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Mobilizing social reproduction: gendered mobility and everyday infrastructure in Abidjan

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the everyday mobilities of mothers in Yopougon, Côte d’Ivoire to analytically center mobility in the study of social reproduction. Yopougon, Abidjan’s largest commune, is on the cusp of a major overhaul of its transportation network intended to better integrate it into the city. Planned through a conventional vision of economic productivity that privileges commuting over other forms of travel, this restructuring risks deepening gendered exclusions in urban mobility. Mothers of young children, a sub-category of passengers who perform the bulk of the work of social reproduction and who experience multiple competing demands on their time that structure their mobilities in particularly illustrative ways, have been overlooked in transport planning. Drawing on mobility diaries and visual research methods, I illustrate how urban transport systems are implicated in the everyday practices of intergenerational care and social reproduction and how, in turn, these practices themselves become forms of urban infrastructure. These mobile practices of social reproduction disclose critical affordances and barriers in existing popular transport systems and reveal the breadth of gendered practices, relations, and materialities that are constitutive of mobility infrastructures but marginalized by a narrow policy focus on the transport sector.

1. Introduction

In February 2019, in a crisp air-conditioned office in the Ministry of Transport, high in the towers of Abidjan’s Cité Administrative, the bureaucratic center of the Ivorian state, Drissa Kouaké, a consultant working on the development of the city’s new integrated transport planning and administration agency, and I discussed the research I was conducting on popular transport and social mobility. When I said one aspect of the study involved better understanding how mothers of young children use popular transport, he laughed and looked surprised. ‘Ok, that’s good, but don’t they just stay at home?’

While it may be rare for such assumptions to be stated so forthrightly, this view of gender and mobility is far from exceptional. Rather, as scholars and campaigners have argued, transport planning operates with a masculinist bias that marginalizes women both as passengers and professionals in the field (Lindkvist Scholten and Joelsson 2019). As Susan Hanson writes, ‘mobility/immobility stand at the core of traditional gender ideologies [that equate] women and femininity with the home, the private, with domestic spaces and restricted movement’ (Hanson 2010, 9). Such gender ideologies – views about the nature of gender differences and concomitant social roles – are reflected in and reproduced through the built environment, including transport infrastructure (Hayden 1980; Holdsworth 2013; Levy 2013). Beyond the specialized domain of transport planning,
Drissa’s assertion that mothers ‘just stay at home’ reflects a widespread sedentarist understanding of family life and social reproduction as located solely in the domestic sphere and, as such, conceptually opposed to mobility.

This article, by contrast, documents the diversity of mobilities constitutive of social reproduction that extend it across urban space and describes the experiences and critical expertise of transport users whose gendered labor itself, I argue, becomes a vital component of urban infrastructure. Without attending to the ways that social reproduction – ranging from everyday routines of childcare to the complex supply chains that feed the city – relies on, and constitutes, mobility infrastructures, transport reforms in the global south entrench an exclusionary politics that privileges a narrowly defined category of economic activity at the expense of the practices of care that sustain urban life.

In a critical transitional moment when many African cities are overhauling their existing transportation networks through public-private mega-projects and plans formalizing and/or displacing popular transport, the diversity of mobilities that existing systems sustain must be taken into account if new infrastructures are to avoid further entrenching into the built environment gendered inequalities that marginalize the work of social reproduction. Divorced from social policy, transport planning in African cities has, from the colonial era through the contemporary move toward ‘global cities,’ focused narrowly on large-scale motorized modernization projects to the neglect of pedestrian and non-motorized mobilities, the heterogeneity of road usages, and the affordances of existing popular infrastructures (Grieco 2011; Rizzo 2017; Uteng and Lucas 2018). This situation calls for decolonized knowledge about transport – decentering traditional assumptions concerning the subjects of mobility and expanding the conceptual categories through which mobility infrastructures are recognized, planned, and valued (Schwanen 2020).

Drawing on ethnographic research in Abidjan I explore two inter-related questions: 1) how do popular transport infrastructures assist and limit gendered practices of social reproduction and 2) how do these everyday mobility practices in turn function as a form of urban infrastructure? Through a close reading of the itineraries of Abidjanais mothers of young children, I examine how everyday social reproduction is organized and how mothers spatially and temporally navigate the competing demands of paid and unpaid work. This makes visible critical aspects of urban mobility infrastructures that are overlooked when they are imagined primarily as a means of delivering workers to work. Beyond recognizing the full range of participants and practices constitutive of urban infrastructures and the ways existing mobility systems include/exclude women, the purpose of doing so is to identify already existing social practices and technologies that differ from, exceed, or otherwise challenge normative hetero-patriarchal arrangements of social reproduction and point to the latent alternative possibilities they contain (Gibson-Graham 2006).

2. Post-colonial infrastructures, social reproduction and everyday mobility

Research on post-colonial urban infrastructures has demonstrated the extent to which infrastructures are peopled and people become infrastructural (Simone 2021). In contexts of inadequate and uneven municipal service provision, the work of infrastructure is devolved onto and distributed across the bodies, everyday practices, and social relationships of urban populations (Diouf and Fredericks 2018; Graham and McFarlane 2014). Such socio-technical systems provision water, electricity, housing, and sanitation, as well as mobility for the majority of the world’s urban population (Frey 2020; Turner 2020; Xiao and Adebayo 2020). They are, in turn, key sites for the development of urban livelihoods as well as new modes of accumulation, exploitation, and disposability (Doherty 2017; Gidwani 2015). In Simone’s theorization, popular infrastructures are the improvisational and ephemeral platforms for urban life, ‘technical instantiations of collective action,’ (2021, 7) through which urban dwellers have provisionally addressed the material challenges of inhabiting the city. While much of this research focuses on the informal economies constitutive of ‘social infrastructure’
(McFarlane and Silver 2017, 463), I argue that Social Reproduction Theory [SRT] illuminates a wider range of gendered practices of everyday care that underpin these urban systems.

