

BOOK REVIEW

Caroline Melly. *Bottleneck: Moving, Building, & Belonging in an African City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. References. Index. \$32.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-226-48890-5.

Having the opportunity to review an academic book that reads as a novel is quite an exceptional experience, but it happened to me with Caroline Melly's *Bottleneck: Moving, Building, & Belonging in an African City*. From the very first page, this lyrically written anthropological study grasps the reader's attention with a rich description of a conversation which took place in a traffic jam in Dakar between a taxi driver and the author on the way to her internship at the Senegalese agency charged with large scale investments and public works (APIX: Agence Nationale Chargée de la Promotion d'Investissement et des Grand Travaux). On the road blocked by *embouteillages*, translated by the author from French as "bottlenecks," Melly realizes that instead of presenting a situation that one should desperately try to avoid, the *embouteillages* offer a unique ethnographic fieldwork site to capture the changing nature of citizenship and governance in the structurally adjusted city of Dakar.

Around the time of Melly's main fieldwork stays in 2006 and 2007, large public works projects to improve the traffic circulation in Dakar, in itself a geographically bottlenecked peninsula, had only led to worsening traffic jams. Bottlenecks had invaded almost every part of life in the city; they became infused in daily greetings, and at the same time, the migrant-investor program at APIX had to deal with a myriad of bureaucratic *embouteillages*, from paper pile-ups to more restricting migration regulations. The strength of "bottleneck" both as a theoretical concept and an analytical device is that it acts as the (temporary) antipode of two other key concepts on the nexus of migration and urban studies, namely "mobility" and "infrastructure." Yet, instead of considering bottlenecks as failed infrastructure and mobility plans, Melly convincingly conceptualizes *embouteillages* as a condition of infrastructures in overload, bringing the movement of ideas, capital, and people to a temporary standstill, yet without losing the potential for possible brighter futures. Hence,

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bottlenecks rather form a sign of too much aspiration of all sorts, both in everyday life and in its governing, rather than too little. Seeing Dakar through the bottleneck metaphor thus illuminates both the way urban residents navigate perpetual uncertainty in the present tense and how they anticipate and plan for grand futures (17). Melly's sophisticated description of the paradoxes of contemporary urban belonging in Dakar forms a very original addition to an emerging scholarship that breaks with reductionist accounts of infrastructural failure in African cities.

It is very revealing how Melly connects the destabilizations caused by the structural adjustment programs of the last few decades in Dakar to new dynamics of transnational migration. This is perhaps the thread that weaves all the chapters together, ranging from the often empty and unfinished, yet ambitious, "bottlenecked houses" funded by the Senegalese diaspora which are drastically and definingly changing the urban landscape (Chapter 3), to more institutional bottlenecks preventing the APIX Diasporic Entrepreneur program from transforming remitting migrants into large scale-investors (Chapter 4). Chapter Three ("Inhabiting Inside-Out Houses"), which was to me the most captivating, outstandingly demonstrates not only how transnational migrants fill gaps in housing that the structurally adjusted city does not address, but also how these unfinished, unruly, and uncompleted constructions "offer a glimpse not of abandoned projects or goals left unaccomplished, but of what *could be*; they foreground latent possibilities and future articulations while obscuring present impossibilities" (92). As also highlighted in the rich scholarship on remittance housing and urbanism—yet not cited in Melly's book—the "inside-out houses" challenge Eurocentric conceptualizations of housing by inverting private-public relations and highlighting the Western preoccupation with finished structures. They also turn experiences of belonging inside out, as they show that "one must in fact *migrate abroad* to be fully present in Dakar" (93).

The book closes with an inquiry into the applicability of the conceptual framework of "bottleneck" to other geographical contexts in an attempt to build cultures of theorizing which appreciate a broader geographical diversity of "urban starting points." This brings us to the coronavirus, the pandemic which has been "bottlenecking" the entire world now for more than two years, and which perhaps also prevented this book from receiving the attention it deserves. During the coronavirus pandemic, in an American city close to the author's place of residence the subprime mortgage crisis had by the time Melly was finishing her fieldwork in Africa around 2007, just as in Dakar, resulted in landscapes of emptied houses and bottlenecked dreams of homeownership. To a certain degree, this effort in deprovincializing African experiences reads as a somewhat obligatory passage within an otherwise incredibly original book. Yet, it reaffirms, perhaps not unnecessarily, that African cities are not less global than others—quite the contrary—and that decades of neoliberal adjustment

programs have led to global bottlenecked conditions that are hardly particular to Dakar.

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