



Book Review

Adventure Capital: Migration and the Making of an African Hub in Paris. Julie Kleinman. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. 224 pp.

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This book has, in a way, two poles. Julie Kleinman starts with a commentary on the monumental railroad terminals in France, from their mid-19th-century beginning in industrial and stratifying Europe to their expansion and renovation in the 20th century, including their recent transformation under commercializing if democratizing impulses. She then proceeds to contemporary African migration and a set of West African migrant men who spend their days in the Gare du Nord, a major railroad terminal in Paris, in order to find jobs, meet European women, socialize with each other, and spend leisure time. The former part summarizes a body of scholarly work on the social history of railroad travel and urban planning that possesses its own appeal, but the latter part on African migrants will probably attract greater professional interest from academic anthropologists.

The sub-Saharan migrants in France on which Kleinman builds her study are a narrow circle: men from Mali and eastern Senegal who come from different ethnic backgrounds but share many cultural and other social traits. They are mostly in their thirties, single, Muslim without being very observant, speaking as their native tongue varieties of language of the Mande phylum or Fulfulde. They have little formal education, an attribute possessed by the Ivorian and Cameroonian migrants with whom they don't socialize, but act as hip men in full purchase of the means and ways of modern European urban life. Kleinman follows the personal histories of a handful of these men for a number of years, even makes a trip to the home country with a privileged interlocutor, but her interactions with them in Paris seem limited to the hours they spend in the public space. This appears to be a methodological preference assumed by choice, but it imposes limits on the resulting ethnography, compared to what would be expected from conventional fieldwork, without evident advantage. The author knows and explains West African cultural variabilities and understands the banter and jokes when her subjects play on mutual ethnic stereotypes in

their conversations. Yet the possible relevance that many of these men are of Soninke or Fulbe background, wandering peoples who represent the consummate Other to the village farmer majority of West Africa, is not fully addressed in the book.

There may be other differentiating factors. Migration involves self-selection, international migration an even stronger dose of it, and for the African migrants in France spending days hanging out in the Gare du Nord is the choice of only an infinitesimal proportion. Representativity cannot therefore be the aim in Kleinman's choice of subject. Nonetheless, statistical preponderance is not the only measure, because outlying cases can also be revealing. Kleinman, in dialogue with recent literature, develops insights into the wishes and goals of these migrant men when they undertook their risky journeys at significant cost to themselves or their relatives, then for long stretches of time endured the hardships and indignities of undocumented migrants in Europe. She also presents glimpses of contrasting approaches to the migration predicament: the hip-hop-dressing young man versus the hardworking absentee head of family, who after years of harvesting tomatoes in the farms of Spain graduates to the Parisian terminal and manages to carve out at his relatively advanced age a job for himself as a baggage carrier.

Spending more time outside the terminal in the worker dormitories, in the low-rent apartments shared by large numbers of bachelors, or yet in the migrant communities that include spouses and children might have exposed other models, alternative trajectories. This issue bears on an authorial choice reflected in the title of the book. Throughout the text, the migrants are dubbed adventurers, a translation of the French *aventuriers*, which in turn is assumed to be equivalent to a Manding term—*tunga na den*—that the author's interlocutors offered as a source. Kleinman notes that the French and English cognates do not mean exactly the same thing, and she also explains at one point the true meaning of the supposed African source: "people who live in a foreign land." The discrepancies built into this Anglo-Franco-Mande series of translations are no further taken into account, probably because of the influence of a spate of French-language scholarly commentary, which is engaging in itself, on the figure of the *aventurier* in West African urban pop culture.

The problem with equating adventurer and migrant as synonyms, however, is the little overlap in meaning they

possess: the Manding term incorporates mobility but has no connotation of adventure. The equivalence offered by Kleinman's African interlocutors could more properly be treated as interpretation or even advocacy. Losing sight of this, we miss the fact that some may value *adventure* for its implications of daring and enterprise, while others use the same term as criticism to indicate a lack of responsibility and an untoward desire for self-gratification. A coincidence that resonates with what attracts some migrant men to the Gare du Nord: *aventure* has ironically another meaning in French, that of a fling, generally an extramarital affair—not a condition that many pious Senegalese and Malians would be proudly associated with.

The richest, most informative, and most rewarding part of this book is the last chapter, "The Ends of Adventure." In it we find an appreciation of the long-term desires of the African men who form the cast of this study, and they chime with what research discovers elsewhere. One instance would be the aspiration toward recognition as successful seniors in their community of birth (which finds graphic expression also in fiction, for example, in

protagonist Mory's daydreams in Djibril Diop Mambéty's celebrated 1973 film classic, *Touki Bouki*). To achieve that recognition, the migrants engage in those interminable projects of house building in their home country—but not necessarily in their home village.

We also learn about the short-term advantages for undocumented migrants of even fleeting relations with white women in France or the way the birth of an unplanned child with a French consort may help resolve residency problems without bringing paralyzing responsibilities, and we learn how such relations represent moral and practical perils for the migrants' longer-term goals. And incidentally, we learn about the astonishing global reach, in remote places on the African continent as well as elsewhere on the planet, of some of these migrants' networks of relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Kleinman conveys much of this with a style that relies on aphorisms and epigrammatic quotes instead of a dedication to an elaborate network analysis kind of description or to conceptual precision and clear exposition, but maybe this is the trend and another way that this book is very much of its time.