Developed as a feminist critique of Marxism’s masculinist biases, social reproduction theory is concerned with how life, under changing conditions of capitalist political economy, is ‘maintained and regenerated on a daily and an intergenerational basis,’ (Brenner and Laslett 1991, cited in Bhattacharya 2017, 6). Social reproduction thus encompasses a wide range of paid and unpaid work from teaching and nursing to cooking, cleaning, and childcare. SRT attends to the ‘fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life’ (Katz 2001, 711) to explore how, and under what conditions, labor itself – laboring bodies and laboring subjects – is produced and how this work is naturalized, devalued, and made invisible along intersecting lines of gender, sexuality, race, class and nation (Ferguson 2020). Denaturalizing and de-individualizing the gendered distribution of social reproductive labor, SRT argues that ‘all reproduction is assisted [but] some forms of assistance are simply rendered invisible because they are taken for granted’ (Emre 2018, np). Just as the body does not end at the skin, neither does reproduction (Lewis 2019). Like the taken for granted practices of care that always assist reproduction, urban infrastructures are themselves often invisible but nonetheless make life possible. Critiquing the ways that social reproduction has come to be increasingly privatized, SRT identifies the roots of contemporary crises of care in the neoliberal reorganization of the state, disinvestment in social welfare and public infrastructure, and accelerating depletion of commons (Briggs 2017; Dowling 2021; Fraser 2017; Strauss and Meehan 2015).

These arguments extend longstanding African feminist analyses of the ways structural adjustment policies transferred the burden of social reproduction onto the shoulders of African women (Dieng 2020; Mhone 1997; Traoré 2002). Far from novel, this dynamic represents a continuation of colonial labor regimes’ structural dependence on women’s unwaged work farming, feeding, and reproducing the urban labor force. As Ayesha Imam has argued, colonial gender ideologies predicated on a mobile wage-earning man and an un-paid home-making woman structured the construction of African labor markets, cities, and notions of development (Imam 1997). Not simply a colonial relic, these gender ideologies have both informed and been re-entrenched by post-colonial politics of nationalism, development, population, and urbanization (Adams and Pigg 2005; Biaya 2001; Murphy 2017; Ndjio 2013; Siwila 2017; Sow 1987). Patriarchal social institutions have also engendered a widespread negative view of women’s mobilities as a cause of promiscuity and domestic tensions that significantly constrains women’s movements and livelihoods (Porter 2011, 68). Together, these politics have constructed an image of the proper African woman as stationary and immobile that subtends their marginalization in transport planning (Porter 2008).

Although researchers in the SRT tradition have detailed the globalization of housework, as women’s entry into the workforce in the global north has accelerated the migrations of women from the global south working as domestic laborers (Parerenas 2015; Romero, Preston, and Giles 2014), there remains a sedentary bias in SRT. Social reproduction theorists have often located reproduction primarily in ‘the kitchen, the bedroom, the home’ (Federici 2012, 8) and paid little attention to the production of everyday mobilities and their role in the division/distribution of reproductive labor. Yet, mobility is vital to social reproduction. Mobilities scholars have challenged the binary opposing mobility and family by, for example, demonstrating the variety of ways in which families are constituted on the move and at a distance (Burrell 2016; Carsten 2020; Schurr 2019; Speier 2020) and by theorizing the co-constitution of care, mobility, and gender (Alam and Houston 2020; Cresswell and Uteng 2008; Poiani Sagaris and Papa 2021). Like other forms of social reproduction, care, this work shows, is ‘inherently bound up with notions of place, mobility, and immobility’ (Plyushteva and Schwanen 2018, 132).

In mobilizing SRT, my aim is to illustrate the ways that social reproduction does not ‘just stay at home,’ as the transport planner had it, but takes place beyond domestic spaces through a range of movements shaped by the affordances and limitations of popular transport systems. These movements are never solely individually determined strategies but are themselves mediated by both transport infrastructures and the intersecting norms of gender, race, class, and other axes of social
inequality (Jirón and Imilan 2015). Read together, research on everyday mobilities and social reproduction reveals both the extent to which social reproduction relies upon a variety of mobility practices and infrastructures and the ways in which reproductive work, care in particular, becomes a form of infrastructure that sustains urban life. Attending to everyday mobilities stretches SRT beyond the home and enables more capacious thinking about social reproduction, what it is, who does it, where it takes place, and how it might be better valued and assisted.

