

# Make Shift

## Street Vendors as Mobile Infrastructure in Zimbabwe

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Kathryn Takabvirwa

In 2015, the Zimbabwean government announced that street vendors had one week to clear the streets or the national army would be deployed against them. This was part of a long-standing campaign of disavowing and displacing vendors. Yet street vendors are integral to economic life in Zimbabwe. In this paper, I examine vending and its policing. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Zimbabwe to ask what underlies the vitriol and violence targeted at vendors. I propose that vending is more than a constellation of individual traders and that its politics extend beyond the conceptions of (il)legality that often characterize debates around street trade. Rather, vending has weaved itself into an infrastructure of economic life in Zimbabwe, facilitating vital flows and undergirding an economy rocked by economic turmoil. Yet vending operates as an infrastructure of disavowal at the nexus of citizenry and spatial politics, as “unwanted” persons operate in unauthorized spaces. Recognizing vending as infrastructural opens up consideration of a decolonial approach to infrastructure and urban governance in African cities.

In May 2005, the Zimbabwean government launched a massive campaign in which it overturned street vendors’ stalls, arrested informal traders, and demolished houses it deemed unsanctioned. It called it “Operation Murambatsvina”—“Operation Drive Out the Filth.” Seven hundred thousand people—5.9% of the population—lost their homes at the hands of the government in the space of a few weeks at the beginning of winter (UN Special Envoy 2005).<sup>1</sup> Three hundred thousand people lost their livelihoods (UN Special Envoy 2005). The national police commissioner-general at the time reportedly said that the operation was necessary to “clean the country of the crawling mass of maggots bent on destroying the economy” (Fontein 2009:373). As people stood devastated amid the rubble of what had been residences and businesses, they spoke in disbelief about the “tsunami” that had hit them.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, the state tsunami struck again. Street vendors were told to clear the streets within seven days or the army would be deployed to remove them. In 2016, yet another campaign was launched against street vendors. And then another, and another (see Mavhunga 2018). With each clampdown comes a fresh set of headlines, as concentrated assaults on vendors are often chronicled as episodic.

1. For scale, that would be like the US federal government demolishing the homes of everyone in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, and Atlanta, rendering them homeless in weeks (5.9% calculated using US Census Bureau population data as of July 1, 2019). While demolitions and arrests were largely conducted by the police, I mark “the government” as the actor here and elsewhere in the paper when the policies or practices stemmed from beyond the police.

2. Murambatsvina appears in NoViolet Bulawayo’s (2013:76) *We Need New Names*, unnamed but indexed through references to the “tsunami” and “bulldozers” that have become its signature referents.

Yet eruptions like Murambatsvina occur within a system of ongoing routinized harassment and displacement of street vendors. In towns and cities throughout Zimbabwe, police officers and municipal officials have been dispatched to harangue or arrest street vendors on an almost daily basis at various points throughout the past two decades. This is in spite of the fact that vending is a core component of economic life in Zimbabwe, buttressing the country during economic turmoil.

When Murambatsvina occurred, unemployment was estimated at 75% (UN Special Envoy 2005:17),<sup>3</sup> with many surviving on some form of microtrade. This was before hyperinflation further lacerated the economy, hitting a record 89,700,000,000,000,000,000% in 2008 (Hanke and Kwok 2009), vaporizing life savings and the value of salaries while crippling shortages of essential goods like food and fuel, business closures, and worsened unemployment further exacerbated economic pain (Raftopoulos 2009). As Zimbabwe underwent hyperinflation, the very logic of the economy shifted toward informalization, improvising (*kukiyaya kiyaya*)

3. The fact-checker Africa Check notes that unemployment estimates range from under 5% to over 90% depending on the source; the various estimates are not based on clearly reliable data (Chiumia 2014). The director of the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, Dzinotizei Mutasa, explained that the agency used the metric of “economically active” to arrive at an 11% unemployment rate, reasoning that whether one is “selling juice cards, driving an emergency taxi or . . . working as a hair dresser,” they are “economically active,” adding: “Textbook economists will say [unemployment is] 85% but . . . if we had a population like that most people in Zimbabwe would have died” (*Herald* 2013). Thus, street trade, like “selling juice cards” (cellphone credits), is recognizable to state organs as valid enterprise when measuring unemployment but is otherwise assailed.

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becoming the prevailing logic of the national economy—an assemblage of stopgap economics (Jones 2010). These activities are central not only to the lives of the people involved in them, but also to the national economy. Historian Alois Mlambo (2017) notes that “the informal economy in the country was estimated at 59.4 percent of GDP in the 1999–2000 fiscal year . . . the highest in Africa” (107). In 2019, the informal sector accounted for 33.7% of all employment in the country and 40.3% of employment in urban areas (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency 2019:136). Street vending is a core component of this informal economy.<sup>4</sup> While there have been street vendors in Zimbabwe at least since the 1930s (Barnes 1999), in the 20 years of protracted economic crisis Zimbabwe is still enduring,<sup>5</sup> the numbers of street vendors have swelled. On the pavements of the country’s city centers, at formal markets, on street corners, and on improvised tables outside their homes, Zimbabweans survive by selling.<sup>6</sup>

With vending standing as a core component of economic life in Zimbabwe, how are we to understand the persistent displacement and vitriol targeted at vendors? Reading the story of policing alongside the persistent turmoil in Zimbabwe’s economy, I argue that street vending serves as a form of vernacular urban infrastructure in Zimbabwe—wherein the wooden stalls, cardboard-box stands, vegetable-laden carts, and vendors themselves make up that fluid infrastructure, as the human and material components of vending form a lattice for economic and social life. This infrastructural form is vernacular both in the architectural sense of being functional, made for use, and in the linguistic sense of being locally derived.<sup>7</sup> From the individual cardboard boxes arrayed with tomatoes to secondhand clothing markets (*mabhero*), vending is an infrastructure of survival where the informal sectors of the economy function as a form of scaffolding for the tatters of the national economy. Yet it is an infrastructure that is constantly being disassembled and reassembled, unmade and remade. It is vital yet disavowed, with displacements vitiated through logics of exclusionary citizenship and colonial imaginaries around urban space, even as the practices of removal are contested in the everyday spaces of vending and its policing.

Thus, there are two stories here, nested within each other—one about policing and the other about infrastructure. Each

4. There is some slippage between the informal economy, street vending, and other forms of microscale trade, like shoe cobbling at a roadside stall. Murambatsvina targeted all these forms.

5. Historians of Zimbabwe often point to 1998–2000 as the period when Zimbabwe entered what they term “the Zimbabwean crisis” (see Raftopoulos 2009).

6. In 2020–2021 the coronavirus pandemic added another layer to the story of livelihoods and state intervention. COVID-19 and its attendant deaths, lockdowns, business disruptions, and partial border closures further compounded the challenges of living in Zimbabwe.

7. The term “vernacular” was loaded in colonial registers and was used to mean not only African, but also inferior and unpolished, particularly with regard to languages. I use it as part of an effort to counter the devalorization of the locally derived.

needs to be understood in relation to the other. Examining the ways vending serves as a form of vernacular urban infrastructure—attendant with the affective, symbolic, and aspirational dimensions of infrastructure—allows for an understanding of the state’s visceral responses to street vending. Furthermore, it shows how the policing of street vendors and the informal economy of which they are emblematic unfold as a continuous exercise of disavowal in which the constant threat of displacement keeps vending ungrounded as a seemingly temporary and unsettled form—this making shift creating the city as a site of mobile infrastructure.

In making the case for seeing vending as infrastructure despite state attempts at casting it as corrosive to economic life, I am inspired by Larkin’s (2013) contention that “infrastructures are not, in any positivist sense, simply ‘out there’” (330). Rather, forms come to be recognized as such, where “the act of defining an infrastructure . . . comprises a cultural analytic that highlights the epistemological and political commitments involved in selecting what one sees as infrastructural” (330). Street vending provides a type of trestle on which life can stand and continue. The dollars from selling flow into different sectors of the economy, such as bus fares, which drivers use to buy petrol, which translates into electricity, and so on. In attending to these modalities, I hope to contribute to decolonial approaches to studying infrastructure, differentiated citizenship, and the governance of urban space. I join with scholars who seek to understand how informalized trade continues to be castigated in cities in Africa, despite being central to economic life (Hart 1992:219).<sup>8</sup>

When the 2015 ban on *mabhero* was announced, I was in the middle of conducting fieldwork on intensified police presence on roads in Zimbabwe. I had not been focused on vendors. I grew up in a small town in Zimbabwe where vendors are regularly displaced; it was one of those forms of state violence to which I had become habituated. The 2015 ban, together with the ways research was teaching me to attend to what had otherwise become ordinary, refocused my lens on vending. This paper draws primarily on the 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in 2014–2015 and seven months of subsequent fieldwork in 2016, 2017, and 2019. I did the bulk of my work in a small to midsized town, as well as some interviews and participant observation in Harare, the capital city. I am fortunate to be a Black Zimbabwean and a woman from a lower-middle-income family, which allows me to be unremarkable enough to move through fieldwork and learn from my interlocutors, even as it makes me particularly visible to my government. Because of the latter, I do not name my field site, so as not to compound the state of policing in that town.

8. Keith Hart (1992), credited with conceptualizing the “informal economy,” notes the problematic nature of the term as one that “rest[s] . . . on the static negations of state capitalism” (225) and the importance of ethnography in interrogating the ways that the concept of “informal” implies an antithetical relationship to that deemed the “formal economy.”

### Kotamai: The Bend-Down Boutique

The weekend secondhand clothing market was referred to by its patrons as Kotamai Boutique—the “Bend-Down” Boutique. Often, you would have to bend down to leaf through the clothing, piled in stacks on the ground. The clothing that vendors sold there arrived at Mozambique’s ports packaged in bales, popularizing the term “*bhero*,” the Shona form of “bale.” One Sunday, I bought six new tops, \$1 each, from H&M, Calvin Klein, Mossimo (Target), Old Navy, North Route, and Sportsgirl; a pair of J. Jill jeans for \$2; and a Banana Republic skirt for \$3.<sup>9</sup> “Your dollar now has buying power!”<sup>10</sup> a man was calling out in Shona. And “The *bhero* from [Prophet] Magaya, *bhero* from [Prophet] Makandiwa, *bhero* from Madzibaba Ishmael,”<sup>11</sup> playfully invoking the names of the leaders of three of the largest miracle circuit churches in Zimbabwe at the time.<sup>12</sup> He looked sharp in his shirt and jeans, no more than 28. The man at the next stand had a pink floral blouse buttoned tight on top of his T-shirt. He was his own mannequin, displaying the clothes he was selling, good-naturedly telling customers the blouses were so beautiful that even he could wear them, all the while smoothing the pleats of the taut blouse. There were no changing rooms at the Bend-Down. Across the way, a woman was trying on a dress by pulling it on over the clothes she was wearing. At my field site, the mabhero market took up a city block. There were rows of clothes, each stall about 2 meters square, some with umbrellas, some without, some with tables, some with their clothes neatly arranged, some with clothes in messy heaps on tarps on the ground. There were men and women across ages, some in their 20s, some all the way up to their 60s. As I rummaged through a stack of jeans, the 60-year-old woman selling them told me about her daughter, who had left to find work in Johannesburg. Another woman told me she was a high school teacher. She sold clothes to supplement her income. It was the beginning of August 2015. The minister of finance and economic development had just announced a ban on the import of secondhand clothing (mabhero), effective September 1. I asked one of the women, “Mai Kuda,” about the proposed ban.<sup>13</sup> She replied, before I finished posing the question: “They can never undo mabhero. Everyone is surviving on it. Fees, rent, everything—it’s all from the *bhero*.” Mai Kuda leaned forward and pointed across the path between the rows of mabhero stalls to a man who was looking through a pile of jeans at a nearby stand.

