

**Life (and Limb) in the Fast-Lane:  
Disposable People as Infrastructure in Kampala's Boda Boda Industry**

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Abstract: Motorcycle taxis, dubbed boda bodas, constitute a vital aspect of Kampala's transportation infrastructure, yet the industry is perpetually precarious, threatened with wholesale eviction. Moreover, drivers' lives and bodies are continually put at risk by the city's traffic. Through a relational approach to ontology, this article asks how the boda boda industry comes into being and endures, what forms of vulnerability it entails, and what experiences, relations, and forms of urban life it produces. It argues that three forms of disposability structure and arise from the industry - structural unemployment, embodied vulnerability, and infrastructural displacement. Infrastructural violence, it is argued, must be considered when describing and theorizing people as infrastructure. The article examines how boda boda drivers' shared condition of insecurity and disposability generates intense forms of sociality, solidarity, mutual obligation, recognition, and urban vitality.

Keywords: Infrastructure, Vulnerability, Disposability, Mobility, Ontology, Uganda

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On the night of June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013, an explosion rocked Kampala's Northern Bypass. A private car collided with an oil tanker, rupturing its tank and causing it to leak fuel into the nearby wetland. A few boda boda (motor-cycle taxi) drivers nearby noticed and took advantage of the situation, following the tanker to try to collect petrol in jerrycans. Others joined in, using helmets, plastic water bottles, and bare hands to scoop up the fuel. Some phoned colleagues, inviting them to partake in the illicit flow. This expression of the solidarity within the industry turned against drivers, however, when a spark caught, igniting the evaporated petrol vapor that

saturated the air, and the entire area went up in flames. Forty-two people, most of them boda boda drivers, died in the fire.

In the aftermath of the fire, the dead boda boda drivers were decried in the media as irresponsible thieves who died because of foolishness and greed. Commentators cited their deaths as evidence of the “the bankruptcy of our morals” (*The East African*, July 6, 2013). When the president offered five million Shillings (US\$2000) as compensation to families of the victims, he was attacked for “validating hooliganism” by an irate letter writer concerned with the fact that “the fuel at Namungoona [the site of the accident] was not free; it had/has an owner who pays taxes used to surface the road on which the boda bodas ride” (*The Daily Monitor*, July 4, 2013). Disregarding the value of their own lives, driven by poverty to taking extreme risks, sacrificing everything for the sake of a few thousand shillings, and ignoring the strictures of property law, drivers embodied the forces of disorder often seen as threats to the moral foundations of the Ugandan social order. The debate about the accident turned on the question of whether drivers were greedy looters, or, if poverty was a sufficient rationale for drivers to risk their lives for a jerrycan full of petrol (*The Daily Monitor*, July 1, 2013). Trying to strike a populist, yet paternal, note, President Museveni visited the accident site to express his condolences and to caution “the youth against living recklessly, [urging] them to engage in income generating activities that can improve their lives” (*The New Vision*, July 1, 2013).

For many Kampala youth, the boda boda business is just such an activity. Boda bodas are motorcycle taxis operated primarily by young men.<sup>i</sup> They make up a critical element of Kampala’s transportation infrastructure, extending the city’s mini-bus routes and cutting through its daily traffic jams. Boda bodas are ubiquitous in Kampala. No one knows exactly how many there are in the city; estimates range from 30,000 to 300,000. In a city of approximately 1.6

million people, this means that potentially as many as one in five Kampalans is a boda boda driver.<sup>ii</sup> Boda bodas do not simply use infrastructure, but *become* a substantial component of it. The boda boda industry attests to the remarkable capacity of people, assembled as infrastructure, to provide vital services, enhance urban mobilities, create livelihoods, and improvise new forms of urban life. It also discloses the violence that inheres in the instrumentalization of human life as people become means to ends, the platform upon which urban life can unfold.

Ontological instability is not the peculiar characteristic of exotic African cities, always discursively tethered to the sign of crisis (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). Drawing on feminist and post-colonial science studies, this article takes ontological instability as its starting point and seeks to describe the ways in which stability is achieved, tentatively and precariously as people become infrastructure.<sup>iii</sup> Accounting for power is vital for describing such stabilization. As such, this approach is inherently relational, predicated on the idea that “relata do not precede relations” (Barad 2007: 334), that people and things come into being, cohere, and stabilize through relations, that the distinctions between entities are political effects rather than pre-discursive given, and that ontologies are simultaneously material and moral in ways that are structured by racialized and colonial hierarchies of being (Fanon 1967). Social struggles in contemporary Kampala revolve around competing understandings of what a city is and what forms of life are properly urban. Attending to such ontological plurality (within rather than across societies) then becomes critical to understanding unfolding forms of historical injustice and material inequality. As the contributions to this volume illustrate, examining the precarious, material, and plural ways in which urban worlds are made and unmade is far from apolitical. In the context of an unevenly fragile urban environment, then, this article asks how boda boda infrastructure comes

into being and endures, what forms of vulnerability it entails, and what experiences, relations, and forms of urban life and vitality it, in turn, produces.

The explosion at Namugooona dramatized the dynamics of disposability in Kampala's boda boda industry. While in the everyday operations of the industry, risk is distributed in less spectacular but no less fatal ways, the explosion made visible the complex entanglements of poverty, unemployment, infrastructure, planning, mobility, risk, morality, and materiality through which the business has emerged. This article describes the more commonplace and uneventful forms of infrastructural violence and vulnerability that drivers contend with on a daily basis. Judith Butler observes that vulnerability affords the insight that "there are others out there on whom my life depends" (2004: xii) and can thus serve as an occasion to cultivate an ethics of mutuality. Yet this mutuality is not guaranteed. It is mediated by urban infrastructures and patterns of recognition that unevenly distribute being. Disposability is an ontological condition of paradoxical indispensability and superfluity that is differentially produced in diverse material contexts. Building on Butler's observations, I consider vulnerability not as a primary human condition, but as something historically materialized and distributed. Under what conditions can such ontological exposure be recognized, by whom, and to what ends? In other words, what can be made of disposability, besides more disposability?