3. Context and methodology

Research was conducted in Yopougon, the largest of Abidjan’s ten communes (administrative divisions, see map) with a population of around one million. The commune has extensive industrial and commercial areas and provides many urban amenities from schools and churches to hospitals and markets. Housing includes large parastatal developments of apartment complexes from the 1970s and 80s, more recently privately constructed middle-class flats, low-rise multi-family compounds, and precarious settlements located both peripherally and at the spatial center of the commune (Steck 2008). As the population has grown, so has the spatial footprint of the commune with new construction taking place in increasingly distant areas off the paved road network. The city’s western-most extreme, Yopougon is separated from the rest of the city by the Ebrié Lagoon and Banco National Park, meaning that there is only one overland route linking Yopougon to the administrative, commercial, industrial, and educational centers elsewhere in Abidjan. As a result, traffic on this route is very congested during rush hours leading to, for example, 3-hour commutes from central Yopougon to the University of Cocody in the east of the city. Existing official transport options in Yopougon include inter-communal municipal bus services and ferries to the central business district in Plateau. Popular transport options include inter-communal mini-buses known

Map. Municipal boundaries of Abidjan (Prepared by Felix Kouame N'Dri).
as gbakas, illicit inter-communal shared ‘clandestine taxis,’ intra-communal shared taxis known as wôrô-wôrôs, private-hire taxis, as well as auto-rickshaws operating at the margins of the commune (Doherty Vakaramoko and Kassi-Djodjo 2021). Congestion and lack of integration are the rationale for a suite of new urban transport infrastructure projects across Abidjan, including the construction of a new bridge and a Bus Rapid Transit route linking Yopougon to the CBD in Plateau and onward to Cocody and Bingerville at the Eastern edge of the city.

To understand how these popular transport systems assist urban social reproduction and the affordances/blockages these infrastructures involve, this study focused on mothers of young children, a sub-category of passengers often marginalized in transport planning but who perform the bulk of the unpaid work of social reproduction and who experience multiple competing demands on their time that structure their livelihoods and mobilities in particularly illustrative ways. Using written and photographic time-space diaries alongside other qualitative mobile research methods (Büsher Urry and Witchger 2011) was essential for understanding not only mothers’ physical movements through the city, but also the meanings attributed to different journeys and modes of travel, the rationales underpinning different strategies for negotiating care and livelihood mobilities, and the interdependence of their mobilities with those of family members and others.

I conducted 40 interviews during which participants and I co-completed a mobility diary detailing journeys during the previous 24–48 hours. An additional five participants were given a digital camera and asked to photograph their regular activities during a five to ten-day period. We then reviewed their images and discussed the activities, places, and forms of transport each image depicted. This process provided participants opportunities to recount and reflect on their activities, comment on the particularities of individual trips, and discuss the extent to which each trip was a typical/regular feature of their mobilities, or a more contingent/irregular one. As the mundane practices of social reproduction can appear banal and insignificant, ‘too trivial to be commented on or distinguished from other events’ (Holdsworth 2013, 13), these iterative diary-interview tools were particularly well suited for making the details of everyday life visible and situating mobilities in the rhythms of social reproduction.

Participants were recruited at multiple sites across Yopougon through a range of urban institutions that are frequented by mothers of young children: pre-schools, primary schools, maternal/infant health clinics, community health centers, a Catholic church, and central markets. Participants, ages ranging from 20 to 54, came from a range of educational and religious backgrounds, from different family structures, from spatially disparate neighborhoods across the socio-economic spectrum in Yopougon, and from multiple professional/occupational categories. In this way, while the sample is not designed to be representative, it was constructed to reflect the diversity of mobilities that sustain social reproduction in Abidjan.

Coding the interview transcripts revealed four overarching patterns in the data linking mobility practices broadly to livelihood activities. As there are many overlapping challenges and shared practices, these should not be understood as fully discrete categories, but profiles that each represent the nucleus of an ideal-type of mobility that, together, highlight the diversity of gendered urban mobilities not accounted for in existing planning frameworks. Commerical Mobilities encompass mothers who work as traders, primarily in markets, and use transport infrastructure not just to get to and from work, but as a critical part of their business practices. Commuter Mobilities encompass mothers including teachers, doctors, civil servants and other office workers, who have professional occupations with relatively fixed work hours and use transport infrastructure to travel to and from these jobs. Home-Based Work Mobilities encompass mothers who engaged in income-generating, generally entrepreneurial work such as tailoring, catering, or retail, from their homes. Homemaker Mobilities encompass mothers who engaged full time in the unpaid work of domestic labor and child-care and did not engage directly in any income-generating activities. These categories were not selected in advance but emerged from a close reading of the ethnographic material. Nonetheless, it was not surprising that livelihoods have a particularly powerful patterning effect on everyday mobilities as mothers’ different engagement with paid work shaped their temporal obligations, spatial movements, and their financial means to employ reproductive work in chains of care, and thus how popular transport networks serve them. In what follows, through
a detailed account of four primary participants and drawing on other examples to illustrate the complexity and internal heterogeneity of each category, I illustrate the different ways popular transport assists social reproduction and how, in turn, everyday mobility practices constitute urban infrastructures.

4. Social reproduction in motion

4.1. Commercial mobilities

Veronique Tra has been working at MAYOP – Yopougon’s biggest market – for nearly two decades, taking over a stall selling onions and hot peppers that her mother previously operated. Aged 37, she is a mother of five. Her two youngest children (aged six and seven) are enrolled in a primary school located next to her home, an apartment in a residential neighborhood in the west of Yopougon. To get home in time to prepare the evening meal for her children and husband, an economist working on short-term consultancies, she arrives early at MAYOP, starting her work at six every morning. Because communal taxis often refuse to go to the highly congested MAYOP area during the morning rush hour, Veronique opts for the less comfortable gbaka minibuses that depart a twenty-minute walk from home and stop in front of the market, taking about half an hour for a total 50-minute commute door-to-door. She usually takes a break at midday to visit her parents’ home a short walk from MAYOP, often collecting her nieces from preschool on the way as a favor for her sister, another MAYOP vendor. Having started early, she can leave the market by 4 most afternoons, returning home via gbaka to wash and dry the family’s laundry, cook, and spend time with her youngest children. Because their school is close to home, they can find their own way home unaccompanied and have an older sibling look after them. Like most other mothers in the study who described a similar domestic division of labor, Veronique did so very matter-of-factly. She referred generically to ‘my housework,’ a bundle of practices that were her responsibility as a wife and mother and that she assumed were common-sense and so only unpacked in more detail with further questions. This discloses the extent to which these practices reflect naturalized gender ideologies concerning the distribution of the labor of social reproduction.