9. All references to currency are in US dollars, which was the official currency in Zimbabwe at the time of the research.

10. “Dhora rako rava kutenga!”

11. “*Bhero rekwaMagaya, bhero rekwaMakandiwa, bhero rekwa-Madzibaba Ismaeri.*”

12. Walter Magaya led Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministries, Emmanuel Makandiwa led United Family International Church, and Madzibaba Ishmael led Johanne Masowe eChishanu, a syncretic *mapostori* church.

13. I use pseudonyms except when referring to national government officials.

“Even maChef [i.e., bosses] of the city council shop here,” she said. The man she was pointing at was indeed a high-ranking city council official, and there he was, sure enough, buying jeans at the Bend-Down Boutique. For Mai Kuda, the *bhero* market had taken on a life of its own and had so inscribed itself in the lives of Zimbabweans that it would not be easily excised. In towns across the country, consolidated mabhero markets like the Bend-Down Boutique and distributed pavement stalls were evincing what de Boeck (2015) described as infrastructural elements—those that “create thickenings of publics and offer the possibility of assembling people or slowing them down . . . impos[ing] their own spatial and temporal logic onto the city” (153). Not only was vending rerouting traffic on Saturdays, slowing pedestrians, and redirecting cash flows, but it was also reordering the shopping of government officials tasked with dispersing it. The September ban on mabhero was looming, but Mai Kuda was not anxious. Another vendor I interviewed told me that the proclamation was “just for show.” The government wanted to be seen to be doing something, and such threats were part of that performance.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, two months before the ban on mabhero, the minister of local government had ordered street vendors to clear the streets, threatening to deploy the army to enforce his order. Street vending was no longer permitted, but the streets were lined with vendors—more now, in fact, than ever before. Municipal police went around every couple of days to remove vendors. At the appearance of the officials, vendors would disperse, wares packed hurriedly into boxes or wrapped in sacks. When an official would appear at one end of the street, vendors would pack and run all the way down the street like fleeing dominos, then melt into the crowd. Cell phone and pirated DVD vendors told me they arranged their goods for ease of dismantling. For those who sold tomatoes, it was more complicated. Some stacked each pile of tomatoes as a square-base pyramid with 30 tomatoes (1 + 4 + 9 + 16) or 55 (1 + 4 + 9 + 16 + 25) per stack, each to be disassembled then reassembled every time the police came.

Street vending combined the material with aspects of what Elyachar (2010) terms “social infrastructure,” the relationship building that allows vendors to often disappear into the shops outside of which their stalls stand. As soon as the officials would leave the area, the vendors would reemerge, once more unpacking their boxes and laying out their sacks. The officers knew this. I often observed officers sitting, clipboards on the ground, exchanging stories with the street vendors whom they chased away each day. It was understood: each was doing their job, looking for a way to live. Mai P told me, at the end of a long conversation at her stall, that the officials knew that anytime now, they too could lose their jobs. “Then they’ll be right here with us, selling on the streets,” she said. But, she added, some officials forgot that they too stood on shaky ground, and when those “rough” officials finally found themselves out of work,

14. For an examination of the purchase and supply sides of secondhand clothing at markets like Kotamai, see Hansen’s (2000) *Salaula*.

“They’ll want to set up their stall next to mine, and I’ll tell them, ‘No, go somewhere else.’” To her, the officers and the vendors stood in mutual precarity, separated by the officers’ uniforms and mandate as well as time (Takabwirwa 2023). And vending was the fallback into which those dislodged from formal employment would need to step, a fallback that the not yet unemployed were constantly unsettling.

Another one of my interlocutors, T, a cellphone vendor, took up the theme of officers failing to weigh other considerations beyond their policing mandate and was pained that officers “forget that we are their little brothers, nephews, mothers, and sisters. . . . We’re just trying to survive.” The municipal police had just swept through his street. T was remounting his stall as he spoke. He had an array of cellphones, from the Chinese Samsung Galaxy S4 knockoff to the basic \$25 Nokia 1280 and Samsung E1100 phones, which only called, texted, and had flashlights and were known as “the little goat” (*kambudzi*) you buy when you cannot afford a cow.

T’s words stayed with me—about the police “forgetting” how they stand in relation to their fellow citizens and, conversely, the state. If, as Ferguson (1994) puts it, the state is “a way of tying together, multiplying, and coordinating power relations” (273), a “way of tying together” that must be thought of in relation to its historical specificities (Trouillot 2001), it is not surprising that vendors like T expect the police to interrogate their own actions. Officers are deployed in service of a “way of tying together . . . power relations” (Ferguson 1994:273) that denies the other ways police and those they police are tied together, as “brothers,” with the officers themselves similarly subject to state violence.<sup>15</sup>

Another vendor I interviewed told me: “This is their time, their time that they’ve been given by God, that He’s allowed them to harass us. Our time will come, when He will see our suffering and intervene.” It was not a statement of surrender. It was anger, frustration, and the bidding of time. She was in her late 30s. Let us call her Margaret. Margaret was at the same spot every day except Sunday mornings, when she took her family to church. She left her house at 4:30 each morning to hike to where she bought the fruits and vegetables she sold, then went into town, where she would set up her stall until 7 p.m. Then, it was home to cook dinner, clean, and do laundry. It was 12:35 p.m. on a sweltering Tuesday afternoon in September 2015. I had asked her how she was, why I had not seen her at her spot in a few days.

Margaret replied: “We are seeing fire!”

“Oh?” I asked, as if I did not know what she meant.

“This council, here,” she said, referring to the municipal police. “We’re only just setting up now. They’ve only just left, now, finally.” She was adjusting her wraparound cloth (*zambia*) as she sat behind the cardboard box on which she had arranged her avocados, tomatoes, onions, and *masawu*.

“It’s the little man,” she said, referring to one of the officers who came to post themselves at the pavement market. She used the diminutive form for “man” by substituting the person prefix “*mu-*” in *murume* (man) with the diminutive prefix “*ka-*” to make *karume*, belittling the official by moving him from the noun class for people (class 1) into the noun class for small things (class 12). “The woman is better,” she continued, keeping the woman in the person class, the man in the diminutive class—“she is laid-back” (*haana pressure*)—whereas “the little man is constantly going up and down, going around.” Margaret spoke of the male officer almost as if he were a whirlwind, sweeping, spinning this way and that, blowing dust in everyone’s eyes and mouths, picking up stones only to whirl them around and then drop them again. The policing of street vendors is very much a picking up, whirling around, and dropping process.

This mode of policing keeps vending and vendors in a state of impermanence, maintaining vending as an ungrounded infrastructure. One of T’s compatriots, who sold both cellphones and phone accessories, told me that he did not begrudge municipal police their raids. They were just doing their work, he said. “And we’re not supposed to be here,” he added. He explained that it was the situation in Zimbabwe that forced vendors onto the streets, that they did not enjoy breaking the law. He said: “We don’t want to be here, but what can we do?” There is a saying in Shona that comes to mind each time I read his words. It goes: “*Mombe yekuronzerwa igama wakarinda nzira*” (“A borrowed cow is one you milk with an eye on the road”). At any point, its owner may appear. This state of vigilance characteristic of vending is necessitated locally, by the constant policing as whirlwind, and more broadly, by national discourses that vilify vendors, insisting that vending be temporary and marginal. The woman I bought tomatoes and bananas from during my fieldwork sat at the same patch of pavement every day. On one particularly hot day in October, I asked her why she did not put up a large umbrella for herself. She had been trading at that same spot, sweating in the sun all day, for four years. Shaking her head, she told me that the minute she put up a structure of any sort, the police would be on her. “But they know you’re here every day,” I insisted. “No,” she replied. It would be like asking for trouble. Each one’s hold on the proverbial cow is different, but what the relentless policing does is ensure that it is clear that another lays claim to the cow, whether that proverbial cow is the square feet of pavement on which someone sits with their wares, drawing a livelihood with one eye on the customer, one eye on the police, or whether it is Zimbabwe itself, with vending standing as a charged site of contested claims to a part of the life that could be had.

These patches of pavement show the importance of attending, as Dalakoglou and Harvey underscore, to sites through which people move, which can appear as “nonspaces.” The uneven pavement outside stores where vendors like Margaret set up, the side of the road, the spaces between vehicles through which a hawker squeezes himself in a parking lot, selling toy wind vanes, toothbrushes, or airtime, are indeed

15. For textured analyses of the positionality of police in relation not only to those they police but also to the law and the state, see Hornberger (2011), Jauregui (2016), and Ralph (2020).

“replete with social relations, with material histories, with regulatory forces” (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012:463). These sites of what would otherwise be transitory mobility are imbued with relations, histories, and regulatory attempts that prevent them from being what Augé (1995) describes as “nonplaces.” In Zimbabwe, those relations—among officers, vendors, and customers—are structured around the need to constantly move, where the regulatory forces govern not only space but also temporality, requiring that vendors remain ever prepared to dismantle and shift.