I argue that boda boda infrastructure is shaped by, and in turn produces, three forms of disposability: surplus, embodiment, and displacement. First, boda drivers are part of the urban surplus population, unable to find work and forced to seek precarious livelihoods in the so-called informal sector due to structural mass-unemployment. Second, the conditions of work in the boda boda business unevenly expose drivers to death, injury, and harm, their lives and bodies vulnerable to the diffuse and heterogeneous assemblage of physical infrastructures, regulations,

driving patterns, mechanical issues, and planning histories, materialities of road decay and repair that constitute Kampala's traffic. Third, the industry is, as a whole, disposable, vulnerable to displacement in the name of public order. As the Namuwoongo explosion demonstrated, however, boda drivers are not atomized by their vulnerability. Rather, as they participate in the making of urban infrastructure, they are drawn and held together, helping each other when opportunities for generosity arise and generating powerful forms of solidarity that interrupt facile attempts to cast them as a disorderly nuisance.

I use the phrase 'disposable people as infrastructure' as a critical supplement to AbdouMalik Simone's widely cited idea of "people as infrastructure" (2004). Although, as I argue below, Simone's use of the concept does not attend sufficiently to infrastructural violence, the term is very suggestive, and when used to describe more typical infrastructural sectors (transport, waste management, sanitation, etc.) it makes visible the ways human lives, labor and bodies that are not only enrolled in but *constitute* infrastructure (cf. Chalfin 2014; Fredericks 2013). Ontologically exploring promises of connectivity and mobility along with the ever-present danger of dislocation or mortality contributes to the ethnographic and historical literature on African roads,<sup>iv</sup> by describing how the ambivalences of the road – its violence and its generativity – are assembled, inhabited, understood, and challenged by the often precarious people who become infrastructure.

I began research on the Boda Boda industry in September 2013, amidst the build up to a registration and 'streamlining' exercise proposed by the Kampala Capital City Authority. For two months I spent three days a week with a group of 11 drivers at their workplace, Katale [market] Stage.<sup>v</sup> My research continued through June 2014, during which time I conducted group interviews with drivers at 15 other stages around the city as well as in-depth interviews

with leaders of Boda Boda 2010, an organization that emerged as the most vocal representative of the boda boda industry. In addition, I attended rallies, ‘sensitization’ events, and mass registration exercises organized by the municipal government and gathered an extensive archive of press coverage of the industry.

### **Interstitial Infrastructure**

Contemporary Kampala is undergoing a dramatic process of techno-political transformation, as the municipal government, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), embarks on an ambitious program to improve infrastructure, regulate the informal economy, and bring order to a city they approach as chaotic and unruly. No figure embodies disorder, or *kavuyo*, more than the city’s fleet of boda boda drivers.<sup>vi</sup> Charismatic icons of subaltern mobility and urban masculinity,<sup>vii</sup> boda bodas assert a powerful presence in the city, carving out a highly visible economic niche in the interstices of the city’s infrastructure.

The boda boda business has emerged in relation to changing national border regimes. Bicycles facilitated the illicit export of coffee across the Uganda-Kenya border in the *magendo* [black market] economy that flourished under Idi Amin’s regime, with its strict controls on coffee marketing and exports. The industry’s myth – repeated by drivers and the press – holds that bicyclists smuggled coffee across the closed border, shouting “border border” (which morphed to become boda boda), to alert farmers of their services. Another account points to origins in the border logistics of the 1960s and 1970s when a policy of free movement for East African citizens eased border crossing but doing so involved walking along a stretch of road between the Kenyan border and Uganda border control at Busia that was off-limits to motor-vehicles. Local residents with bicycles operated in this liminal zone, ferrying travelers from border to border (Malmberg

Calvo 1994: 22-3). The neo-liberal reforms initiated by Yoweri Museveni's government in the 1990s opened the nation's borders, allowing an influx of second-hand Japanese, and then, in the 2000s, low-cost Indian-manufactured motorcycles that have motorized and transformed the industry (Kumar 2011).

Complex financial arrangements (as well as an extensive second-hand market) enable young men to access these machines that, at the time of research, retailed new at US \$1300. These arrangements include weekly rental agreements, land-secured loans from predatory lenders who double in property speculation on the peri-urban fringe, investments cobbled together from kinship networks, and rent-to-own programs initiated by social enterprises. These financial arrangements assemble and distribute risk, responsibility, and harm in ways that expose drivers to extreme forms of dispossession, as when a traffic accident or a theft can cost a family ancestral land used to secure a loan. As the industry has grown, a proliferation of semi-state regulatory authorities (Roitman 2005) have emerged, seeking to represent and regulate the boda boda business, electing leaders, designated stage locations, issuing identity documents, and collecting dues in exchange for the promise to cover drivers' medical or funeral expenses. Many of these associations are linked to the president's political party, whereas drivers themselves are widely held to be supporters of the opposition. An important voting bloc, boda bodas have become central players in electoral populism and urban protest (Carbone 2005; Goodfellow & Titeca 2012).

Kampala has a love-hate relationship with boda bodas and the chaos they embody. A high-end rooftop bar and restaurant in the once prestigious Garden City shopping mall took the name Boda Boda, trading on the industry's allure of urbanity, mobility, and subaltern charisma. Boda bodas feature prominently in photographs, paintings, t-shirts, and branding campaigns that

aim to present a distinctive vision of Kampala. For passengers, riding boda bodas can be terrifying, exhilarating, and immensely pleasurable. To go with the anxiety provoked by weaving through moving traffic, there is the satisfaction of cruising through a jam, the thrill of accelerating onto an open road, the relief of not walking up a steep hill, the simple enjoyment of observing street life, and the jovial and joking encounters with chatty and opinionated drivers. Boda bodas provide vital mobility for people in a hurry seeking to cut through congestion, becoming a regular part of the daily commute for large swathes of the city's population. The middle class, in particular, depends on boda boda drivers to sustain their daily existence, providing rides for school-age children, running errands to shops and banks, delivering packages, meals, and money, even paying visits to relatives on behalf of over-extended business people. This dependence, however, comes with a certain level of resentment. Boda bodas emerge as a solution, filling important gaps in the city's infrastructure, but in so doing they have come to be identified with, and held responsible for, those gaps, signaling the failures of development and modernization that the city's middle class media lament and protest.<sup>viii</sup>

### **Staging: Becoming Infrastructure**

Located in an up-market neighborhood five kilometers from the city center, Katale Stage served a diverse clientele including traders and customers from the nearby market, patients and clinical staff from a private hospital, neighborhood residents on the way to and from jobs in town, students staying in the surrounding hostels heading to the nearby business school campus, as well as the myriad others passing through the area to work, visit, or shop. Robert Musooba, the vice-chairman of Katale Stage and my key interlocutor in the industry, introduced me to the stage and its drivers. Eleven men made their living at this stage, parking their bikes on the



concrete and iron blocks they had jointly purchased and installed over the top of a storm drain. The drivers at the stage ranged in age from Denis Kiiza a 17-year old who had been in the business only six months to Tom Mbabali, 42, who had been driving for over a decade.