Discussing these routine daily movements did not much interest Veronique. Commenting that her commute was not especially comfortable but not a point of stress, she was, by contrast, enthusiastic in recounting her trips to Adjâmé: a central commune that is the commercial core of Abidjan, the central hub of the country’s transportation and agricultural logistics networks, and home to the city’s most important wholesale markets. Veronique travels to Adjâmé twice a week to restock her business, attracted to the wide selection of cheap wholesale foods. Typically, after arriving at MAYOP at the normal early hour, she leaves her stall under the care of a neighbor (see Image 1) and departs by gbaka, often with a fellow-vendor also heading into Adjâmé. While municipal buses serve the same route, she prefers to use gbakas because they depart more frequently and nobody must stand up, as is often the case on the larger crowded buses. Gbakas are the only viable option for vendors moving merchandise from Adjâmé to Yopougon’s markets. Municipal buses do not allow for travel with large amounts of goods, and taxis are too expensive for these businesses’ tight margins. Because gbakas allow vendors to travel with their goods reliably and at an affordable price, they have become integral to the commercial logistics networks that keep the city’s markets stocked and the city’s restaurants, road-side kiosks, and kitchens provisioned. As Jennifer Mandel (2004) has illustrated in Benin, this kind of mobility is central to the livelihood strategies of women traders and is closely linked to higher incomes insofar as access to the most lucrative trade goods requires knowledge of and travel to the locations of the most direct sources. Veronique’s detailed recounting of her commercial mobility can be understood as a performance of her identity and expertise as an experienced vendor, revealing the pride and social position her prowess as a highly mobile urban trader affords her.
While mobility can be central to many women’s livelihood strategies, allowing them to overcome a lack of capital and to use the capital they do have (Mandel 2004, 268), it can also be an index of the precariousness of informal livelihoods or represent a form of displacement (Bryceson 2009). As informal business owners become more established, they often outsource mobility onto others, replacing personal movement with coordinating paid service providers to make payments, deliver goods, and check providers’ stocks (Esson et al. 2016). This was the case with two young mothers in the Béago neighborhood who worked 12-hour days in their self-started business moving back and forth between Yopougon and Adjamé’s wholesale markets taking clients’ orders, shopping for clothes, delivering them, and chasing up payments. Like their partner’s jobs driving communal taxis, this left them no time to care for their primary school-aged children who lived with their grandmothers elsewhere in the city.

Popular transport systems have become vital components of Abidjan’s complex supply chains and infrastructures of social reproduction. Vendors like Veronique do not simply use the transport system to get to work, their mobility is work: the spatial redistribution of goods from wholesale to retail markets. The conceptual distinction between public transport and logistics systems, between human and non-human mobilities, does not hold in practice (Grieco Apt and Turner 1996). The same applies beyond the food sector; a wide range of women working in small- and medium-scale commerce such as fabric and clothing retail rely on popular transport to access markets in central Abidjan and transport their wares to clients.

Blurring the lines between production and reproduction, these gendered commercial mobilities reveal how mobility itself becomes a form of work in the context of flexible livelihood strategies characteristic of precarious neoliberal urban economies around the world and the critical role that popular transport plays (Jirón and Imilan 2015). Gbakas and communal taxis provide vital services for the commercial workers who have developed and continually reproduce the supply chains that keep Abidjan fed and clothed. Transport planning that privileges male commuter mobilities ignores this gendered diversity of uses of popular transport for livelihoods and social reproduction. Euro-centric transport reforms seeking to displace popular transport from congested points like urban markets, or to replace mini-bus services by municipal services in the name of efficiency or de-congestion risk disrupting, even severing, the complex logistics systems that rely on popular transport, in turn, undermining not only vendors’ livelihoods but also the accessibility of food and other goods throughout the city.

Image 1. A colleague at the market minds Veronique’s stall while she goes to Adjamé to restock. Image by Veronique Tra, photodiary project participant, 2019.
After describing the role that popular transport plays in her business, Veronique put forward her plan for an improved system. Having seen recent changes that pushed gbaka stops away from central areas of Adjame and their replacement by municipal bus routes, she predicted more future difficulties for sustaining her stall’s stocks. Imagining an alternate arrangement, she described a service run by the market administration with special buses for vendors to take them to and from Adjame, equipped with space above and below to transport their merchandise, with refrigeration for those who need it. Such a service, she insisted, must be cheap enough not to eat into vendors’ margins, have predictable and fair pricing (as opposed to the periodic price hikes in the popular transport sector), as well as be dependable so as not to waste vendors’ time waiting, as is the case with the existing municipal routes. Such novel visions of urban reproductive infrastructure should be a critical resource for decolonizing public transport planning that risks, intentionally or inadvertently, deconstructing popular transport systems and the modes of social reproduction they assist.

