

Adventure Capital: Migration and the Making of an African Hub in Paris



Julie Kleinman

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In *Adventure Capital*, Julie Kleinman explores how West African men support one another in an unusual ethnographic site: the international crossroads of Gare du Nord in Paris. Kleinman does so using the framework of “adventurer”—a term long used among Western Africans to denote the journey or rite of passage of their migrations. For many migrants living on the margins of urban life, the idiom of adventure—not abjection—more aptly characterizes their lives and struggles. The notion of “migration as adventure” captures the historical tradition of journeying in the Western Sahel, in which migration is considered a necessary phase of life. The Gare du Nord, one of Europe’s primary transit hubs, is a site of social opportunity for the men Kleinman meets—site for carrying out the adventures and of forging lasting connections that might enable future mobility. From finding temporary work and housing to picking up women, adventurers use their social networks at the Gare to produce “adventure capital,” despite legal, social, and economic marginalization.

The station, however, is also a border zone, complete with the trappings of border enforcement. Military patrols, customs agents, immigration officers, national and railway police, and private security guards patrol. Migrants battle extreme racial profiling and segregation, built into the very design of public spaces in France. They do so in the quest for an alternative form of integration to the “colour-blind” model that the French state purports to uphold: a highly controlled version of diversity that discounts heterogeneity. It is in this way, Kleinman suggests, that West African men present more meaningful models of migrant integration that cut across national, racial, ethnic, and class boundaries.

Kleinman takes the Gare du Nord as an embodiment of “the way borders, state policy, urban public space, and migration intersect in France” (9), which allows her to chart the social and physical infrastructures that West African migrants navigate. The survival strategies of adventurers in navigating their migrant livelihoods are labelled the “Gare du Nord method.” Kleinman draws on ethnographic fieldwork in the station over 18 months, creating her own social networks and tracing threads and leads, much like her protagonists. This is coupled with archival research into blueprints, records, and correspondence associated with the Gare, an internship with the Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer—France’s state-owned railway company—interviewing

transportation architects, accompanying railway police on patrols, and eventual fieldwork in Mali to follow her interlocutors’ return journeys.

Kleinman’s book begins with a historical analysis of the Gare’s construction in the nineteenth century as a deeply segregated space. At that time, architectural strategies of containment maintained separations between the middle/higher classes, assumed to be taking the high-speed trains, and the urban poor and regional migrant workers using the commuter lines. These techniques and aggressive forms of policing later moved to colonial subjects and non-European workers as the new “dangerous others,” who purportedly threatened the national order. Delving into the spatial divisions, policing tactics, and ideas of difference built into the Gare takes Kleinman into an exploration of how West African migrants make social ties in and outside the station to support their survival in Europe. This exploration includes a close analysis of the 2007 “revolt”—represented in media and political narratives as a “riot”—that took place following police brutality against a ticketless Black Metro rider. Kleinman uses the incident to exemplify contradictions of the French Republic narrative of inclusion: where racial differences are denied, despite the reality of extreme racial prejudice. Adventurers must tirelessly evade the police, ticket controllers, surveillance cameras, and a distrusting public fed with representations of Black men as dangerous to the French public order.

By exploring these urban practices, Kleinman pushes us to rethink the factors behind international migration beyond merely seeking citizenship and socioeconomic benefits. This is an important contribution, and the framework of migrant-as-adventurer counters depictions of vulnerable migrant or refugee suffering. Likewise, Kleinman’s emphasis on how migrants negotiate pathways to integration through their own social practices is a counterpoint to the state-imposed multicultural models, particularly when West African migrants are often stigmatized as refusing assimilation into French society. However, Kleinman runs the risk of overly elevating the concept of adventure. This can push the legitimate economic motives of the men to the background, along with their struggles to obtain residential legality. It also raises ethical quandaries about the ethnographic documentation and framing of such practices. Even as the adventurer framework combats representations of abjection, could it

also inadvertently reinforce populist negative representations of migrants?

Kleinman uses the adventure-as-method as universally rooted in West African male traditions, yet how does this framework apply to migrants from other regions or to women? Migration patterns show an increase in independent female migration from West African countries to France, but in *Adventure Capital*, discussions of racial boundaries are prioritized over gender. What onward-looking strategies are then developed by women in this context? More so, for Kleinman's adventurers, gender norms—such as being a household provider and returning home as a marriageable man—go uncontested. The xenophobia and racism in France become Kleinman's main critiques, rather than a fuller picture of how masculinity, as much as constructions of Blackness and Africanness, shapes adventuring and become a site for social change.

Adventure Capital is a beautifully written and an empirically rich journey into the pathways of West African men, in spite of extreme hostilities and uncertain futures. It makes it possible to reimagine how meaningful forms of living together could look. This has been all the more pressing in the global COVID-19 pandemic, as many politicians have retreated into ideas of racial difference, continuing to play on anxieties of the racialized others, foreigners, and their diseases. Such ideologies of difference, where “undesirable” migrants are racialized as people of colour, fail to advance, in adventurers' terms, new strategies for creating meaningful relationality.

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