Stages are the key organizational feature of the boda boda industry, serving as the base from which drivers collect passengers. Like Katale Stage, they typically comprise ten to twenty members, though some exceptionally large stages include almost 100. The stage system not only generates intense camaraderie among drivers, but is also seen as a way of building trust and accountability both among drivers and between drivers and the public. Stages are seen by drivers as a mechanism to ensure discipline in the industry. Their elected chairmen enforce self-designed codes of conduct, resolve conflicts between drivers, and represent their interests to local government officials. Stages are socio-material landmarks that position and link drivers, passengers, roads, traffic, and multiple forms of regulation. They stabilize the industry by carving coherent and continuous workspaces from the ever shifting world of traffic, providing a sense of security for both drivers and passengers.

[FIGURE 1]

[FIGURE 2]

Across the street from Katale Stage, taxis stop to pick up and drop off passengers.<sup>ix</sup> The Katale drivers honk, shout '*tugende?*' (we go?), or wave to attract these potential clients. Some drivers wait with their engines running, darting forward to present their services. Others are more relaxed, keeping the bikes on their more stable double kick stands, and sitting back to watch the street and chat with their colleagues. Drivers name a price based on how long the journey will take, current traffic conditions, the price of fuel, the amount of luggage a passenger has, and their assessment of how much they think the client can afford.<sup>x</sup> Taxis ply the city's arterial roads, but

leave passengers short of their final destinations. Most of the trips the Katale Stage drivers make are short jaunts into the surrounding area, extending the public transit system by ferrying passengers up the nearby hills and along the unpaved roads of the residential districts where Taxis do not pass.

Many drivers told me that the appeal of the industry is that it requires little start-up capital and no education. “Boda boda wouldn’t be my choice, but I don’t have any alternative,” said a driver I interviewed at a stage in Central Division. Even so, drivers pointed out that it is a stereotype that they are all uneducated. “There are many teachers who run from teaching and join boda boda,” explained another driver, because “we boda bodas never starve [...] a boda boda can feed five people: the owner’s family, a driver, his family, the folks in the village and even friends who may not have work for a day.” Rather than having to wait for eternally delayed government salaries that fail to keep up with inflation, as teachers do, the boda business provides cash in hand, however little and hard to save. The ability to avoid hunger and to provide sustenance for oneself and one’s family emerges as a vital idiom of responsibility through which boda drivers value their work and evaluate the risks they face. As I discuss below, the idea of feeding people using a bike enmeshed drivers in extended social relations of collective becoming that contrasted dramatically with their on-the-job disposability. Despite the attractive money to be made, drivers are “always on tension.” A driver at a stage in Nakawa Division put it this way: “We work hard but get little. We take long working and at the end we gain little.” Structural unemployment, theorized demographically as the existence of a “surplus-population” (Bauman 2004, Yates 2011), thus serves as a background condition of disposability that shapes the boda boda industry. While stages embed boda infrastructure in the everyday spatial practices and sociality of the city, in traffic, boda drivers are embedded in equally everyday conditions of embodied vulnerability.

**Fatality: Unbecoming Infrastructure**

Boda Boda's disposability is produced both by the materiality of traffic and the moral order that unevenly distributes responsibility and visibility on the road and in public culture. "Other motorists don't value our lives," Robert commented one afternoon as we sat and watched traffic pass by at Katale Stage. "If a taxi knocks a boda boda man, to him he feels that he has not done any wrong. Taxi people don't see us as human beings." Robert's observations suggest the extent to which boda boda drivers are pushed not only to the margins of traffic, but, simultaneously, to the margins of the social categories that hierarchize the value of lives. There are so many boda bodas, and so many more unemployed young men looking to join the business, that boda drivers see that their deaths barely register, hardly troubling the conscience of other drivers. Indeed, a 2015 editorial, "Boda Boda Carnage Now Out of Hand" laments the commonplace fatality of boda boda infrastructure, but names as its victims three young educated women, boda passengers who had bright futures (*The Observer*, March 4, 2015). Despite acknowledging that the accidents that led to their deaths were caused by motorcycles being struck by other forces (a truck, a taxi, a flood), the drivers' deaths are not mourned. Their lives remain unrecognizable within the framework of dreams, families, and formal employment that render their passengers grievable. For many boda boda drivers, this status was understood as an effect of their position in the urban class structure, the materialities of traffic, and the moral distribution of responsibility and blame that informs policing. A driver in a busy industrial section of Rubaga Division put it succinctly: "The vehicle drivers despise us. If a car driver sees that it is a boda boda, he cannot reduce speed but just squeezes him off the road. Cars are for big people so no one can touch them. They hit us and most of the time they run away. And when you

are dead nobody follows the case.” Here, bodas’ vulnerability and smallness is contrasted to the impunity with which “big people”, those with money or influence, can act. Disposability is understood to inhere in the gaze and world-view of other motorists and is reinforced by the state insofar as the police fail to take interest in boda boda drivers’ deaths. The term “despise” here is a rough translation of the Luganda phrase *okuyisaamu amaaso* which means “to look through someone,” commonly used to refer to ways in which a person with a more elevated position in a hierarchy sees and disdains those below them. This formulation speaks to drivers’ sense of something more radical than invisibility: non-being. In Fanon’s terms, Boda Bodas thus offer “no ontological resistance in the eyes of” traffic (Fanon 1967: 110).