4.2. Commuter mobilities

Nadine Touré lives in Ananeraie, a residential neighborhood of Yopougon that transformed from peri-urban pineapple fields to a busy urban neighborhood during the 1980s. Nadine and her husband André bought their home there because it was a calm, quiet, respectable area. ‘It’s kind of the bourgeoisie of Yopougon here,’ Nadine proudly explained. We talked one evening after work in her living room while Nadine’s youngest son, four, climbed all over her grasping for her attention and her phone. André sat on the front porch revising homework with their daughters, nine and seven, the couple’s 13-year-old son worked on a laptop at the kitchen table, and a housekeeper folded laundry in the house’s back courtyard. The three younger kids were enrolled at Complexe Éducatif de Yopougon (CEY), a prestigious all-ages private school with excellent teachers, facilities, and test scores. One vital amenity underlying the Touré family’s mobility is an optional school bus, a service that increasing numbers of private schools like CEY are offering (Kassi-Djodjo, Kouassi-Koffi, and Mamoutou 2016). While their oldest walks, accompanied by the housekeeper, to and from his nearby school, for the last four years, Nadine and André’s younger children have ridden the bus the 2 km journey to and from school every morning and after the midday lunch break, allowing their parents to make their own commutes.

Nadine explained that ‘the bus suits me because it means I don’t worry, especially about their safety. As a mother, I know that the bus will collect them, take them to school, and that the school will be responsible for their security and their flourishing until they get home.’ In this way, the bus was more than just a mode of transport, but part of an institution that took responsibility for the safety and flourishing of her children, the quality of their care and education being an important affirmation of her as a mother. She continued, ‘it gives me the peace of mind I need to be able to get on with my own business freely and get to work, knowing that my kids will be in a safe place without any danger until I get home in the evening.’ Here, the school bus is explicitly linked not just to children’s mobility, but to their mother’s socio-spatial mobility; it is the infrastructure that enables her physically and affectively to shift her attention from childcare to her career and to begin her own commute every morning.

After seeing the kids onto the bus at 6:45 every morning, Nadine departs for her office job at a logistics company in the northern commune of Abobo, about 15 km from her home. Her commute is highly unpredictable. Because the communal taxis she prefers are not allowed to cross the boundaries between communes, she takes two gbaka minibuses, often waiting up to 30 minutes to find a passing vehicle with an empty seat during the morning rush hour. Gbakas usually then get stuck in a frustrating traffic jam as the vehicle takes the only route available north, via Yopougon’s congested industrial area. On a lucky day, she can reach work in 40 minutes. On a bad day it can take her two hours. While her husband is able to leave the house at 5 am to avoid the traffic as he drives himself to his job as an electrical engineer at the distant port in Treichville, this option is not available for Nadine because of the risk of robbery when waiting for a minibus at the roadside, a risk that
women in particular face in the early morning. Without a car of her own, Nadine explained, her mobility is limited to sunlight hours or times when there are lots of people about to ensure safety, minimizing her capacity to control departure times in order to manage her commute. In this way, as in other cities around the world (Govinda 2019; Lekalakala 2020; Quinones 2020), Nadine’s daily itinerary is not a pure time-space calculation, but significantly mediated by everyday forms of gendered violence that inform access to livelihoods and the organization of care. She has more flexibility on her way home, however; without immediate pressure to arrive she can opt to walk the final leg of her journey, avoiding the stressful competition to cram into a seat in a gbaka at a busy station, and instead enjoy 40 minutes of exercise and time alone before resuming child-care at home.

Like other middle-class professional women in the study and around the world, Nadine’s mobility is made possible through chains of care: paid domestic labor that relieves much of the burden of her gendered domestic responsibilities (Montoya-Robledo and Escovar-Álvarez 2020, Parrenas 2015). As she explained, ‘I don’t have a brother, I don’t have any parents I can tell to come and stay here. I have a job, so does their dad, so as a mom, when there’s no housekeeper at home it’s really disruptive. It’s stressful. You can’t just leave work telling your boss “my kids are alone” – how many days will he allow that? How long before he replaces you?’ Paid domestic work here takes the place of extended family in giving Nadine the time and ability to pursue her career with peace of mind. Nadine and André’s commitment to education was embodied in their shared practice of supervising kids’ homework, an evening routine of ‘family time’ together that reflected their values and their upwardly mobile social identities. While their housekeeper is crucial to Nadine’s ability to work, she also stressed that she cooks dinner every night for her own family and helps with homework, highlighting them as the most important forms of love, care, and mothering she performs daily, and emphasizing their centrality to her identity (McDowell et al. 2005).

The reliance of commuter mobilities on this arrangement of social relations and practices prompts a more expansive conceptualization of mobility technologies. School buses and housekeepers are part of the flexible suite of logistics, relationships, practices, and paid services through which everyday commuter mobilities are produced and multiple aspects of these mothers’ identities are balanced. In light of these interdependent mobilities (Jirón, Carrasco, and Rebolledo 2020), chains of (paid and unpaid) care emerge as the infrastructure of infrastructure, an invisible technology that assists urban social reproduction. While professionals’ reliance on these services reveals their centrality for social mobility, that they are all paid commercial services reveals the degree to which urban mobilities are inequitably distributed. The private development of school buses, for example, reflects and exacerbates existing educational and livelihood inequalities, inevitably translating into differential levels of generational social mobility. These arrangements are a form of relational infrastructure, the mundane practices through which access to urban transport networks is constructed.