### “Order and Sanity”: Alternative Visions of the City

It is worth asking what alternative vision of the city the policing of street vending is meant to bring about. During Murambatsvina, the spokesperson for the police reportedly said that arrests would continue “until there is order and sanity in the streets” (*IOL* 2005). In English, Murambatsvina was referred to as “Operation Restore Order.” What, though, does “order” look like? In Zimbabwe, this goes beyond urban aesthetics. Rather, contemporary policing stems from and retains traces of colonial imaginaries around urban space (Moore 2005; Ranger 2007). This, however, is antithetical to the ideological underpinnings of a state that wants to see itself as anticolonial, and the colonial imprints are little acknowledged among officials.<sup>16</sup>

When Britons colonized what would become Zimbabwe, they administered it as a settler colony—Southern Rhodesia, with settler and colonized in close proximity.<sup>17</sup> As colonial administrations sought to create urban areas, they designated them white spaces. They passed laws aimed at racially segregating the country along a rural-urban axis, forcing Africans into arid “reserves” (*maruzevha*) as Rhodesians promoted the idea that rural areas were the “natural” and rightful place for Africans and urban areas were for European-descended people—even as Rhodesians appropriated nonurban spaces through conservationism and farming in the making of multimodal settler whiteness (Hughes 2010). This bifurcation was central to the construction of the idea of “Africans” in Rhodesia and the coconstitutive making of settler identity as derivative from and oppositional to nonsettler (cf. Fanon 2004 [1963]:4).<sup>18</sup> As

Moore (2005) puts it, Rhodesia “racialized space and spatialized race” (12). It passed laws like the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1952, restricting where Black people could live and own land (Moore 2005), and instituted a pass system requiring African men to obtain and carry IDs and resident passes, limiting their access to urban areas (Austin 1975; Barnes 1997).

As Barnes (1997) notes, Rhodesians saw themselves and, by extension, urban areas as “little white island[s] in a sea of black” (62; Kennedy 1987; West 2002). They recognized, though, that they could not prevent the emergence of African urban populations, as Southern Rhodesia depended on Africans’ labor and consumption in towns and cities (Burke 1996; West 2002). Thus, given these limits on legislative and spatial segregation, the racialization of colonial cities extended to policing urban subjectivity.<sup>19</sup> The state circumscribed the kinds of presence permissible in urban areas. For Africans, to be in urban centers was to be there for a defensible reason: as a worker whose employment permit was always on their person, as the wife of an authorized worker, or as a businessperson licensed to operate in a Black township (Barnes 1997; West 2002).

Ibbotson (1946) writes that the governor of Southern Rhodesia claimed in 1944 that historians looking back on mid-twentieth-century Southern Rhodesia “would conclude . . . by remarking that the problem of the urban Native was one of the most vital of those which faced the colony” (73). Seeing that the urbanization of portions of the African population was inevitable, the question became how to maximally regulate the conduct of these Black bodies and souls to ensure that their presence in urban centers did not overly “contaminate” Euro life (Stoler 2010; West 2002). In Rhodesia, the trope of the “dirty” and undesirable African was “a distinctive aspect of colonial racism” (Burke 1996:20; Vaughan 1991). Colonial administrators feared that “the European may become like the African, backward and generally indolent” (Ibbotson 1946:73; also see Stoler 2010). To guard against this, Rhodesia proposed raising “the African” out of darkness through science, school, and soap, akin to Kipling’s “white man’s burden” yet inspired by a desire to preserve whiteness as it was being constructed in Southern Rhodesia (see Rutherford 2001:86).<sup>20</sup> Racializing urban space as white then meant attempting to “whiten” those Africans who could not be kept out of urban centers, through policing and legislating conduct, to produce a right kind of urban subject. Urban space, filled as it was with Africans, could be policed as white through the management of activity—social and economic. These histories cast their shadow over the unspecified “before” to which Operation *Restore Order* gestures, implicating contemporary policing in the country’s

16. There are also historical precedents for state-enacted demolitions and removals in rural areas during colonial rule. See Moore (2005:16) and Ranger (2007).

17. White (2015) underlines that the colonial era was not uniform; Zimbabwe went through four colonial periods, initially administered by Cecil Rhodes’s British South African Company, then as Southern Rhodesia, then Rhodesia, then Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, before it attained majority rule in 1980 and became Zimbabwe.

18. In Fanon’s discussion of the spatial order of colonial racism, he marks a distinction between the “colonized sector” and the “native sector,” to show that “native” was a colonial invention.

19. See the 1960 Vagrancy Act.

20. I refer to “the African” here, rather than Africans, to underscore the fact that the object of colonial imagination was not actual people living in what is now Zimbabwe, but an essentialized construct of the colonial imagination.

longer history of racializing urban space and creating differentiated citizenship.<sup>21</sup>

### “Now It Is Everywhere”: The Poetics of an Unruly Infrastructure

Vending is both physically and politically unruly. It demands examining what Larkin (2013) terms the “poetics of infrastructure,” wherein we look beyond the technical and functional dimensions of infrastructures to attend to the ways that infrastructures stand “as concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles oriented to addressees” (329). As Zimbabwean newspapers have covered the government’s clampdowns on vendors over the years, their comment sections have allowed readers to weigh in on vending. Two comments from a national paper, *NewsDay*, stood out to me. The first, by a commenter using the handle “Fact,” describes vending as an encroachment into the city that swells and swells, spiraling out of control (*NewsDay* 2015a; see fig. 1).<sup>22</sup>

Fact’s description presents vending as an unruly infrastructure adding layers and layers to itself as it builds itself into an ever more expansive form: newspapers, then airtime, then gloves, socks, and pirated DVDs, and on and on, Fact writes—a mesh of items and activities. The feeling of “now it is everywhere” that Fact describes is also captured in a comment by “Hazvie,” whose words give a sense of being crowded out of the city (see fig. 2). Responding to the same *NewsDay* article, Hazvie writes: “Walking in town: If you trip on a tomato, you’ll fall into bananas, and roll on butternut; if you’re lucky you’ll come to among clothes from a bhero, if you’re unlucky, you’ll get into fire being used to roast mealies.”

The idea that cities were being “overrun” by masses of vendors was a recurring concern not only in online forums but also among people I interviewed in the field who were not themselves vendors. They told me that there was “nowhere to walk” in Harare, that the sidewalks were completely blocked by vendors. A theme that kept coming up was that cities and, by extension, the country were at risk of becoming an overgrown flea market (also see *New Zimbabwe* 2014).

Harare is known as the “Sunshine City” (Kamete 2006). A few days after the local government minister’s 2015 ban on street vending, I interviewed a vendor who was selling bananas in the Sunshine City. She told me: “If it’s about the rubbish, we have the bins. There.” As she said this, she pointed at a cardboard box next to her that she had put out to serve as a bin. “They said they wanted bins; we got the bins.” A few meters away from the neat box into which her customers tossed their banana peels, candy wrappers, and empty potato chip packets was another bin: a large, metallic

City of Harare bin that was overflowing with rubbish. It was already 8 a.m. The city had not emptied its bins. Where would people in town toss their rubbish? The woman selling bananas would allow her cardboard box bin to be used only for rubbish derived from the goods she was selling. Next to the city’s overflowing metal bin, the woman vendor’s neat cardboard box stood almost as a commentary on the ban on vending as “dirty” and tending the Sunshine City toward disorder. Yet the deployment of such narratives against vendors was not merely irony writ large.

The idea of disorder evinced through vending can be read as symbolic of the disarray of governance. One poster on *NewsDay*, “Dee,” puts it well (*NewsDay* 2015b).<sup>23</sup> Referencing promises the government made during the 2013 national elections to create 2.2 million jobs through its Zim Asset plan, Dee writes that vendors “are being chased away because . . . when Zanu PF [Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front] walks past these people sprawled along sidewalks selling second hand underwear, they are reminding [ZANU PF] of their failure, vile[ness] and lying. Instead of 2 million jobs, vendors in streets are a living reminder that, instead, 2 million vendors have been created.”

It is not simply that there are many street vendors and that they are operating “everywhere.” It is that their plurality speaks to the condition of governance in Zimbabwe, their presence rendering visible the failings that necessitated vending and the work of vending in facilitating everyday life. Dee’s comment underlines not only that Zimbabweans are compelled to sell “underwear” on the streets, but also that people have been so economically debased that they would need to buy it. Like the unemptied rubbish bin in Harare, vendor, customer, and secondhand clothing each interpellate the government as failing.

As scholars of infrastructure have shown, infrastructures engender a complex of relations such that the metal, wood, or concrete is deeply political, imbued with meaning, and encased in social relations (Anand 2017; Fredericks 2018; von Schnitzler 2013). Infrastructures are, as Julie Chu (2014) puts it, “partial objects always gesturing to other flows and transactions for their completion as meaningful social forms” (353; also see Larkin 2013; Mitchell 2014:329), requiring that we understand them in their relational forms. In vending, the material components—crates, carts, cellphones—motion to the electronic, social, emotive, and transactional tissue that includes and exceeds the goods and funds exchanged.

Scholars have shown that analyses of infrastructures require attending to the people whose work is central to constituting and operating those infrastructural forms and systems (Anand 2017; Fisch 2018). Simone (2004) and Elyachar (2010) propose that we go further by examining the ways people themselves operate as a form of infrastructure. Simone (2004) posits that people knit themselves into a form of urban infrastructure in African cities like Johannesburg, where infrastructure “is capable of facilitating the intersection of

21. Also note Chingozha and Mawere’s (2015) account of how contemporary policing in Zimbabwe continues to be structured by distrust and by policing attitudes from colonial times, whose lack of reform the authors argue undermines present-day policing.

22. The comments on this article have since been removed online.

23. The comments on this article have since been removed online.

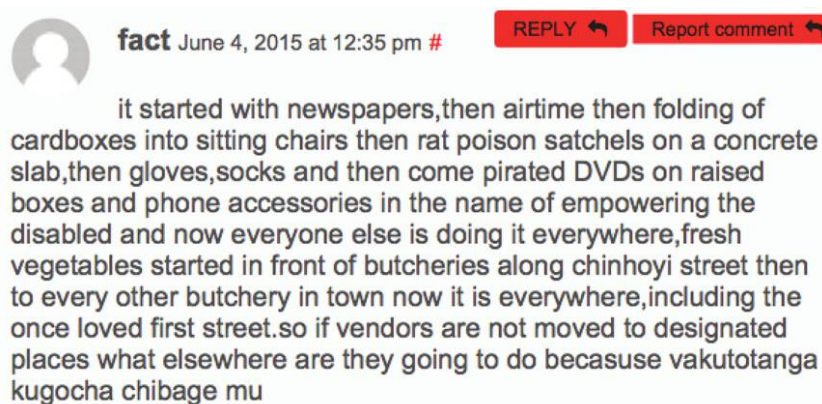


Figure 1. Comment by Fact on *NewsDay*.

socialities so that expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation become available to residents of limited means” (407). There, the “conjunctions” formed between people as they navigate their activities in the city “become an infrastructure—a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city” (Simone 2004:408; Kleinman 2019).<sup>24</sup>

In Zimbabwe, these nodes of activities on the pavements are not only “a platform for reproducing life in the city” but also a template for recording that life. Vendors are central to cities’ living memory of the hyperinflationary crisis, even as they stand central to the articulation of vernacular ways of inhabiting urban space. The proliferation of vending and the range of items for sale chronicle economic life in Zimbabwe, telling a story about consumption. The fluctuation in the US dollar to South African rand exchange rate is tracked in the text messages, negotiations, and calculations of those who change money in the streets. As Dee put it, vendors “are a living reminder” of the conditions of life in Zimbabwe. You might not find a plaque commemorating hyperinflation or unemployment, but the record of the crisis is clear, maintained as it is in the people facilitating life in its wake. Block by block, people are sitting along the pavements or walking along the roads, selling to survive. Indeed, as Fact says, “now it is everywhere”—it, the visible testament to and critique of the conditions of economic life and the intensification of the need for the means to endure it.