Similarly, many drivers I interviewed complained that in addition to police assuming that they were responsible for any collision, medical institutions are equally quick to blame drivers for their injuries, and apportion care based on this economy of blame. “At Mulago hospital, [Uganda’s national referral hospital] if the medical staff discovers that you are a boda boda cyclist, they ignore treating you, for a time,” reported a driver at Katale Stage. A driver working at a stage that rents its small piece of land from the national referral hospital itself explained that “if one goes to Mulago and says ‘I am a boda boda driver’ they don’t attend to you. You only have to say that ‘I was hit by a boda boda’.” A driver in Rubaga Division expressed a more extreme fear: “today as we speak, if a boda boda driver gets in an accident, [doctors] can even break his legs because they want to reduce our number.” I have no evidence to either dismiss or substantiate these claims, but these assumptions about the ways in which care and blame are distributed inform the ways in which boda boda drivers interact with the nation’s medical establishment and seek treatment. Moreover, they speak to the ways in which boda drivers understand their position in Kampala as both physically and morally marginalized. It is part of a

broader pattern whereby drivers, seen as urban blight and *kavuyo*, are ‘despised’ and rendered less than fully human by the fellow road users and the major institutions of the nation and the city (the police, hospitals, municipal authorities, and the media).

As Gabriel Klaeger notes, one of the “most disturbing feature of African roads is perhaps their seemingly pathological capacity to cause injury and death to both travelling and roadside-dwelling publics” (2013: 360). Indeed, a World Health Organization (2013) study notes a reported 2,954 road traffic fatalities in a single year in Uganda. Such statistics do not, however, capture the uneven distribution of vulnerability on the road. As a condition of exposure, vulnerability is an effect of specific arrangements of people and things, forms of regulation, patterns of movement, and infrastructural investment or abandonment. Most basically, Kampala’s roads are overburdened, both with vehicles and with multiple, competing enactments of who and what road infrastructure is for.<sup>xi</sup> Planned for a population of, under 10,000 in 1928 (Mirams 1930) they currently serve a city of 1.6 million. In cutting through congestion, boda’s primary function as a form of public transportation, boda boda drivers occupy the margins of the resultant congestion, squeezed between larger vehicles, lingering in blind spots, and forced to the edges of the road. Bodies on motorcycles are more exposed to the surfaces of the road and to other vehicles – themselves often equipped with cattle grills to protect auto-bodies at the expense of human ones. Potholes, puddles, gravel, and mud are more risky for motorcycles than cars, and so boda drivers often swerve to avoid them; even experienced drivers with a mastery of the city’s roads can be caught unawares. Boda drivers’ incentive to pay the daily rent on their bikes – or to pay back loans guaranteed with familial land as collateral – often pushes them to take risky short cuts, cross red-lights, and ignore one-way traffic flows.<sup>xii</sup> The Bajaj Boxer, the bike of choice in the industry (due to its low cost, fuel economy, maneuverability, and wide availability of spare

parts and skilled mechanics) also contributes to drivers' vulnerability insofar as its small 100cc engine struggles to keep up with traffic at high speed and its extended seat (an advertised feature) encourages and enables overloading that further slows and unbalances the bikes. Seen thus, vulnerability is infrastructural, a socio-technical construction that unevenly distributes risk, injury and death.

How are these deaths, and the vulnerabilities to which they attest, represented by the national media? What are the lived effects of such representations? Traffic accidents are a standard feature of the Kampala press. Rendered as a gory spectacle, photos of bus and taxi crashes command much attention on the city's pavement newspaper kiosks. Boda deaths are reported less often, typically when a report is released on their aggregate number, or in a week with an irregularly high number of fatalities. In 2013, out of 2900 road fatalities, 641 boda boda drivers died. In 2012 the number was 571 (*The Observer*, February 23, 2014). These numbers are provided as self-evident demonstrations of the dangers of the industry, but are cited without context: are they national or urban? Do they include passengers, or only boda drivers? Are these only cases that passed through major hospitals? These deaths are attributed to drivers' indiscipline and the absence of helmets, locating responsibility for fatalities solely on boda boda drivers. The fact that boda bodas are *involved* in a high percentage of fatal road accidents is conflated with the argument that boda bodas *cause* these accidents. Regardless of cause, the fact is that in any collision with a speeding commuter taxi, an intercity bus, an oversized SUV, an 18-wheeler, or any of the other vehicles that constitute Kampala traffic, a boda boda driver and his passengers will fare the worst.

This consequential rhetorical slippage is characterized in a report from Mulago Hospital's orthopedic ward. Tebandeke, an injured driver, recalls being struck head on by a drunk driver.

“That is the price you pay for riding a boda boda,” he laments. The article quickly transitions from this vignette that illustrates boda boda drivers’ vulnerability, to the illegal practices of motorists, to the statement that boda bodas have become “a leading cause of accidents.” (*The New Vision*, June 6, 2013). It goes on to detail the disproportionate costs that the national hospital accrues treating boda boda accidents. While representations of the other can give face to vulnerability, constituting a reciprocal gaze from which the recognition of interdependence and obligation follow, as Butler notes, “personification sometimes performs its own dehumanization” (2004: 141). Fanon, for instance, theorizes the constitution, by the white gaze, of black personhood such that a person’s being-as-human is always in doubt, if not disavowed (Fanon 1967). The recognition of personhood is no simple means of security as divergent modes of personification contribute to the construction of disposability. Such is the case in media accounts of the boda boda industry. Although boda boda drivers protest their invisibility in traffic, when they do become visible, it is not as grievable lives, but as urban pathology. Bodas come to personify chaos, injury, and death. They are cast as morally culpable and responsible for their own injuries, having engaged willfully in risky behaviors. Their vulnerability becomes, not a grounds for social solidarity, but another reason for disposability and displacement.

This stark assessment of the multiple embodied vulnerabilities drivers navigate illustrates the violence that shapes people as infrastructure. Simone (2004) makes the important argument that, contrary to the Euro-centric assumptions of urban theory and development studies that apprehend African urbanisms in terms of lack and failure, the activities taking place under the catch-all term of ‘urban informality’ provide vital resources and connections that sustain social life, mobility, and futurity. For Simone, people are infrastructure insofar as the tentative connections forged between them serve as a platform or basis for urban life. However, Simone is

overly celebratory of these arrangements, using the term ‘collaboration’ to describe what often amounts to mutual instrumentalization and exploitation. Conceptually, his notion of people as infrastructure is loosely defined and is hard to distinguish from the sphere of life anthropologists may be accustomed to calling, simply, exchange.