4.3. Home-based work mobilities

Djeneba Gouzou, 47, has lived in Quartier Nimba, ‘a calm and safe neighborhood,’ in the north of Yopougon, ‘where everyone is like a family and we resolve our problems together,’ for 30 years. Wedged between the highway and the forest of Banco National Park, the neighborhood first grew as housing for workers in the nearby sawmill. Djeneba lives with her husband, a stonemason, and four children, while her two oldest sons live with relatives closer to universities and offices where they study and work. For the last eleven years, Djeneba has operated a small restaurant selling lunch and dinner from a kiosk next to her home’s front door. Her everyday practices exemplify the challenges home-based workers face, the routine ways they construct mobilities, and the urban infrastructures that assist social reproduction. Informal enterprises like hers that commercialize aspects of social reproduction often collapse the difference – and the spatial gap – between home and work such that the commute is no longer a useful concept for understanding livelihood journeys (Bryceson, Mbara, and Maunder 2003).
Djeneba’s morning routine begins with daily prayers at the nearby mosque at 5 am, the only time in the day she can attend prayers in person, after which she wakes her youngest children to prepare them for school. Once ready, she accompanies her youngest son and daughter across the busy road 100 yards from their house and then leaves them to walk the rest of the way to school unaccompa-
nied. While her business is home-based, it requires regular movements through the commune to gather supplies. By 7 each morning she leaves home on foot to walk 2 km across the highway to the large market where she sources fresh fish. While she enjoys walking to market slowly and calmly, on the return she prefers to load her wares into a wôrô-wôrô that brings her directly home, easing the heavy load and allowing her to escape the heat. Once home from the market, Djeneba cleans and grills the fish, prepares a sauce, and begins selling as customers, primarily workers at the sawmill, come for lunch. Business continues in this way, pausing only for prayers inside her home, until she runs out of food at 6 or 7 in the evening: ‘I don’t go anywhere, I’m here at my table, selling.’ She can stay at work during the day because her youngest children eat lunch at the school canteen and, in the evening, are able to find their own way home independently. Meanwhile, Djeneba’s oldest daughter takes on the everyday household work of laundry, cleaning, and preparing the family meals.

As with the market traders discussed above, here again popular transport systems are a vital logistical link the supply-chain moving food from suppliers to markets to the city’s plates. In Djeneba’s case, her work is a commercialized form of social reproduction that blurs the distinction between supply chains and chains of care. Popular transport is the infrastructure of Djeneba’s business which, in turn, sustains the urban workforce, illustrating the thorough entanglement of everyday mobility infrastructures and social reproduction (see Image 2).

While Djeneba is able to construct a mobility routine that allows her to stay in place once she begins her work, her routine stands in marked contrast to that of Estelle Silue, a home-based beignet vendor in the central Port-Bouet II neighborhood who has no grown children, nearby relatives, or paid help available to support her domestic work. Although she did not need to embark on a daily journey for supplies, Estelle’s work was perpetually interrupted by trips to and from her young son’s primary school. Because she distrusts the quality of food available in the school canteen, Estelle collects her son from school every lunchtime to eat together, an additional errand she found very tiring: ‘with kids, it’s often exhausting. They wear you out. At the end of the day, I sometimes haven’t earned enough to put the money back into my shop for the next day.’ Estelle described how escorting her son to and from school four times a day – a task that would be halved if the school’s

lunch program were better – consumes the time she needs to make her business viable. Like school buses, quality school lunches should be understood as a critical infrastructure of maternal mobility that reduce not only the domestic work of food preparation, but also the time spent ferrying young children through the city.

The contrast between Estelle and Djeneba reveals the extent to which children’s independence and mobility is a critical aspect of constructing everyday mobilities for social reproduction. The built environment, school services, and the social fabric of popular neighborhoods is a key factor enabling children’s mobility and, in turn, mother’s mobility strategies. Amina Kra, a home-based worker who runs a telephone kiosk and sells airtime from the lively road in front of her house in an informal settlement in industrial North Yopougon, explained: ‘because the school is not too far and we all know each other like a big family here, there’s no problem, there’s no big road so they can all go together as a group while we stay to work.’ Amina and I walked the route to her children’s school after our interview and she showed me the narrow, unpaved, potholed, and muddy road buzzing with commerce that they traverse four times a day. Rather than being a problem, however, she pointed out that this road slowed cars, giving her more peace of mind that kids would arrive safely at school. In contrast to the private school buses used by wealthier commuter-parents, here social ties and the area’s low-grade roads work together to construct a sense of urban safety that enables children’s mobility and, in turn, underpins mothers’ home-based livelihood. Likewise, the mix of residential and commercial premises in her neighborhood mean Amina is able to accomplish many regular chores – resoling shoes, repairing electronics, buying airtime, purchasing basic household necessities – without needing to walk more than a few minutes from home.

Already existing Abidjanais spatial practices produce everyday infrastructures in ways that pre-figure trending ideas like the ‘fifteen-minute city,’ a vision of sustainable urban development predicated on minimizing the need for mobility. The functional mix, heterogeneity, and texture of Yopougon’s residential neighborhoods emerges as a critical aspect of the infrastructure of social reproduction. While recognizing the infrastructural challenges and exclusions structuring popular neighborhoods in African cities, it is also critical to recognize the practical affordances they do provide. Euro-centric conceptions of urban transport fail to recognize these affordance as part of mobility infrastructures and thus risk undermining children’s independent mobility capacities, and, in turn, increasing the mobility burden on mothers, undercutting their possibilities for autonomy and social mobility.