### Vending as the Market?

There are moments when the sociality engendered in constant policing is also evident in relations between vendors and officials, who, through the practiced repetitions of making and unmaking vending, show the ironies of everyday policing. To

draw on one of many such cases I encountered during fieldwork: there was a day when vendors in the section of town near the train tracks were sitting with black plastic bags over their goods. A 70-year-old woman vendor explained to me that when the council officials had come that day, they had told the vendors to simply cover their goods and not to run away. Thus, the vendors had pulled black plastic bags over their wares. Officials knew that each time they appeared, vendors dispersed and then returned as soon as the officers left. That day, they decided to shelve the performance to spare vendors the tedious ritual. This is not to say that it was ever rosy between officers and vendors. Officials would confiscate vendors’ goods, including from vendors they had known for years or from whom they themselves bought clothes or groceries, in small towns as well as large.

The back-and-forth between permitting and pummeling street vending and the informal economy that plays itself out on local streets is also evident at the national level. At various times, the government has supported vending or at least moderated its disavowals (Musoni 2010; Sachikonye 2006: 29). Mlambo (2008) shows that Zimbabwe’s informal sector strengthened in the 1990s and was encouraged at the time, particularly with what he terms “backyard industries” (15). Yet it was not only those forms of small-scale business that are conducted in people’s backyards and thus off the city center pavements that were encouraged—like shoe cobbling, raising chickens, or growing kale for sale in one’s backyard. The *Financial Gazette* reported that in 1994, Robert Mugabe, who was president at the time, spoke in support of street vending on national television, urging that vendors “should be given small stalls to sell their goods,” adding, “we see this type of business in New York and London, why can’t we do it here?” (as cited in Rukuni 2005).

Above, I noted that the informal sector has historically made up a significant proportion of the national economy, accounting for 59.4% of GDP in 1999–2000 (Mlambo 2008:15). When the government was launching the 2015 targeted action against vendors, the minister of finance at the time told Parliament that the items vendors were selling—like secondhand

24. Note Fisch (2018) on how human and material forms within infrastructure systems inform one another and Kleinman (2019) on how African migrants in Paris create and navigate networks of possibility at the confluence of social and material infrastructures.

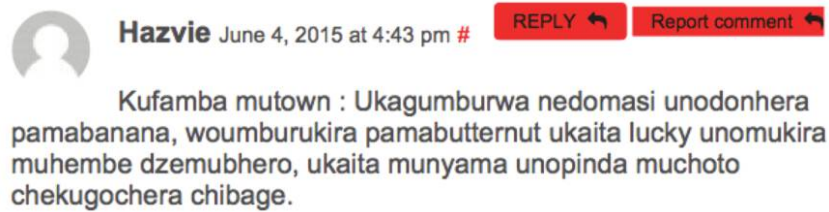


Figure 2. Comment by Hazvie on *NewsDay*.

clothing—were “continu[ing] to flood the market” despite attempts to curtail vending (Zimbabwe 2015). This, he said, was undercutting the government’s attempts to “resuscitate local industry” by reducing demand for locally produced clothing (Zimbabwe 2015).<sup>25</sup> In the finance minister’s construction, the “market” stands separate from the goods and practices of vending. There is no space in his conceptualization to see vending as central to the “market” and to the “local industry” that the government hoped to “resuscitate,” indeed, to see that in this contemporary moment, vending is the market and the local industry.

Attempting to put a finer point on the issue, the deputy minister of industry and commerce, Chiratidzo Mabuwa, stressed to fellow parliamentarians that the problem lay not in vending itself but with unregistered vendors operating in undesignated spaces (Gumbo 2015). Yet as Vambe (2008) shows, registered and licensed traders are targeted during clampdowns, with legislation authorizing and regulating vending disregarded. It is not simply that some street vendors operate at unauthorized spots as “traders out of place,” as if those at municipal-designated spaces were welcome (Douglas 1966). Rather, the violence aimed at vendors marks street vending itself as transgressive. To be a street vendor is to be “out of place,” trading license notwithstanding. In 2005, a Bulawayo city councillor said in alarm that “the clampdown was targeting not only those who were operating illegally, but legitimate vendors as well” (Rukuni 2005). The constant policing of street vendors works to produce urban areas as spaces in which there is no place for street vendors, where clampdowns are not simply to remove vendors operating “illegitimately,” but to mark street vending itself as illegitimate. Above, I examined colonial logics around what constitutes legitimate presence in urban areas and the ways policing urban space is about both place making and policing people. In contemporary Zimbabwe, layered over the remnants of those spatial and citizenry politics is another aspect of belonging that cuts to one of the greatest ironies of postcolonial citizenship: politically unwanted “others” (cf. Mamdani 2001).

25. Customs duty at the time of the ban on secondhand clothing was \$5 per kilogram for clothing and \$1 per pair plus a 40% duty for shoes. However, the minister did not cite the contribution that customs revenue from this industry made to state revenue.

### Why the Vitriol? Infrastructure by the “Wrong” People

Even if vendors are a constant, visible reminder of the government’s failings, to take Dee’s point, and even if vendors are “everywhere,” there is still a disconnect between the seemingly mundane arrangements of tomatoes on pavements or customers riffling through piles of secondhand jeans at the Bend-Down Boutique and the viciousness of the government’s response. The disproportionately violent response requires that we ask what it is that is so offensive about vendors or about them building themselves into an infrastructure of urban survival that elicits the level of vitriol and physical assault meted out to them.

There is a rich body of work on state assaults on street vendors. Edited volumes brought together by Hansen, Little, and Milgram (2014) and Clark (2019) examine the politics of vending as a central component of urban governance across the Global South. Scholars have shown the gendered nature of street trade across multiple cities (Seligmann 2001), exploring how market women navigate marginality and shifts in the modes of their disavowal (Clark 1994), with clampdowns on vendors in cities like Lusaka tied to liberalization and attempts to attract foreign investors (Hansen 2004) and vendors in Kampala targeted as city governance shifted toward technocracy (Young 2017). In Mumbai, food hawkers navigate interactions with state officials in ways that reshape not only urban space but also citizenship itself (Anjaria 2011:62), even as migrant women vendors in Johannesburg deploy strategies of invisibility to capitalize on the limits of policing (Kihato 2013), while markets in Harare are implicated within the larger social relations mediated by cultural norms (Horn 1994). In Zimbabwe, much of the scholarship on vending centers on Murambatsvina, emergent as it was in the aftermath of the 2005 demolitions and arrests. This work is especially helpful in mapping out how street vendors are perceived by government officials—as “alien others” descendant from Zambian, Malawian, and Mozambican migrant workers; as supporters of the opposition; and as rural people encroaching on urban space (Kamete 2006; Muzondidya 2007).<sup>26</sup>

26. Ranger (2007) argues that Murambatsvina was a contemporary expression of historical conflict between municipal and national governments over city residents. Although there may be continuities in cleavages between different levels of government (Ranger 2007), policing



The making and marking of belonging are constitutive of Zimbabwean politics (Muzondidya 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009; Ranger 2004). What makes the infrastructure of crisis all the more unwelcome to the government is that the scaffolding is built by people whom the government considers “not real Zimbabweans” (see Chimedza 2008). In this way, policing vendors is also about autochthony, about who has a right to be in the city and in the nation-state. The antivending campaigns articulate with Zimbabwe’s history of restrictions on access to space and to the city, colonial obsessions with hygiene and the figure of the “polluting native,” the postcolonial government’s mistrust of migrants and its mythologizing of “rural purity” and the imagined rural home, and the state’s attempts to regulate women’s presence and women’s labor. Although a large number of street vendors are male, state responses to vending operate within deeply gendered frameworks. These factors inform and produce a sustained and highly charged clampdown on street vending in Zimbabwe.

When it destroyed vendors’ stalls and people’s homes in urban centers during Murambatsvina, the government told the people to “go back to the rural areas they originally came from” (Habitat International, as cited by Potts 2006:53). Scholars like Deborah Potts (2006) have criticized the government’s assumption that everyone displaced would have a “rural home” to which to “return” (54; cf. Ferguson 1994:156). However, when officials told people to “go back” to their rural homes, this was not based on a mistaken assumption that everyone in urban areas had one such home. Rather, it was the articulation of a conception of personhood and of citizenship based on autochthony: to be a person and to be Zimbabwean was to have a rural home to which one could return (Hammar 2008; LeBas 2006). By implication, those dislocated by Murambatsvina who did not have such a rural place of perpetual attachment were neither “people” nor “Zimbabweans” and thus were not of concern to the government. This position was put forth by the country’s highest-ranking officials. During Murambatsvina, the deputy minister of industry, Phineas Chihota, told Parliament that those affected by Murambatsvina “had no identity and recognition (as Zimbabweans)” (as cited in Muzondidya 2007:334). They were, to use Muzondidya’s (2007) term, “alien urbanites” (334). President Mugabe himself had described vendors and residents of the Harare market township Mbare as “totemless elements of alien origin” (Muzondidya 2007:334, citing *Daily News* 2002).<sup>27</sup>

Not only have vendors been swept to the peripheries of citizenship, but they also have often been scapegoated as the reason for shortages of goods, chronic shortages of foreign currency, and the government’s inability to control exchange

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of street vending is conducted across these divides. Municipal police work in tandem with members of the national police, with discourses surrounding displacement echoed at both the municipal and national levels.

27. Mugabe is cited as having made the “totemless” slur at a rally in Bindura in 2000 (see *Daily News* 2002).

rates (Bratton and Masunungure 2007:25; Sachikonye 2006). Vendors were also painted as purveyors of illegality (Potts 2006), although the quickness with which the so-called informal is associated with illegality even beyond Zimbabwe belies an underlying contention of what constitutes legitimate economic activity (Roitman 2005). Similarly, vendors are often blamed when outbreaks of cholera occur, which they respond to by highlighting the government’s failure to maintain piped water infrastructure, garbage removal, and waste management (Mavhunga 2018).

Scholarship on Murambatsvina has also tied policing to electoral politics. Scholars argue that the demolitions and forced relocations are forms of indirect rezoning or redistricting to break up the opposition’s strongholds in urban areas, reconfiguring the spatialization of the electorate. Some have argued that Murambatsvina was retribution for ruling party Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front’s 2005 parliamentary election losses in cities like Harare (Bratton and Masunungure 2007); that it was about consolidating state power, the violence a manifestation of governance by coercion (Moore 2008); or that Murambatsvina was aimed at preempting protests about food shortages and price hikes—to empty city centers of people who would otherwise participate in such protests (Bratton and Masunungure 2007). Ironically, the “totemless” people relegated outside symbolic and often juridical citizenship by the state are simultaneously endowed with the power of political citizenship—as voters, protesters, and opposition supporters (see Daimon 2016).