Disposable people as infrastructure is a certainly more than an absence or lack. It is a means of making a life within highly unequal cities. But it is also a form of necro-politics (Mbembe 2003), an uneven exposure to death that, at a global scale, disproportionately discards certain lives, particularly young black lives, from the institutions of social and economic (re)production. Without the aspect of disposability, I suggest, Simone’s account of people as infrastructure is unable to take up the ways in which these infrastructural worlds can be experienced as unfair, exclusionary, degraded, and degrading by those who live and work within them.<sup>xiii</sup> In addition to the embodied risks of their work discussed above, boda boda drivers become collectively disposable insofar as municipal planners and political elites call for that wholesale eviction from Kampala in the name of restoring sanity and circulation to a congested city.

## **Decongestion**

Boda bodas gather in busy areas looking for customers and cluster in huge groups at major intersections waiting to cross. But they move. They operate in the margins of congested traffic, squeezed between pavements and passing cars whose drivers leave them little room and honk and swerve if motorcyclists dare occupy the middle of a lane. Boda bodas actually cut through congestion, but are confused with it because of their sheer numbers. Nonetheless, congestion was the primary rationale for the KCCA’s project to “streamline” the boda boda



industry. The KCCA outlined its vision of the industry in a glossy pamphlet that was distributed (although seemingly only to recognized industry leaders and persistent American ethnographers) at the mass registration exercises that took place in the first weeks of November 2013. Filled with images of drivers clad in shiny new helmets and color-coded high-visibility safety jackets, the pamphlet explained that streamlining was taking place so the government could better plan for traffic, reduce congestion, and minimize crime. That boda bodas are a cause of congestion is meant to be understood implicitly.

Registration was the first step in streamlining, and would allow the government to build a database, know the numbers, and better enforce current and future regulations. To register, drivers had to take two passport photos and a letter from their Local Councilor – a common form of identification in the absence of a national ID or widespread use of driver’s licenses – to their local division KCCA office during the month-long registration period. After filling out a form asking for personal information as well as the name of their stage and the registration number of their bike, drivers were issued a receipt. This paper bore the phrase, “Motorcycles not registered may find it IMPOSSIBLE to work in Kampala. THIS IS NOT a license to operate in Kampala.” “Now what does that mean?” inquired a driver at a prestigious stage in Nakawa Division; “It is like someone giving you food, having poured sour substances in it.” This caveat embodies drivers’ fears about the streamlining process: they face registration and regulation without any guarantees. In its first instance, the city’s paperwork explicitly foreclosed the possibility that it would, in any way, secure drivers’ right to operate in the city. The streamlining processes had already been soured. A superficial concern for drivers’ safety was seen to mask municipal predation and eventual displacement.

Drivers feared that registration would inevitably lead to taxation. They objected that the new taxes would make their work unprofitable, forcing them to raise prices, becoming too expensive for much of their clientele. A sanctioned place within the urban order would come at a cost that threatened the viability of the industry. Attesting to the ways in which drivers understand the state as a predatory and exploitative force, a driver explained that the “KCCA cannot do anything if it does not gain anything. [...] government thinks about how it can extract money out of us, instead of developing us.” Drivers did not object to taxes as such, but assumed that they would not see the benefits. Moreover, they resented the way the KCCA saw them simply as an easy to exploit and lucrative source of revenue. Again, attempts at state regulation generated and intensified boda boda coherence and solidarity, as drivers insisted on the vital role played by bodas in urban mobility and on an alternate distribution of responsibility.<sup>xiv</sup>

Boda boda drivers objected to the framing that confuses them with congestion. This is the premise for the entire streamlining exercise and drivers rejected it outright. “A boda can go to town from here and comes back before the car has moved an inch,” another driver, from a distant stage in the peri-urban fringes, told me. He went on to observe that “most cars carry only one person. He will need a parking [spot] for his car, yet there are many people with cars in town. They are more responsible with causing the traffic jam.” This explanation situates traffic as an effect of poor planning; the lack of adequate parking spaces contributes to the crowding of roads, and to the absence of safe pedestrian pathways. Moreover, it refigures the solitary car driver as a selfish cause of congestion. Here, *kavuyo* – the privileging of selfish desires over orderly conduct – can be shifted to describe not the law-breaking boda boda drivers, but the lone motorist, the normative subject and aspirational icon of development around whom traffic planning is based.

Boda drivers explained that their services keep the formal urban economy running: “We have saved so many people from being knifed from jobs when we quickly deliver them to their work places,” explained a driver working in a high-end residential neighborhood. Not only job-creators, boda drivers also constructed themselves as job-savers, a vital and indispensable part of the urban infrastructural landscape. Drivers at one stage in a sprawling unplanned settlement explained how traffic is entangled with urban history. One driver began, “the problem is roads. These roads were constructed during the past regimes, Obote and the British.”<sup>xv</sup> His colleague completed the story, “then there were only two vehicles in the whole village. But now you can find six cars in one fence [at a single house]. But the roads do not change. That is the main cause of the jam.” This account links congestion to changing patterns of consumption, patterns generally taken to be a sign of personal progress and national development. It highlights that urban infrastructure has not seen adequate investment. It brings up the legacies of racialized urban planning under the British, for whom the city was the preserve of the white colonial administrative elite, and not an appropriate settlement for the native population.

[FIGURE 3]

The KCCA’s streamlining exercise deploys classic technologies and ontologies of disciplinary individualization: issuing registration numbers, licensing, amassing a data-base, designating distinct geographies of operation, training, and enforcing myriad regulations that map responsibility onto the persons of boda boda drivers. A streamlined industry would be austere and uniformed, without the excessive numbers and unruly practices that currently define boda boda infrastructure. Streamlined drivers would be ensconced, head to toe, in the helmets, jackets, gloves, and boots demanded by the bevy of new regulations typical of the epidemiological approach to road safety that “disguises, especially in Africa, the infrastructural

politics of automobility” (Lamont and Lee 2015: 483). Streamlining on the street would require a proliferation of paper: registration documents, fines, receipts, ledgers, and licenses. But drivers are familiar with post-colonial fantasies of order that states can muster neither the resources nor the will to enforce. They assume that fantasies of disciplinary regulation will be punctuated by episodes of spectacular penalization, and that the KCCA may, at anytime, resort to a ban. Paradoxically, the ways in which the municipality seeks to recognize boda bodas blurs the line between displacement and creating a place in the urban order. Drivers contest this form of enrollment and demand recognition on other terms. While the KCCA plans locate responsibility in the minds and bodies of individual drivers with calls for more driver education, discipline, and use of protective equipment. Drivers, on the other hand, enact a more diffuse notion of responsibility that positions them as vital both to urban infrastructure and to networks of reciprocity, obligation, and moral entanglement.