### 4.4. Homemaking mobilities

Adé Yébé lives in a newly built apartment building in Western Yopougon with her three-year-old daughter and husband, a gendarme who spends half the year living at bases elsewhere in the country. Her daughter, Merveille, attends pre-school at the nearby social center, not the closest option to home, but where the staff are trained to care for a chronic health issue she experiences. Because of this issue, Adé has not enrolled Merveille in the center’s canteen, preferring to collect her at midday for a special lunch. The 20-minute walk to and from the social center structures their daily routine, which begins at 6:30 every morning when Adé wakes, bathes, and prepares Merveille for pre-school. They walk together, arriving at 8 for the start of school, and Adé returns home, stopping along the way to go to the market every other day or dropping in at her church to pray or discuss the prayer group she heads. Talking in her living room, she told me that in this way time runs away from her: ‘I get home, then I go back. Time flies. I pick her up, she comes home, she refreshes herself, eats, and rests a bit. But since she’s stubborn and she doesn’t like to rest we’re here together until it’s time to go back.’ Adé relies on her upstairs neighbor to help mind Merveille from time to time on non-school days when she must run errands, but when the neighbor is not available, Adé brings her daughter along with her. ‘She likes to walk and see the area,’ but travelling greater distances using public transport is a challenge as Merveille grows.
While communal taxis can be cramped, Adé, like several other mothers I talked to, explained that she cannot use the municipal buses that ostensibly provide inter-communal links across the city and is reluctant to use the gbaka minibuses that serve these same routes more directly. She worries she would have to spend hours standing in the cramped buses that do not have enough seating, something that is not an option when travelling with children. Gbakas are a last resort; while they have seats, they are still cramped with a child and, moreover, since being in an accident that killed a passenger, Adé has feared the badly driven minibuses. ‘With a child on your lap you’re squeezed in, there’s no air and you’re under the sun in a traffic jam. It’s shit. You’re there, not moving, not breathing.’ These sentiments, and the preference for communal taxis, were shared with many other mothers who noted the embodied exclusions of the bus and minibus systems for pregnant women and mothers traveling with infants or young children, a recurring form of infrastructural marginalization in public transport (Boyer and Spinney 2016). Cramped, over-heated, airless, and dangerous, gbakas are seen as a necessary evil that mothers rely on when other options aren’t available. In addition to these physical discomforts, mothers noted gbaka’s crass ‘affective atmosphere’ (Bissell 2010) engendered by the vulgar and violent comportment of apprentices, the widely pathologized young workers who handle fares onboard. While municipal buses are notably safer and better driven, the lack of seating severely limits their accessibility for women like Adé travelling with children. These embodied micro-exclusions have dramatic consequences on mothers’ ability to construct mobility, and significant knock-on effects on their social networks and livelihoods.

Adé’s care-giving routines mean she has, for the moment, put aside the cosmetology business she spent 10 years building. Having established her client base in her old neighborhood in an upmarket corner of Cocody, a 50–120 minute journey away from her new home in Yopougon, with Merveille in pre-school, she is no longer able to travel to see clients as she could when she had an infant. This 20 km trip involves either an expensive 3,000–3,500 F CFA (€5) taxi ride or an exhausting journey involving three separate shared taxis. For Adé, more than just the loss of her business, the newly limited mobility she experienced living in Yopougon represents a much-missed loss of social connection to friends and family she used to see twice a week but now only has the chance to visit occasionally on weekends.

Mothers fitting all the mobility profiles discussed here reported that one of the most common reasons for long-distance journeys outside of Yopougon was not to visit the CBD, as planners imagine the purpose of the transport network, but visiting family elsewhere in Abidjan. Adé, like almost every mother I talked to, described making regular weekly or monthly trips to other communes to pay visits to parents, in-laws, siblings, and extended families, as well as more occasional trips to attend family weddings, parties, or funerals. While wealthier families were able to make these trips using metered taxis to speed up the trip and ensure they arrived looking and feeling fresh, the majority of mothers made these family trips by combining two or more modes of popular transport (see Image 3). Reproductive mobilities make clear that, beyond being commuter infrastructures bringing employees to work, popular transport systems are vital for enabling the affective and social practices through which extended families are bound together and reproduced in the urban context. Emphasizing temperature, air circulation, crowding, ease of entry/exit with children and other embodied features of popular and official transport systems, mothers’ reflections on mobility reveal that it is not just that arriving at their destination in time that matters, but importantly how they arrive there – how they feel and how they look. These basic aspects of passengers’ dignity are critical for the everyday mobilities that underpin social reproduction.

Home-making work is thus shaped by the ways transport infrastructures structure space-time in ways that engender exclusions from the paid workforce. Far from being confined to the home, however, home-making work itself is spatially distributed in ways that require combining and coordinating a variety of interdependent mobility practices drawing on a range of urban infrastructures for child care and education, provisioning the home and accessing health services, as well as embedding nuclear family units in the extended bonds of kinship.
5. Conclusion: mobility infrastructures and/as assisted reproduction

When Veronique Tra first showed me the images she made for the visual mobility diary I thought I had miscommunicated the nature of the research project I had asked her to participate in. Along with one or two images of gbakas, the bulk of her photos showed people: her friends, family, and colleagues from the market. Through our conversation, it became clear that far from a misunderstanding, Veronique was illustrating a crucial dimension of everyday urban infrastructures that unites all of the four profiles discussed above. These images, and the practices highlighted in this article, disclose forms of already existing infrastructures of social reproduction, from school lunches to sending kids to live with grandparents to siblings, aunts, and neighbors collecting kids from school to the existence of integrated urban neighborhoods that foster children’s autonomy and socialize care in ways that emerge from and extend existing practices of mothering in Africa (Dieng 2020). Parenting is a collective endeavor that relies on and constitutes urban infrastructures. The infrastructure of infrastructure, these practices enable people, mothers in particular, to avail themselves of existing urban transportation options to craft their urban livelihoods and identities. These forms of care are essential to developing socially equitable sustainable urban mobilities.