For the so-called “totemless” people to be cords holding the country together as they source and trade elusive foreign currency, fuel, and food is that much more intolerable. If food is to be provided, it must be at the hands of the sovereign state, for sovereignty is, as Mbembe (2003), drawing on Foucault, put it, “the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (11; cf. Fontein 2009:373). If the necropolitical state (Mbembe 2003) “makes die” its citizens by allowing “zones of social abandonment” to exist, wherein its (in)action can then allow people to slide into those zones (Biehl 2005; Povinelli 2011), in Zimbabwe, the government is a tsunami that hurls people there. Once there, Zimbabweans are not then “abandoned” by their state. Instead, it stands guard over them to ensure that they do not lift themselves out and that no one approaches to assist and usurp the state’s right to monopolize the means to life.<sup>28</sup> Yet vending stalls not only are visible,

28. In 2002 and 2004, there were legislative restrictions on nongovernment organizations, and there was a ban in 2008 on food aid distribution by nonstate actors when a third of Zimbabwe’s population reportedly relied on food aid (Sevenzo 2008). In 2004, during one of Zimbabwe’s worst food crises, President Mugabe decried food aid in a Sky News interview, saying: “We are not hungry. . . . Why foist this food upon us?” (Meldrum 2004). During my fieldwork, stories abounded of the government not allowing food aid unless it was repackaged into sacks that bore the seal of the state.

tangible testament to the crisis but also attest to people's resolve to sustain themselves around and despite the state. The continued presence of street vendors is a commentary on the limitations of the state's power to fully realize control over not only "the capacity to dictate who may live" (Mbembe 2003) but also by what means that living is attained. Unable to rid the urban landscape of street vendors, the government sends the police out to chase and confiscate, to maintain vendors and their stalls as ever ungrounded, even as vendors stand as the solid urban infrastructure of a country ever surviving against the odds.

Even as scholars like Chimedza (2008) situate Murambatsvina within longer histories of exclusion in Zimbabwe, wherein a differentiated citizenry has been constituted through the unequal distribution of rights—from women to the descendants of migrant workers—so too is it necessary to consider these longer histories in the analysis of the policing of street vendors as an ongoing phenomenon (Barnes 1999; Dorman 2016; Sachikonye 2011). In the 19 years since Murambatsvina, street vendors have continued to be policed, displaced, and dispossessed by the government. If, as Vambe (2008) puts it, Murambatsvina revealed that citizenship is "brittle, and can be subject to revision" (3), the policing of street vendors long after Murambatsvina shows that this revision is continual. What appears as episodic violence is in fact part of a continual process, like dialing up and dialing down the volume while the same song plays. The persistence of the policing of vendors requires frameworks for understanding the ways these repetitions articulate with the project of statecraft—frameworks that interrogate what is so seemingly destabilizing about vending.

Murambatsvina was gut-wrenching. The gash it left on Zimbabwe might never fully heal. As we continue in its wake, 19 years later, it is necessary to reexamine the policing of vendors and of the informal economy to see how that escalation stands as part of a longer and ongoing phenomenon of urban governance. Thinking with infrastructure allows for this. It shows how seemingly extraordinary events like Murambatsvina are patterned on and occur as eruptions of forms and repetitions of violence that are weaved into everyday life.

### Rethinking Modernity, Decolonizing Infrastructure

The vending-as-infrastructure lens is also crucial in two ways. First, it allows for the rethinking of the urbanism-modernity-infrastructure nexus in studies of cities in the Global South. And second, it centers the need for a decolonial reading of infrastructure.

Infrastructures are often seen as modernist forms, particularly in scholarship on cities in the Global South (Harvey and Knox 2012; Masquelier 2002; Melly 2013). Examining road construction in Peru, Harvey and Knox (2012) argued that roads hold "promises of emancipatory modernity"—for example, by offering "the promise of speed and connectivity" (523). Yet infrastructures index relations of inequality and the shuffling and shuffling of responsibility between actors,

materializing what Appel (2012) terms "infrastructural violence." Water and sewage systems are developed, for example, within enclaves of expatriate oil company communities, bypassing Equatorial Guineans in whose towns the companies operate (Appel 2012; cf. Caldeira 2000; Makhulu 2015). As infrastructures operate as sites for the imagination of a certain type of utopia (Melly 2013), they are at the same time overlaid with what Klaeger (2013) calls their "perils and possibilities," as hope and strain stand baked together into the tar that crisscrosses African landscapes. In her work on roads in Niger, Masquelier (2002) writes that they "retain traces of the violence and terror of colonial times" and, in so doing, "endow . . . the past with a tangible, and at times frightening, immediacy" (830). Similarly, the concrete walls of the Kariba Dam represent white settlers' attempts to claim belonging by manipulating Zimbabwean landscapes (Hughes 2010). Today, that same dam generates hydroelectric power that enables life while posing a perpetual risk of flooding. Attending to the ways that infrastructures are "semiotic and aesthetic vehicles" and interrogating "what sort of semiotic objects they are, and . . . how they address and constitute subjects" (Larkin 2013:329; Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2018) can allow us to examine the ways infrastructures serve as ambivalent terrains constituting multiple addressees.

Roads like Samora Machel Avenue in Harare, along which traders sell newspapers to motorists stopped at red lights or in traffic jams, were a central feature of colonial governance in Africa. Colonial administrators forced Africans to work on road and railway construction—the infrastructure that would then go on to channel people as labor to mines and farms as well as minerals and crops out to ports. "Infrastructure in the colonies was primarily linked to processes of extraction and a biopolitics closely bound up with the project of colonial domination" (von Schnitzler 2008:908–909). Some may look at a speeding train and feel inspired by it. Others are reminded of Hugh Masekela's (1994 [1974]) "Stimela," the song of the train as a vessel of dislocation and dispossession that takes people from their homes, herds, lands, and loved ones, to use Masekela's words, to work in South Africa's gold mines "16 hours or more a day for almost no pay." He sings: "When they hear that choo choo train chugging and pumping and smoking and pushing . . . they always cuss and they curse the coal train, the coal train that brought them to Johannesburg—*Stimela*" (Masekela 1994 [1974]). He punctuates his words with sounds of a train screeching as he sings, "Sihleli njenge zinja, emigodhini . . . sikhalel' izingane zethu" ("We live like dogs, at the mines . . . we cry for our children"). That is the meaning of the train: separation and suffering.

Infrastructure in Africa is often a domain in which material forms derived from colonial origins, for colonial purposes, are taken in the postcolonial era as "ailing" or "failing" (de Boeck 2015). Potholes, electricity outages, and insufficient water piping are often taken as evidence of failure in and justification for the "civilizing mission" of colonialism (Mavhunga 2011; von Schnitzler 2008). Decolonizing infrastructure entails detaching

colonial meanings and features from extant structures—building roads, water systems, and sewage pipes to serve high-density neighborhoods that were structurally excluded by colonial regimes or relocating factories and their toxic pollutants away from low-income areas and redressing urban planning’s “biopolitics of racial infrastructure” (Chari 2013:156). Furthermore, it requires redefining what is recognized as infrastructure, expanding the category beyond capital-intensive forms to see how infrastructure can be cobbled together stall by stall, by ordinary people.

With conventional types of infrastructure underlain with colonial histories of extraction and violence, forms like street vending stand as a mode of restorative infrastructure. Holding in view the ways infrastructure can serve as both “a material embodiment of violence” and the means for “inscribing unjust relations . . . into the tangible form and mechanical functioning of city streets” (Rodgers and O’Neill 2012:404–405), while street vending is shot through with unjust relations, it is not itself the medium for performing violence.<sup>29</sup> Vending operates in response to and alongside other forms of exclusion, serving as a form of restorative infrastructure. Even as the national economy is fractured by state policies and livelihoods are broken by state-led demolitions, inflation, an unstable currency, and recurring shortages, street vending and informal economic life buttress supply chains, provision livelihoods, and support economic life.

Attending to vendors as the infrastructure of economic survival allows us to take seriously Mavhunga’s (2011) provocation not to perpetuate a view of Africans “as helpless, initiative-less, and static—except when moved by the kinetics of outsiders” (81) and Diouf and Fredericks’s (2014) contention that we must interrogate similar portrayals of African cities. Mavhunga pushes against discourses that associate vending with “chaos.” He writes that street vendors are represented as typifying “rural takeover of the urban area” and that this is presented “as a transgressive kind of mobility” (Mavhunga 2011:81). Yet, in fact, theirs is “restorative mobility, the decolonization of a European city built in Africa” (81; Makhulu 2015). Rather than seeing vending as that which spoils urban centers, as a regressive form of urban life, as the antimodern, this conceptualization of vending opens up a space for considering noncolonial infrastructural forms and for speaking into the problematization of the relationship between infrastructure and modernity in African cities. While physical infrastructure has been faltering—potholes marring tarred roads, water pipes rusting from disuse, power outages accompanied by ominous warnings about the Kariba Dam wall and hydroelectric turbines<sup>30</sup>—the human infrastructure has continued to push on.

29. Some store operators may disagree, as might those who object to vending’s impact on circulation on pavements and city aesthetics.

30. See World Bank (2015).

## Conclusion: Making Shift

Policing, constant and persistent as it is, never actually clears the streets of street vendors. An officer appears at the end of the street, vendors gather their wares and flee, and a few minutes after the officer leaves, the vendors have reassembled their merchandise. On their way home from work, officers stop to buy tomatoes from those very same vendors. These repetitions are not evidence of failure at ridding cities of vendors. Cities need vendors. Rather, the sweeping up and letting down is the point. Policing and politicians’ threats work to keep vendors moving, ensuring that they do not forget that they can be dislocated on a whim. In constantly making vendors shift, policing maintains the notion that vending should only ever be makeshift. This temporariness is produced against a backdrop of the permanence of the remains of the economic crisis.

If, as Chu (2014) notes, “infra” means “below,” “as the *infra*-in *infrastructures* implies, such configurations are also supposed to sediment into their social surroundings” (353). In Zimbabwe, it is this sedimentation that the government will not allow. What does it mean for an infrastructure to be made to be ungrounded? Imagine if people laid their own water pipes or installed networked solar microgrids and state actors regularly dug up the pipes, tore down the solar panels, and destroyed the inverters so that the people would have to constantly rebury and reconnect the water pipes and remount the solar panels, state and citizens unbuilding and rebuilding key infrastructure in a continuous back-and-forth. This is the story of the policing of street vending in Zimbabwe. The sheer amount of state resources required to maintain this activity of dismantling vending requires that we ask what is at stake in the unrelenting policing of street vending.