### **Responsible Responses to Disposability**

*“These are helpful people whom we should not despise.  
We poor people would not afford the car fees so boda bodas saved us, the poor.  
We should stop despising jobs; these small motor cycles have done a great work.  
Boda bodas have really saved us, the poor people.”*

-Elly Wamala, “Boda Boda Song” (1996, translated from Luganda)

*“Oh, Jenifer [Musisi, KCCA executive director] has intervened in my job, I am finished!  
How am I going to look after my children and home?  
Boda boda, you carried me on your lap but I say ‘bye’ to you.”*

-Suna Meya, “Omulumu Gwange” [My Job] (2013, translated from Luganda)

These two songs, recorded nearly two decades apart, register boda boda drivers’ long-standing struggle against marginalization in, and expulsion from, the city. They speak to the primary constitutive rhetorical strategies and moral values through which boda drivers contest

disposability. The songs highlight the service that bodas provide in making urban mobility attainable for a wide stratum of the city's population and the role that drivers have as providers for their families. In contrast to the individualizing disciplinary distribution of responsibility that inheres in the municipal streamlining project, boda drivers situate themselves in dense and vital relationalities, histories, and urban infrastructures. These work to bring the boda boda industry into the moral center of the city in order to preclude the possibility of disposability at the infrastructural scale.

In response to their shared condition of disposability, drivers have developed a broad sense of solidarity across the industry that is manifested in a range of practices. "I know that whatever problem I get, he also gets," explained a driver in Rubaga Division, "[W]e have no groups of people to plead for us. If a boda boda man fails to help a colleague, nobody else can do it." Striking an unusually combative tone, a young driver in Kawempe Division joked that "if we don't help each other, the taxi people would kill us all. Those people don't take us as humans. That's why we sometimes get together to give them a beating." Boda drivers occasionally participate in the forms of extra-legal justice dubbed lynching or vigilantism. In response to police disinterest in accidents involving motorcycles, drivers would rally together to chase down and surround a vehicle that struck a boda boda and to intimidate or beat its driver. Many drivers I spoke to described this practice as common, but distanced themselves from it, seeing it as a form of indiscipline that tarnishes the image of the industry.

They described other practices of solidarity, however, such as warning each other when there are police checks for helmets or overloaded bikes on the roads. If a driver is in an accident, he will run away from the scene if he can, but drivers from a nearby stage will go and collect his bike and hide it before the police arrive. This ensures that a bike, even one that has been

damaged in a crash, is not impounded and that the driver can escape arrest, avoiding the unaffordable bills to repair a damaged car. This practice occurs regardless of the actual causes of specific accidents, but exists in response to the feeling that police inevitably blame boda drivers, regardless of the facts of the case.

Solidarity in the industry was generally expressed in the idiom of brotherhood: “we look like children born from one mother” noted Tom, gesturing to the others present at Katale Stage. “We are like brothers. Even if I meet a boda boda in Masaka [a city 130 kilometers away], if he is in trouble I must stop to help.” Several drivers recounted receiving help after accidents from other drivers they had never met before, forms of mutual aid that materialized the invocation of kinship. The sense that drivers have a shared condition and a common vulnerability – “that fate can also happen to me at any time,” as Robert put it – motivated them to enact a generalized economy of care, help, and assistance that took the shape of securing each other’s property, transporting each other to clinics, paying medical bills to the extent possible, informing drivers’ stage chairmen of injuries, and attending burials for fallen brothers.

In addition to this kinship among themselves, boda boda drivers stressed their role as providers for their families.<sup>xvi</sup> If the industry were to be evicted, many asked, who would feed their children and pay their school fees, or care for their ailing parents and other kin? Drivers have important responsibilities to fulfill whether or not the industry is allowed to exist. “We will still have to pay rent,” one driver observed. Without the industry, crime in the city would escalate dramatically, many drivers hypothesized, as they would have to find money one way or another and lack the connections and qualifications to enter into formal employment. In this way boda drivers articulated an understanding of their own deracinated class position as a dangerous population. The argument is that without access to land or livelihood (and not motivated to feel a

stringent respect for private property), they pose a threat to the urban order and to the personal security of the population. This threat forms the basis for the claim that they should be included in the city in order to keep it immune from insecurity.

Another driver echoed this sentiment, saying that he “would like the government to restore the factories. It would solve the problem of crowding in the city with what they call ‘idlers’. But now they chase us, but provide no solution.” In this account, the industry is situated within a history of industrial neglect and the ruptured social contract of an earlier era’s modernist notion of urban citizenship via employment. On this view, the state has failed in *its* responsibilities to ensure broad-based growth, drivers pointed out, and the boda boda industry is one of the only available means for them to be productive members of society and to fulfill their own responsibilities as fathers. In meeting their responsibilities to family, drivers enact their humanity and practice the full personhood that is denied to them in traffic. Writing about national road policy in Kenya, Mark Lamont (2013) argues that traffic fatalities are framed as sacrifices to national development. While boda boda drivers’ deaths did not register as sacrifices in national public culture, many drivers I interviewed (and indeed, the few wives and partners I spoke to) shared this sense of sacrifice although they did not nationalize it. Instead, they articulated an understanding of risks taken, and sacrifices potentially made, in the name of children and other relatives. Drivers listed what they had achieved in the industry in these terms, citing children they had been able to move to Kampala and put through school, weddings they had been able to fund, houses they had built in Kampala, and land they had bought in their home villages. In contrast to the individualized responsibility of municipal streamlining, drivers assert their embeddedness in collective forms of becoming, in networks of reciprocal support, and in economies of mutual aid.<sup>xvii</sup>

