inconveniences and disruptions endured for the sake of the nation. What emerges from this analysis is a more complex view of neo-liberal reform and urban change in contemporary Africa.

RÉSUMÉ

Durant sa présidence, le Sénégalais Abdoulaye Wade a cherché à rendre tangible et proximale sa « vision » du futur du pays en construisant et en réaménageant de grandes artères dans la capitale, Dakar. S'inspirant de nombreuses recherches ethnographiques, cet essai porte sur ces projets routiers ambitieux, leurs interprétations locales et leur impact au quotidien. L'auteur soutient que la transformation infrastructurelle de Dakar a rendu spectaculairement visibles non seulement des futurs éloignés et invraisemblables, mais aussi une vision très particulière du présent qui a rationalisé, souligné et même célébré les difficultés du quotidien provoquées par le changement infrastructurel. Manifestement anhistoriques et carrément centrés sur l'individu, ces discours de la difficulté présentent le changement infrastructurel comme un projet orienté vers le futur engendré au travers d'inconvénients et de perturbations « temporaires » endurés pour le bien de la nation. Il ressort de cette analyse une vue plus complexe de la réforme néolibérale et du changement urbain en Afrique contemporaine.