It could be argued that the government is unable to completely dismantle vending—that the partial and iterative displacements evince the limits of state capacity. It is evident that vendors resist removal, persistently returning and reconfiguring urban governance (Kihato 2013; Musoni 2010). However, the Zimbabwean government has historically proved itself not to lack capacity when it comes to its policing functions (Maringira 2021; Sachikonye 2011). Rather, vending persists as makeshift because it is a critical infrastructure. The country’s urban landscape is marked by this defiant infrastructure of the ongoing crisis, despite state attempts at sweeping the ruins of the crisis out of the public eye and preventing secondhand clothing stalls and foreign currency traders from sedimenting (Chu 2014:353) into urban memory—memory of an ordeal that is still unfolding.

In proposing that we recognize vending as urban infrastructure, I take seriously Simone’s (2004) contention that such a framing brings to the fore the lives and work of people who would otherwise be seen as “marginalized from and immiserated by urban life” (407). These city residents, when present in scholarship on infrastructure or city life, are often there as “people against infrastructure”—as displaced by the construction of dams or roads (Hughes 2010), as skeptical of

construction projects, as excluded from water and sewage systems (Appel 2012), or as circumventing water meters and bypassing electricity billing systems (von Schnitzler 2013). Similarly, by recognizing the ways people live around and in spite of state regulation, we can attend to the ways that infrastructure serves, as von Schnitzler (2013) puts it, as “a political terrain for the negotiation of central ethical and political questions concerning . . . the shape of citizenship” (670; Anand 2017; Doherty 2019; Fredericks 2018; Holston 2009). Street vending is punctuated by creativity and perseverance (Diouf and Fredericks 2014; Musoni 2010). As vendors continuously return, in jokes and complaints, in the networks that develop as vendors communicate about officers approaching, and in the assemblages that take form between vendors and the shopkeepers whose stores vendors sometimes melt into when dodging the police, street vendors are more and more deeply knit into the social and economic fabric of cities. The stories unfolding on the streets of Zimbabwe have not been stories of people against infrastructure but, rather, of people whose economic lives buttress the socioeconomic life of the country.

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## Comments

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I remember the shock and uncertainty—as well as anger and despair—that Operation Restore Order (Murambatsvina) provoked in Harare in 2005. Its sudden unexpectedness caught everybody by surprise—city authorities as much as residents and street vendors. This was aptly captured by its characterization as Zimbabwe’s “tsunami,” a reference not only to events in Asia earlier that year, but also to its brutality and perceived arbitrariness. The fear and insecurities of the immediate period soon gave way to a deeper sense of its uncertainties and contradictions, provoking much rumor and discussion (Fontein 2009). Enacted in the name of “restoring order” or “cleaning the filth,” the tsunami created landscapes of ruination as rubble from destroyed backyard houses filled the streets of Harare’s townships. Although appealing to a reassertion of “apolitical” urban planning, many suspected it was a political act of vengeance by the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) party against Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) opposition-supporting urban populations. And for a process supposed to “restore” order, “sanity,” and “safety” to the “Sunshine City,” it was a brutish and violent affair; people died under the bulldozers, not to mention the many thousands it made homeless (HRW 2005).

For many in Harare, there seemed to be no precedent for Murambatsvina, although some older residents did recall—

sometimes approvingly—previous clearances in the late 1960s and early 1970s under Ian Smith’s Rhodesian government. Yet as scholars of urban Africa noted, both in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, such violent evictions, exclusions, and destructions have been part of urban contestations for a long time (Amis 1984; Mlambo 2008; Ogot and Ogot 2020; Otiso 2009; Potts 2006; Smith 2019). If ZANU PF’s urban politics seemed behind the curve in 2005, then by 2015, when Takabvirwa picks up the story, they had clearly “caught up.” As vividly captured by her account of the contradictory daily relationships of vendors, city officials, and police, central to this is exactly the kind of uncertainty between coercion and consent (Moore 2008)—or necro- and biopolitics, if you prefer—that marked Murambatsvina initially: between demands for “order” and planning, appeals to older notions of urban propriety, and the arbitrary flexing of ruling party “muscle.” It is a politics of uncertainty (Cooper and Pratten 2015) that ZANU PF perfected in rural areas through the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme of the early 2000s, with its combination of violence and lawlessness, emotive appeals to postcolonial restitution, and occasional reassertions of developmentalist technocracy (Fontein 2023). This uncertain duplicity between violent assertions of governmental sovereignty over urban space and populations, interspersed with appeals to technocratic planning and pastoral responses to people’s needs through tacit acceptance (or even celebration) of what used to be called the “informal economy”—now “hustling” (Thieme, Ference, and van Stapele 2021) or, in Zimbabwe, “*kukiya kiya*” (Jones 2010)—is a common feature of urban politics across the continent, particularly in the context of increasingly stark neoliberal inequalities and the growing masses of the never-to-be employed. Urban becoming, in this view, always circulates around uncertainties between planning and improvisation; people, materials, and infrastructure; the informal and formal; and legitimacy and sovereignty (Fontein and Smith 2023; Fontein et al. 2023).

A lot happened between 2005 and 2015 that set the scene for this dastardly “coming of age” of ZANU PF’s urban politics that Takabvirwa does not discuss. The year 2008 and what followed was the pinnacle. It saw the peak of Zimbabwe’s inflationary catastrophe and of its post-2000 election violence, when hundreds of opposition supporters were killed and many thousands more were brutalized. This was followed by the troubled Government of National Unity (GNU, 2009–2013) and, to epitomize the dire state of urban services, a cholera epidemic that killed thousands more than violence had. ZANU PF worked hard to regain political dominance, particularly in urban areas that had long been bastions of opposition support. There were many dimensions of the GNU period (Raftopoulos 2013), but two things stood out. First, MDC partners, now in charge of city authorities, delegitimized themselves through deepening internal struggles, violence, and increasingly corrupt involvement in city politics. And second, ZANU PF thickened its involvement in criminal gangs like Chipangano (Munyarari 2018) in Mbare, Harare’s oldest township, as part of its effort to regain control of urban spaces. Its 2013 election victory suggests

that ZANU PF was surprisingly successful. This marked a moment when it had finessed the uncertain duplicities of urban governance between formal planning, violence, and more pastoral responses to people's everyday struggles.

Takabvirwa urges scholars to employ Simone's (2004) notion of "people as infrastructure" because it promises "a decolonial approach to . . . urban governance in African cities" that recognizes how street vending can be "a form of restorative infrastructure" against a predominant view of "people against infrastructure," which she suggests lies behind the ruling party's repeated attempts since 2005 to restore exclusionary "colonial-era" regulations. Few could sensibly argue against Simone's formulation, as it has become well recognized that cities constantly emerge from contested, incomplete entanglements of people and materials, ideas and stuff, planning and improvisation (Fontein and Smith 2023; Fontein et al. 2023; Guma 2022). Indeed, in most colonial-era cities across the region, people usually pre- and postexisted the imposition of exclusionary urban planning regimes. Nairobi is a good example (Amis 1984; Ogot and Ogot 2020; Otiso 2009; Smith 2019), and maybe Harare was once an exception. If so, as Takabvirwa shows, this is no longer the case. If recognizing people as infrastructure is indeed a "decolonial" move, then ZANU PF has perfected this since 2005 as it has finessed the uncertain duplicities of urban politics.

In the longer, wider view, people as infrastructure have always been constitutive of the core uncertainties that characterize urban politics. More troubling is Takabvirwa's suggestion that there is something "restorative" about street vending. Championing street vending, hustling, and the *kukiya kiya* economy may appear like a redemptive "restoration" of the creative "agency" of people long denied it, whether by colonial-era planning or by regimes like ZANU PF, but it can also appear like a celebration of extreme abjection and precarity on the margins of authoritarian states and exclusivist, neoliberal economies (cf. Jones, Kimari, and Ramakrishnan 2018; Rizzo 2017; Wiegratz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018).

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### Karen Tranberg Hansen

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Kathryn Takabvirwa's discussion of street vending in Zimbabwe makes constructive use of the notion of infrastructure to analyze the unruly economic underpinnings of urban informal activities and their ever-shifting relationship to regulatory agents of the state. Today street vendors of all kinds of goods and services are everywhere in towns and cities in Zimbabwe, but that was not always the case. Strictly regulated by race and economic activity, vending during the colonial period of white settler rule was segregated, out of (white) place, located in the African townships. When on a break from neighboring Zambia

in 1981 to visit the capital of Zimbabwe, Salisbury (renamed Harare in 1982), one year after independence, I was struck by the near absence of street vendors from public urban space and the limited scale of township African markets, much unlike the street vending and market scenes I studied in Lusaka. By the turn of the last millennium, all this had changed. As the author notes at the outset, in 2005 Zimbabwe attracted dramatic international attention when Operation Murambatsvina demolished makeshift housing and cleared away licensed and unauthorized vendors from urban space, demolishing the homes and livelihoods of thousands of persons in the process. As her discussion shows vividly, similar events continue to take place at a lesser scale, again and again, in processes in which street vendors, police officers, and municipal authorities coconstitute a vexing interrelationship of mutual precarity.

Contributing to the growing body of scholarship on street vending, colleagues and I used the notion of street economies for such activities (Hansen, Little, and Milgram 2014). Serving the vast majority of urban populations in rapidly growing cities in the urban Global South, street economies provide basic commodities and services at affordable prices in convenient locations to residents with limited means. Their unprecedented growth is taking place at the same time that urban space is becoming reconfigured in several ways, with difficult consequences for street vendors. One process involves private or foreign investments that are changing conventional land values. Along with this are new urban master plans that often include road construction, the upgrading of city centers for tourism purposes, and the building of shopping malls with upscale entertainment activities, high-rise hotels, and gated communities for the very rich. The rapid expansion of supermarkets across urban Africa is challenging the livelihoods of informal traders and vendors, yet a very large proportion of the urban population continues to rely on open-air markets and street vendors for most of their daily consumption needs. Although the chief focus of this article is on vending as a makeshift infrastructure, it invites some additional discussion of the supply and demand side of vending activities to explain their stubborn staying power. The age and gender dynamics that structure vending also call for more attention.

The fluidity and mobility that are central to their activities help explain why authorities consider street vendors to be troublesome. As the bane of power holders, vendors are often scapegoated for all sorts of societal ills. Their right to be in the city or even the nation is questioned, as in the case of former president Mugabe arguing that street vendors were people without a totem, that is, not Zimbabwean in a cultural sense but "alien others." Violence and xenophobia between South African nationals and immigrant traders from across the African continent have attracted widespread attention (e.g., Crush, Chikanda, and Skinner 2015). Yet because of their massive numbers, vendors in markets and streets are at times courted by political parties and involved in patron-client relationships with groups contending for power. Networking strategies between vendors may fragment as a result, adversely affecting

their efforts to organize collectively. Elsewhere, local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are seeking to improve the work conditions of street vendors. Perhaps there is a relevant account of such interventions in Zimbabwe, although the hostility of the state toward NGOs may have reduced such efforts.