This notion of collective becoming, and its attendant distribution of responsibility, draws on a conception of personhood that co-exists with but differs, importantly, from the liberal ontologies of the person at work in the disciplinary project of municipal streamlining. To briefly summarize a rich and contentious literature in African philosophy and anthropology, this is a theory of personhood as a relational, processual, and gradually accomplished status that emerges from being embedded within systems of social reproduction (Mbiti 1969; Brown 2004; Menkiti 2004; Kaphagawani 2004). Anthropologists have described the ways in which neoliberal economies undermine the possibilities for social reproduction, causing crises in personhood (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001; White 2010; Weiss 1996). Historically, in central Uganda, personhood has been entangled with kinship, land, the political authority of the Buganda Kingdom, and the spiritual authority of healers (Kodesh 2010; Hanson 2003), a relational mode of being that informs, for example, contemporary charitable practice in Kampala (Scherz 2014). Boda boda drivers enacted and lived both forms of personhood, divided between the time spent in traffic, where they were seen as disposable bodies and a cause of congestion, and at home, where they invested in the domestic and social relations that constitute them as responsible persons. While the municipality and the materialities of traffic render them disposable, boda drivers assert themselves as indispensable to both the city's infrastructural functioning and to their families' wellbeing.

## **Conclusion**

Kampala's congestion illustrates the limits of roads alone to fulfill the promises of speed, connectivity, freedom, and prosperity (Harvey & Knox 2012). Rather than the idealized time-space compression of auto-mobility (Harvey 1990; Featherstone 2004), the city's daily jam



generates a time-space *expansion*, often, it seems, towards infinity.<sup>xviii</sup> The city's infrastructure has not kept pace with the rate of privatized car consumption and the road network materializes incivility, blockage, and friction instead of flow. In this context, boda bodas both fulfill the promise of the road; delivering speed and connectivity, they embody its many moral ambiguities and political ambivalences.

Despite fulfilling the modern promise of speed, bodas are cast as the irrational other to Kampala's modernization. Boda bodas are described as "agents of chaos" or as a kind of "madness" or "craze" that, like an epidemic, is spreading from its Kampala epicenter to the rest of the nation's towns (*The New Vision*, June 6, 2013; *The Guardian*, August 13, 2013). As Daniel Jordan Smith (2014) argues of Nigeria's *okoda* men, motorcycle taxi drivers are icons of the moral ambiguities of urban development and inequality and attract both popular and elite condemnation as embodiments of the immoral circulations of cash, sexuality, and individual consumption, even as drivers engage in nationally shared struggles for survival and redirect their earnings to socially valued ends like marriage, child-rearing, and care for parents. As embodiments of *kavuyo* boda bodas play a crucially productive ontological role as the constitutive other against which visions of a clean, modern, developed, and orderly city are imagined and enacted. In this way, despite the chaos they embody, boda bodas help to stabilize images of the urban future by serving as their opposite. But boda bodas are also a generative feature of Kampalan life in other ways. The industry provides a livelihood for thousands of young men, delivers vital mobility that keeps the city moving, generates thrilling moments of movement, and captures the imagination. It gives rise to dynamic social circulations: to gossip, flirtation, political debate, patronage, and protest, fostering the kinds of interpersonal connections and exchanges that Simone characterizes as "people as infrastructure."

Yet, as this article has argued, in contrast to Simone's (2004) de-materialized account of infrastructure, disposability is both the condition and effect of the boda boda industry. Drivers, I have argued, are triply disposable. First, as members of a floating population anathema to a developmental politics predicated on productivity otherwise they are disposable, surplus to the urban economy's demand for labor. Second, the material assemblage of traffic renders drivers vulnerable to embodied harm and death. Third, cast as a cause of congestion and a scourge on the city, the industry as a whole is insecure, despite being indispensable to so many lives. Potentially subject to wholesale displacement by the municipality in ways that are used to push through disciplinary 'streamlining' projects. Given the ways in which drivers' bodily vulnerability is transformed into calls for expulsion, the ethical challenge for urban theory is to develop accounts of people as infrastructure that neither celebrate these conditions, nor contribute to their disposability.

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## Figures

Figure 1. Drivers at a stage in Nakawa Division (December, 2013).





Figure 2. Drivers wait for a green light to cross Jinja Road (December, 2013).



Figure 3. Global Helmet Vaccine 'Life is Wealth' Campaign Poster (Mar 2013). The text reads: 'Be Wise, Wear a Helmet. Remembering a helmet can save your life. Life is Wealth.' The numbers contrast the modest price of a helmet (US\$16) to the extreme costs of medical care: an operation on the head, an x-ray, a damaged eye (US\$4152). Note that it depicts a single driver against an all white background, without any context. The sign brings together economic and medical disciplines identifying life/health (obulamu means both) as wealth. It urges drivers to be wise, calculate risk, and perform a cost-benefit analysis and invest in their life/health.



<sup>i</sup> Boda boda drivers are also known as boba boda riders, boda boda operators, boda boda cyclists, boda boda men, *ababoda* (boda people), *abana ba boda* (boda boys, literally: children of bodas), or simply as boda bodas. Here, I use the terms driver or boda boda. Local terms for the overall economic practice include boda boda industry, boda boda business, boda boda sector, and again, simply, boda boda. I also use these interchangeably in addition to my own rendering, boda boda infrastructure.

<sup>ii</sup> Although these numbers are almost certainly an exaggeration, this exaggeration attests to boda bodas' sense of ubiquity in the city.

<sup>iii</sup> While the "ontological turn" in anthropology has animated one line of debate, ontology in general can only be understood as a novel disciplinary concern by ignoring decades of scholarship not only in African Studies, as noted in the introduction to this special issue, but also in feminist and medical anthropology, in the anthropology of religion, and in post-colonial and black studies, where questions of being, mutability, and materiality have long been central.

<sup>iv</sup> These conditions are not unique to Kampala's roads; such "infrastructural overload" (Lamont 2013), is the subject of a growing body of research (Masquelier 2002, Mutongi 2006, Gibbs 2014, Stasik 2016, Lamont and Lee 2015; for an overview, see Klaeger 2013).

<sup>v</sup> This stage name, as with all proper names and certain identifying descriptors in this article, has been changed.