Illustrating the extent to which social reproduction takes place across urban space this study emphasizes important dimensions of popular transport as well as making apparent the range of infrastructures, including but not limited to transport systems, that constitute urban mobilities. Popular transport is central to the supply chains that constitute the city’s food system as well as the logistical backbone of a variety of commercial activities that sustain social reproduction at the urban scale. In addition to delivering men and women to work and home, it also links families together across the city, increases the accessibility of essential urban amenities like markets, clinics, churches, and schools, providing vital links in the city’s chains of care. Popular transport drivers, in this light, should themselves be understood as socially reproductive infrastructural workers. Focusing on the everyday mobilities of mothers of young children also reveals the exclusions these systems engender. Unreliable departures and broken-up journeys make journeys long and can exclude women from paid work. Moreover, the embodied and affective dimensions of transport shape when, how, with whom, and in what conditions mothers can travel. Situating everyday movements within the patterns of social reproduction complicates the straightforward normative assumption that, as Hanson critically parses, ‘mobility is empowering, and because it is empowering, more mobility, especially for women, is a good thing.’ (Hanson 2010, 9) and the concomitant planning ideal that ‘more transport appears better than less transport’ (Pirie 2009, 27).

![Image 3. Passengers board a gbaka minibus decorated with the slogan ‘only work pays’ at a busy intersection in central Yopougon. Image by author, 2019.](image-url)
Table 1 Types of popular transport services functioning in Abidjan at the time of research (2019).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Vehicles</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Official status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gbaka</td>
<td>12 to 18 seater minibuses</td>
<td>fixed lines within and between communes</td>
<td>Authorized by permit &amp; inspection process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxi Communal (aka wôrô-wôrô)</td>
<td>4-seater cars, color coded by communes</td>
<td>within individual communes, either on fixed lines or flexible routes set by the first passenger</td>
<td>Authorized by permit &amp; inspection process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxi Clandestin</td>
<td>7-seater cars, unmarked</td>
<td>fixed lines between communes</td>
<td>Prohibited, tacitly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tianboro</td>
<td>Old gbakas and taxis that no longer pass inspections</td>
<td>last mile service the edges of the transport network</td>
<td>Prohibited, tacitly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saloni</td>
<td>4-seater auto-rickshaws</td>
<td>last mile service the edges of the transport network</td>
<td>Prohibited, tacitly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxi Compteur</td>
<td>4-seater cars</td>
<td>Private hire taxis authorized to operate anywhere. Their name refers to meters, but fares are negotiated individually</td>
<td>Authorized by permit &amp; inspection process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Decentering transport infrastructure as such from the definition of mobility systems highlights the diversity of materials, technologies, relationships, and practices that constitute mobility as well as underscoring the point that people do not travel in the abstract, but to access people and activities at concrete destinations that contribute to the construction of meaningful lives. The mobility infrastructures that underpin social reproduction blend the human and the technical (Simone 2021) as care work and other socially reproductive practices themselves become vital infrastructures for the construction of gendered mobilities. Gender-sensitive decolonial transport planning must account for the heterogeneity of mobilities in the city and recognize the vital role that existing urban reproductive infrastructures – ranging from popular transport systems to food supply chains to school buses and lunches to chains of care – play in producing and reproducing urban life. Far from limited to Abidjan, popular transport and everyday practices of social reproduction are deeply entangled in different ways in cities around the world (Gamble and Dávalos 2019; Pojani Sagaris and Papa 2021; Uteng and Lucas 2018). Overlooking mothers’ experiences and expertise on the basis they just ‘stay at home’ both fails to serve popular transport’s actual users and forecloses creative planning engagements with the critiques and creative ideas of women like Veronique. Recognizing these already existing forms of urban infrastructure that assist social reproduction is a necessary first step in properly valuing them and developing the necessary forms of support for more profound and inclusive modes of accessibility and urban mobility.

Notes

1. As with all names of people (as well as schools and other institutions) that appear in this article, this is a pseudonym used to protect the anonymity of research participants. All research participants provided informed consent orally after hearing an oral consent script and reading a project information sheet.
2. I use the term popular transport as an alternative to the more common ‘informal transport’ to refer to the range of mobility infrastructures that have developed without formal state planning or support to serve Global South cities. As Table 1 illustrates, there is a wide range of services, modes of operation, and degrees of municipal regulation present within the popular transport sector in Abidjan.
3. This research forms part of a broader ethnographic project on urban mobility transitions in Abidjan on emergent popular transport, violence, rentier economies, and mobility justice in the city. Participatory mobile methods like observations of popular transport systems in operation, ride-alongs with drivers, photo mobility diaries, and walking interviews are central to this overall project and inform my understanding of everyday mobility practices discussed here.
4. The term housekeeper is used here to cover a range of terms used by research participants (nounou, fille de maison, fille de menage, servante) for paid domestic workers involved in childcare, cleaning, cooking, laundry,
and shopping. In all cases in my sample these workers were young women who lived in the same household as the mother I interviewed. Housekeeper in this usage does not include unpaid arrangements whereby relatives of the mothers I interviewed performed the same duties.

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