Street vendors turn space into a critical resource even though they are rarely part of new urban master plans. Harare has seen the opening and closing of shopping malls. When the Ximex Mall, built before independence in Harare's central business district, was closed and abandoned in 2013, it became a hive of down-market activity, a hub for street vendors of all sorts, including money changers, until it was demolished in 2014 to make way for a car park. In effect, streets are multifunctional spaces with changing resource environments—buildings, commodities, street-savvy economic and social practices, and rules and regulations—that both enable and restrict the livelihoods of female and male vendors of different ages and backgrounds. Although we learn only in passing about the age, gender, and ethnic dynamics of street vending in Zimbabwe, the author captures well the relationship building between some vendors and state agents that shapes the social infrastructure and binds them together in mutual precarity. In this way, by focusing on the street, she links the concern with economic practices to the social and cultural dimensions of urban life in a more general way when concluding that street vendors constitute an urban infrastructure deeply knit into the social and economic fabric of cities and towns in Zimbabwe.

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### Caroline Melly

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In this keenly observed and lucidly written essay, Kathryn Takabvirwa theorizes street vending as a critical vernacular infrastructure in Zimbabwe, one that generates and sustains an astonishing array of transactions, services, and connections in times of economic turmoil. In doing so, she carries forward a long tradition of meticulous research on market spaces as central spheres of African political, economic, and social life (Clark 1994; Hansen 2000; Peterson 2014; Scheld 2007; Steiner 1994) while skillfully fusing it with the burgeoning literature on infrastructures. In this way, Takabvirwa contributes powerfully to scholarly considerations of the materiality and substance of African cities (Archambault 2018; Fontein and Smith 2023; Fredericks 2018; Hoffman 2017); of the fluxes, flows, blockages, and accretions that distribute and mediate this urban matter (Melly 2017; von Schnitzler 2017); and of the human capacities, solidarities, and interdependencies that constitute and sustain urban life (Degani 2022; Elyachar 2010; Guyer 1995; Simone 2004).

What makes Takabvirwa's approach particularly distinctive is that she refuses to analytically separate street vending from state efforts to disavow, disperse, and dismantle it. In her insistent attention to both vending and its policing, she contributes to anthropological considerations of governance and citizenship, centering this enduring tension as a locus for city making and unmaking (Diouf and Fredericks 2014). She convincingly demonstrates how violent crackdowns and everyday sweeps by police forces temporarily disturb vending practices, producing distinct urban rhythms, thickenings, and discursive possibilities in their wake. This is a state deeply invested in demonstrating its power not by erecting infrastructures but instead by violently uprooting them continuously. Street clearing, she contends, is not a contained event or a dramatic moment of rupture but instead a persistent and continuous mode of governance that becomes enmeshed with the infrastructure itself. This entanglement, in turn, produces vending as a perpetually unsettled and ungrounded infrastructure, defying many of the presumed logics of urban planning, temporality, and (post)colonial development.

This restless energy and constant motion are palpable throughout Takabvirwa's analysis. I read the "Make Shift" of the essay's title not (only) as an adjective (temporary, improvised, stopgap) but also as a verb: to make shift, to make do, to improvise, and to endure, but also, perhaps, to move, to agitate or unsettle, to make room for, or to force some kind of change. The state deploys officers to uproot and disrupt markets, even as vendors subsist, circumvent, and reconstruct the urban economy despite and around these efforts. By attending to the relentless making, relating, dismantling, confiscating, surviving, and extracting that characterize vending in Zimbabwe, Takabvirwa casts these infrastructures as lively, processual, always emergent, and remarkably potent urban amalgams.

We feel this churning energy in the everyday encounters between vendors and state officials. Takabvirwa fleshes out the ambivalences, dependencies, and solidarities that draw vendors and police officers into volatile relations with one another. Like other urban residents, state workers depend on these vibrant market infrastructures for their own household essentials and for the capital that vending infuses into other sectors of the economy. Their kin are pulled into vending endeavors as well: as one vendor puts it, the officers "forget that we are their little brothers, nephews, mothers, and sisters. . . . We're just trying to survive." The officers are themselves always on the verge of becoming vendors, subject as they are to the whims of economic precarity and state violence. Both vendors and police officers must negotiate these social complexities with every transaction and engagement. These slippery encounters, sometimes violent and sometimes more subdued, render vending forever threatened and unstable but also vital and indissoluble. Indeed, vending infrastructures are both the consequence of colonialism's racialization and violent policing of urban space and also a visible, tangible sign of its undoing.

Vending infrastructures do not simply channel currency and goods; they also generate and circulate crucial urban insights,

information, and expertise. Throughout Takabvirwa's essay, I was taken with the strong resonance between these unruly, ever-becoming infrastructures and Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga's (2014) conceptualization of "transient workspaces," also in the context of Zimbabwe. For Mavhunga, Africa's most crucial laboratory spaces are likewise ungrounded and constantly in motion. In his in-depth consideration of African hunting technologies, Mavhunga frames "the work of moving" as itself productive of the kinds of knowing, gathering, and making that bring innovation, even in the face of colonial repression and violence. In similar ways, vendors at the Bend-Down Boutique transform their bodies into mobile mannequins as they wind through shoppers and piles of sorted clothing. They calculate prices, share news and gossip, and work out sales strategies, all while anticipating and dodging the imminent threat of police sweeps. Amid all of this making and shifting, vendors cultivate sales tactics, forge and extend relations, and weave themselves into the fabric of the city.

Takabvirwa also briefly considers how these bodies, text messages, personal exchanges, calculations, goods, and wooden stands congeal together as a sort of vernacular archive of the present, a dynamic and living recording of what people endure and how they carve out possibilities. By approaching these infrastructures as one might an architectural ruin (see, e.g., Hoffman 2017), Takabvirwa surfaces the decolonial narrative possibilities embedded in vending practices. That we might consider vending as an intellectual project of sorts, as a powerful means of public commentary, is perhaps one of the more potent insights in the essay—and, this reader hopes, an ideal site from which to consider the decolonial capacities embedded in making and shifting.

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### Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni

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### The Schizophrenic State and the Crisis of Urban Modernity in Zimbabwe

I am greatly honored to be asked by the editors to comment on Kathryn Takabvirwa's contribution focused on the question of street vendors and their treatment in Zimbabwe. I agree with most of the premises of the arguments proffered by Takabvirwa, even though I think she expended too much effort reading the surface appearances of the deep-rooted problems of imploding postcolonial urban modernity in Zimbabwe. This perhaps has to do with the nature of anthropological approaches, with their emphasis on thick description. The concept of unruly vernacular infrastructure captures very well the surface appearance of the features of the informal vending industry in Zimbabwe. Positing the vernacular infrastructure

of vending vis-à-vis postcolonial policing is very creative, as Takabvirwa sought to understand "the state's visceral responses to street vending." But how adequate is her approach in explaining the mind of the postcolonial state of Zimbabwe vis-à-vis the vending industry? The historical framing of the issues, including taking it back to the colonial period right up to Operation Murambatsvina in 2005 and the banning of vending in 2015, is necessary and enlightening.

It is great that Takabvirwa attempted to deploy "decolonial approaches to studying infrastructure, differentiated citizenship, and the governance of urban space" so as to understand how "informalized trade continues to be castigated in cities in Africa, despite being central to economic life." However, there is no serious engagement with the rich decolonial archive and decolonial literature to achieve this important goal, and there is no specificity in terms of which decolonial approaches are used. For example, the Latin American "modernity and coloniality" decolonial approach is very helpful in tracing the historical and epistemic and even ideological contexts and genealogies of the postcolonial problems of imploding postcolonial modernity and elusive development (see Mignolo 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2022; Quijano 2000). It is handy in constructing "a solid concept of the subjectivity that is produced by the urban process" and "describ[ing] the composition and the agency of the subject that is ontologically proper" to any analysis of "urbanization as the core of the political" (Sanin-Restrepo 2020:5).

In short, across the modern world, Black people in general and African people in particular continue to be treated as problems rather than as people with problems. It was this attitude that enabled genocides at the dawn of modernity, that is, as final solutions to problems. Are street vendors a problem in themselves or people with problems emanating from the failure of the state to absorb them into gainful employment? Takabvirwa's analysis provides details of a perpetual state attitude toward a people who are treated as a problem, very typical of colonial attitudes toward Black and Native colonized peoples. Takabvirwa's contribution is comprehensive and takes us into the postcolonial issues of the urban policing of urban subjectivity, the poetics of an unruly infrastructure, derivative notions of order and sanitation, vendors as reminders of the failures of governance, the scapegoating of vendors as a source of urban problems, the state's attempts to write the vendors out of the nation (aliens), and imbrications of the operations of cleaning cities within the politics of breaking strongholds of opposition.

My commentary is to call attention to the concept of the schizophrenic state of Zimbabwe, which helps to explain its behavior and attitude toward the urban people. It was the leading Zimbabwean political scientist Ibbo Mandaza (1986) who depicted the then-emerging postcolonial state of Zimbabwe as a schizophrenic state. The concept of a schizophrenic state better explains why there are consistent attempts to use the state apparatus to harass street vendors and criminalize the informal economy, even within a context where there is no formal economy to absorb the people in urban areas. The first point is that a schizophrenic state claims to be a people's state

while remaining fearful of the people at the same time. The second point is that a schizophrenic state always uses the name of the people to justify its antipeople politics. The third point is that a schizophrenic state claims democracy while destroying it.

How the Zimbabwean state became schizophrenic comes from the way it was born. It was born in 1980 out of an armed rural-fought guerrilla war in which the freedom fighters had disciplined and pacified the rural population, if not actually conquered the rural areas, on behalf of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front party. Being so born, the newly born state became comfortable in rural areas and not so comfortable in urban areas, in which a people assumed to be undisciplined, unpacified, and unconquered resided. Urban support for the ruling party was never assured. Ironically, the postcolonial state also pursued a modernist-developmental agenda, drawing from colonial notions of the civilizing mission. The urban spaces were taken as epitomes of civilization surrounded by a sea of yet-to-be-civilized rural areas. What also distinguished a schizophrenic state was reasoning that which is unreasonable—for example, maintaining an anti-street vendor attitude in a country where unemployment is above 90%.

