

# City & Society

## Book Review

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**Nothing's in Vain.** *Emmanuelle Andrianjafy*, London: MACK Books, 2017, 112 pp. with 54 color and 20 duotone plates. Text by Emelie Øyen.

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Following a tip provided to me by a wandering soul I met in the fall of 2009 during fieldwork in Praia, the capital city of Cape Verde, I spent one week in Dakar, Senegal. A brief flight and I was plunged into the heart of one of the gems of Francophone Africa. I was in search of diasporic communities in the hope of gaining greater contextual understanding of Cape Verdean migration and migrants' relationships with "Africa" and "Europe," respectively. My memories highlight a stark contrast between the blowing sands and urban blur of rushing commerce and the vibrant colors and magnificent styles of Dakar fashion. A whirlwind and a snapshot. Allure.

In her award-winning book, Malagasy photographer Emmanuelle Andrianjafy represents her own search for place in a constantly shifting city. Dakar is the meeting point of three competing forces: the Atlantic Ocean, the brutalism of urban development (i.e., the city "itself"), and human residence, only possible in a heightened

performance of self. Competition obscures while occasional synergies are made manifest in sharp focus. Emelie Øyen, another thoughtful wanderer and acquaintance of Andrianjafy, writes of Dakar as a conflicted point of encounter: "It would take months to process how an ocean can be as multi-faceted as the human character, one shore delivering while the other deceives" (111).

In an email exchange, Andrianjafy provided me with more context on her project. "The book was presented last October as a conversation at RAW Material, an art center in Dakar. Although my work is highly subjective, I felt people recognized their city and we didn't have to discuss why it is a disorienting place. It's something we all understand, the book is just a reminder" (Emmanuelle Andrianjafy, pers. comm.). The idea of "text-as-reminder" is worthwhile carrying forward as one considers the literature regarding the anthropology of urban experience. Going back to foundational texts in urban sociology from Georg Simmel, for example, we understand the emergence of the city caused a qualitative change in how people perceived time, for example. City as sentiment, text as evocation.

On the surface, *Nothing's in Vain* is sparse, even for a book essentially of photos. There are no captions, with the

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only text being two pages of Øyen's prose in English and French placed at the very end of the book. However, in the hands of an imaginative reader or an inspired professor, Andrianjafy's work can be as instructive as any ethnography. She does not tell but rather shows a migrant perspective, as the reader/viewer feels movement and the human struggle to make sense of difference. While the mode of presentation is not scholarly, the themes are squarely within the purview of city studies insofar as the urban and transnational topics of diaspora, migration, and experience are explored. In my opinion, university instructors could use this book as a complement to ethnographic and theoretical texts.

The images suggest anthropological topics such as the relationship between humans and landscapes, the role of religion in urban Senegal, the human experience of robust urban development, and the vibrancy of street during the day and night. One can glean, for example, that the interface between humans and the environment, built or otherwise, is often improvised and dynamic. Moreover, human emplacement (i.e., practices used to make place) consists of multiple dimensions including religion and ethnicity. Finally, the temporalities of the city, the scenes of sunlight, shadow, darkness, and everything in between, are also significant points of understanding and experience. It stands to reason then that *Nothing's in Vain* is not a smooth book with a glossy narrative; rather, the layout and the images themselves force one to fill in the gaps. Human portraits,

dark tones, dead fish, bird's-eye views, arid landscapes, domestic scenes, crowded streets, misty mosques, natural overexposure, whitewash, supreme fashion, isolated palaces, and piles of rubble mingle as the noble baobab tree seems to absorb it all.

Andrianjafy's juxtaposition avoids the pitfalls of exoticization, celebration, and exploitation. And, yet, she realizes the complexities of reception and the politics of representation. In our email exchange, Andrianjafy reflected, "I think the audience for the photobook in general is small. The leading bookshop in Dakar showed no interest for the book stating it was too 'artistic'. . . . My impression is that the majority of people interested in the project [are] not Senegalese." In this last phrase Andrianjafy identifies the persistent conundrum of anthropological writing and readership.

Mulling over the images in *Nothing's in Vain*, one sits in between displacement, experience, and representation. Individual adaptation serves as a temporary, albeit unsatisfactory, resolution. The outsider readjusts. "In the rawness, with time, a different order of sensation was devised, a new perception . . . an acclimation began to unfold" (111). And, yet, as any of us know, we, the hundreds of millions of displaced souls on this planet, know that integration is never complete. The tactility of the Other and the materiality of the city are always social and often fleeting. "There is nothing to say or do, but to observe the way things are. Like a shadow sweeping in front of the rising moon—like a spirit, or memory—

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practically touching my face, yet still not there” (111).

[Dakar; Senegal; Photography;  
Displacement; Urban Contradictions;  
Experience]