<sup>vi</sup> *Kavuuyo* is a locally used term that refers to disorder at a few different registers. These range from the riotous street demonstrations associated with the political opposition centered around Kisekka Market in the Central Business District to the tendency of guests at parties or weddings to selfishly rush the buffet table, ignore the queue, and cause disputes.

<sup>vii</sup> While there were older men working in the industry, driving a bike was widely considered a young man's game. For many drivers I met it was treated as a transitional occupation, a means of accumulating money and connections in order to move into more prestigious work, like driving a special hire (a private taxi), opening a retail shop, or buying more bikes to rent out. Boda bodas thus while provided a (risky) means for drivers' accumulation and eventual exit from both the industry and the associated status of dependent, working as boda driver could be respectable, but not prestigious. As in the South African taxi industry as described by Gibbs (2014), personal aggrandizement could come through owning and controlling bikes, rather than driving them.

<sup>viii</sup> Writing of similar affective dynamics around Nairobi's *matutu* industry, Kenda Mutongi argues that "commuters have created the monster [the *matatu* man] and then attacked it in order to exorcise their collective guilt" (2006: 549), detailing the illicit practices developed by mini-bus drivers in response to public demands for mobility that are, in turn, reframed as essential traits of the industry and its "thug" operators.

<sup>ix</sup> Taxi is the Ugandan name for the system of (typically second-hand Toyota) 14-seater minibuses, imported from Japan, that operate as the primary means of public transportation in the city.

<sup>x</sup> A friend reported the following exchange with a driver at the stage near his job that illustrates the ways in which price is negotiated based on interpretations of self-presentation and social positioning: Adam: "*Sebo* [sir] how are you? How much to Kisimenti?" Boda: "5k." Adam: "But aren't you the one who took me last time for 3k?" Boda: "Yes, but today you are wearing a suit."

<sup>xi</sup> The main artery connecting the Mombasa Port to Kampala, Western and Northern Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo passes through Kampala, meaning that local and international, personal and commercial, industrial and agricultural auto-mobilities converge in the city. Mark Lamont (2013) situates this kind of infrastructural overload between the contradictory state mandates promoting public safety and rapid economic expansion. His work on Kenyan traffic describes the paradox in which an ideology of speed, valued as iconic of modernity and economic growth, combined with intensive car importation produces overloaded and deadly roads.

<sup>xii</sup> Material disposability on the road is entangled with financial arrangements. In his analysis of the motor-cycle taxi industry in Togo and Benin, economist Moussa Blimpo (2015) shows that kinship relations between owners and drivers lead to a preference for daily leases rather than (lower trust) lease-to-own contracts that, he argues, reduce moral hazard and encourage safer driving practices.

<sup>xiii</sup> Simone's impressionist account renders as a given conditions of infrastructural under-investment, that, as in the case he describes of Johannesburg's Hillbrow, are often results of deliberate urban policies aimed at producing and maintaining violently uneven conditions of life (Morris 1999).

<sup>xiv</sup> While boda bodas are hardly quiet, this dynamic is akin to the *dymaic* that Asef Bayat (2010) labels quiet encroachment, whereby poor people's practices of urban life are not collectively organized as movements until threatened by displacement. Drawing on James Scott (1990), Swati Chattopadhyay (2012) identifies similar forms as *infra-politics*, describing the everyday economies of belonging that become the basis for more visible forms of protest and contestation.



<sup>xv</sup> President Milton Obote was president of Uganda from 1966-1971 (when he was overthrown by Idi Amin) and from 1980-1985 (when he was overthrown by Yoweri Museveni). This reference to the roads being built by Obote and the British signifies both the fact that they are very old, and, with intended bitter irony, that they were built under regimes considered to be undemocratic.

<sup>xvi</sup> In addition to referring to themselves collectively as *abaana ba boda* [sons of boda], in conversation, many boda drivers I met referred to their co-workers as their “real brothers” (in English, eschewing the more precise vocabulary of relatedness available in Luganda) in contradistinction to siblings with whom they shared parentage but little intimacy or reciprocity. Robert, for instance, contrasted the easy conviviality and mutuality of his stage with the distance he felt from a successful older sibling with a downtown retail shop who, despite his wealth, refused to assist him in moments of hardship. He and other drivers also frequently attended funerals together, both for other drivers and their parents. Several interviewees referred to the patrons to whom they paid back loans on their motorbikes as uncles, but it was never explicit if this identified a consanguine relation, it was a primarily financial and hierarchical bond. By contrast, other drivers alluded to property speculators who encouraged them to take loans to buy bikes using family lands as collateral, hoping for a default that would allow the speculator to amass valuable peri-urban land. Insofar as, “kinsmen are persons who belong to one another, who are members of one another, who are co-present in each other, whose lives are joined and interdependent,” as Sahlins (2011: 11) suggests, the involvement of boda boda drivers in each other’s lives *is* kinship, rather than a fictitious kinship idiom.

<sup>xvii</sup> Entrepreneurialism was an alternative, though not mutually exclusive, idiom through which drivers staked their claim to the streets. Some drivers, redeploying President Museveni’s neoliberal rhetoric valorizing foreign investment, infrastructural development, and individual responsibility, framed themselves as job-creators and investors in urban infrastructure. Boda drivers, in this view, built their industry with no support from the KCCA who, accordingly, have no right to displace them. Boda boda drivers’ sense of themselves as innovators and entrepreneurs of a vital and unique urban infrastructure echoes Jomo Kenyatta’s view on independence era taxi operators in Kenya (Mutongi 2006) and resonates with Clapperton Mavhunga’s (2014) argument that a narrow focus on roads and automobiles has privileged a simplistic narrative of technology transfer from Europe to Africa and obscured the innovations of African mobilities. Although Mavhunga is primarily interested in neglected rural mobilities, my analysis of Kampala’s boda boda infrastructure builds on his argument that rather than simply *using* technology as passive recipients, “the African becomes a designer who makes technology” (2014: 16).

<sup>xviii</sup> As Caroline Melly (2013) observes, one of the ambiguities of the road is the radically divergent experience of this temporal expansion. In Dakar, she argues, “temporary hardships” in traffic jams are framed as sacrifices to a shared brilliant future; yet, while all commuters must deal with congestion, phenomenologically, the experience of time in an air-conditioned and chauffeured luxury SUV cannot be compared to that in the crowded and uncomfortable seats of a mini-bus.