In conclusion, the theory of the encryption and decryption of power developed by Ricardo Sanin-Restrepo (2020) is very useful in unearthing “what is buried below the urban liberal simulacra of legality and human rights” (4). The starting point is that in the theory of encryption, the urban is the quintessential form of the encryption of power, involving hiding the message and meaning of things in plain sight. Takabvirwa’s analysis sought to decrypt power in the urban so as to understand policing vis-à-vis the street vendors. The second point is that of the “hidden people” (the “precariat”), who have replaced the “proletariat” (Sanin-Restrepo 2020:23). The street vendor is, in the postcolonial modernist illusion, “a monstrous being (quasi citizen, quasi people, quasi proletariat) that moves in and out of the entrails of the legality and aesthetics of the city” (Sanin-Restrepo 2020:24–25). Thank you to Takabvirwa for provoking us to delve into the urgent task of decrypting the urban with a view to understanding power, capital, and law operations, which produce the street vendor as the hidden people whose appearance in public reveals the failures of postcolonial governance and the implosion of postcolonial modernity.

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#### Charles Piot

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This essay about informal street vendors in Zimbabwe is both a model of clarity and smartly theorized. In “Make Shift,” Kathryn Takabvirwa argues that street vending is the lifeblood of Zimbabwe’s economy—a core feature of everyday life and “the prevailing logic of the national economy”—while nevertheless vilified and demonized by the Zimbabwean state. State officials routinely harass and clear the streets of petty

vendors. But why such a government response to the sellers of tomatoes and used clothing? What is so offensive about these small vendors of everyday needs?

Takabvirwa’s answer to this oxymoron is layered and complex. During Southern Rhodesia’s era of European settlement, colonial reason racialized urban and rural spaces and separated Black bodies from white spaces and neighborhoods, providing, she suggests, a template for racialized removals. During more recent postcolonial xenophobia and worry about invading foreigners, street vendors have often been conflated with these abject others. Furthermore, she suggests that the visibility of informal vendors—who constitute a majority of the workers in Zimbabwe—along city streets is a living daily reminder of the state’s failure to govern, of its inability to properly provide for its citizens.

At the same time, policing the street contains extraordinary irony: the same officers who chase vendors from the sidewalks buy produce from informal food sellers and likely have family members who work in the informal sector. With job precarity, they may also find themselves in their shoes one day.

I would supplement Takabvirwa’s compelling set of explanations with another. Development economists, policy analysts, and state officials across the continent today disavow the informal both because informal workers often avoid paying taxes and because conventional economics regards trade, unlike manufacturing, as unproductive and non-value generating, and thus not in service of the interest of national development. Here, mainstream economics combines with racial legacies in perpetuating violence against informal workers.

Takabvirwa’s own against-the-grain, “decolonial” reading of street vending is inspired. She suggests that street vendors are a human infrastructure. It is they who buttress supply chains, provide livelihoods, support economic life, and suture the city together, stall by stall. Their very existence is transgressive and flies in the face of exclusionary citizenship and colonial imaginaries of urban space. A decolonial reading of infrastructure, then, implies renarrating street selling beyond colonial legacies of policing and removal and seeing it as a vernacular decolonizing of the European city in Africa. This, she suggests, is a “restorative” reading of vending.

I like the argument but nevertheless offer a few comments for reflection. First, while Takabvirwa acknowledges and, indeed, celebrates the informal, there is also a hint of disavowal in her descriptions. Vending is at one point referred to as a “fallback,” relied on when formal employment dries up. “Vendors ‘are a living reminder’ of the conditions of [precarious] life in Zimbabwe.” Vending is an “infrastructure of survival,” a “scaffolding for the tatters of the national [formal] economy.” These ways of putting it, inadvertent as they may be, suggest that street vending is something of a last resort when more formal avenues of employment break down. Then, too, the use of “Make Shift” in her title signifies that vending is a temporary substitute, sufficient for only the time being. A lack.

In Lomé, Togo, where I have conducted research on informality, informal sellers describe their work as a positive choice.



Among other aspects, they appreciate the freedom it offers, to come and go, to work inside and outside the home, to move around the city, to negotiate, banter, and socialize while working, to be their own boss. The freedoms and pleasures of street vending are, for many, preferable to the rigidities of more formal work, even if it means making less money.

Second, I wonder how well her analysis will travel beyond southern Africa? As mentioned, two pillars of her interpretation are to read street vending through settler-colonial imaginaries of racial and spatial separation and through their association with the abject foreigner or nonautochthonous other. Both explanations apply with difficulty to West Africa, where there were few European settlers and where xenophobia and violence against foreign workers have been less extreme than in southern Africa (with the possible exception of Côte d'Ivoire). However, despite the absence of these prior conditions, street vendors are still often seen as abject and are sometimes chased from the streets. My suggestion is that it is informality's association with the inverse of formality (the illegal, the unregistered, the non-tax paying, those with an inability to scale up) that weighs heavily.

Finally, in what sense is Takabvirwa's a "decolonial" reading? She never defines the term, so readers are left to wonder which of its many meanings and range of definitions she is drawing on. I assume she means something like "a decolonial reading attends to longer histories in the sites where anthropologists study, especially the ongoing legacies of colonialism, racism, and white supremacy." And that street vending is decolonial because it evades the system of policing that is identified with colonialism.

All fine, but this move would appear to be little more than a renaming of what anthropologists used to call the local, Indigenous, or non-European. Is street selling not just "African culture"? And how to separate out the colonial from the decolonial after hundreds of years of entanglement?

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## Reply

I am grateful for these thoughtful commentaries and the ways they open up space for further discussion. In crafting my response, I cannot do justice to each of them; I hope that any silences or omissions stand as invitations for future conversation.

### Celebrating or Disavowing Vending?

The aim of my analysis is neither to celebrate vending, as Joost Fontein suggests, nor to disavow it, as Charles Piot suggests. Instead, the paper argues that street vending is a form of restorative infrastructure when read against other forms of infrastructure. Fontein asks whether describing vending as restorative celebrates "extreme abjection and precarity." Recognizing the work people do to survive does not mean cele-

brating the conditions necessitating their labor. It is not to romanticize street vendors. Their work is difficult. Many do it under excruciating conditions—from walking or busing long distances to source supplies, to barely making any profit, their efforts undercut by relentless policing. It is not a celebration of abjection to recognize the contribution street vendors make. Rather, the paper argues that we recognize an aspect of street vending and the so-called informal economy that has hitherto not been acknowledged—that in buttressing the economy as it has, vending serves as an infrastructural form in Zimbabwe and that this invites us to rethink the ways we conceive of both infrastructure and informalized economic activity. Street vendors' work is restorative in many senses. In the face of precarity, street vendors sell to survive and, in so doing, attempt to restore to themselves and to their families what neoliberal policies and brutal governance are constantly eroding. It is a recognition, as Caroline Melly put it, of the ways vending is "vital and indissoluble."

Piot asks whether there is not a "hint of disavowal," for example, in my reference to vending as a "fallback." The question is well taken. My interlocutors spoke of vending in this way, saying that if police found themselves out of formal employment, vending would be a fallback for the officers. For many of my interlocutors, too, street vending was a fallback, where fallback is not "a last resort" but a second, third, or fourth resort—an alternative plan. Some of my interlocutors had once been employed in the formal sector. Others had graduated from university, intending on finding such employment, but were unable to get jobs in the fields in which they had received their degrees. They highlighted this trajectory when discussing their experiences. As in Togo, where Piot found vendors speaking of their work "as a positive choice," so too do vendors in Zimbabwe underline the ways their work is meaningful. The thousands of vendors in Zimbabwe each have their own story of how they became a vendor and how they see their work. Within this plurality of perspectives, many vendors took great pride in having managed the difficult task of gathering funds and materials to set up a stall or have a mobile market (for "hawking"), cultivate a customer base, figure out where and how to source their goods, and navigate the "supply and demand" aspects of vending that Karen Tranberg Hansen highlights. Some vendors dislike their work, just as some professors love their jobs and others do not. For many of my interlocutors, vending was not something that they would have chosen as a first option for their careers, but that issue is different from how well they conducted the work.

### The Decolonial

Several commentaries raise the question of the decolonial. Melly helpfully sees the idea that vending operates as "a powerful means of public commentary" as "an ideal site from which to consider the decolonial capacities embedded in making and shifting." Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Piot ask what I mean by the decolonial. In response to Piot, I would clarify that I am not saying that policing is colonial and therefore evading policing is

decolonial. Contemporary policing retains many colonial logics; however, as I argue elsewhere, postcolonial policing is continually reworked by those who wear the uniform and those it subjects, as “police and policed together negotiate the precarities” of contemporary citizenship (Takabwirwa 2023:236).

What I propose as decolonial is the paper’s reading of infrastructure and urban governance—a reading that problematizes conventional views around infrastructure and modernity and interrogates the depiction of African infrastructures as deficient or ever in decline. I agree very much with Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s reading that the paper shows how street vendors are treated “as problems” (cf. W. E. B. Du Bois 1903). Indeed, vendors are made into a problem by those who see them as such, as they are scapegoated for cholera outbreaks, tax revenue decline, and so on. Writing about Black life in America, Du Bois (1903) describes “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (2). That sense of assessing one’s work through imposed metrics of value also permeated colonial life in Zimbabwe and continued into postcolonial life, through conceptions like “modernity.” A decolonial approach interrogates that gaze. It recalls Aimé Césaire’s (1972) contention that colonization tore people “from their gods, their land, their habits, their life” (6) and instilled in them “fear . . . and an inferiority complex” (7; cf. Mudimbe 1988:14). It recognizes that colonial logics persist in frameworks that continue to dispossess Africans of their gods, lands, habits, and lives and continue to maintain the idea that to be African is to be inferior, lacking, failing. A decolonial approach to infrastructure is one that pushes against these logics (cf. Rutazibwa 2019:66; Sabaratnam 2017:7).

### Make Shift versus Makeshift

I am grateful to Melly for drawing attention to the title and how “Make Shift” evokes both an adjective and a verb. Indeed, the paper is titled “Make Shift,” rather than “Makeshift,” intentionally, to respond to Piot. The paper critiques policing—the constant effort to make vendors shift, to make shift—and the ways that that policing seeks to render vending makeshift (temporary and unsettled). I appreciate Melly highlighting the paper’s refusal “to analytically separate street vending from state efforts to disavow, disperse, and dismantle it” such that the policing and unmaking of vending “becomes enmeshed with the infrastructure itself.”

### Gender and Age

Hansen asks about the “age and gender dynamics that structure vending” in Zimbabwe. This is a great question. In my research, I did not observe a demographic trend. However, what I did find is that gender operated in structuring political contestation over street vending. I discuss the ways this gendering occurs more extensively in a chapter in my forthcoming book, where I examine the ways that vending was discursively gendered as a female enterprise and politicized as such. There, I show how

this occurs in the wake of a history of restrictions to women’s access to urban space and contestation over African masculinity. In that discussion, I also examine the ways vendors were—as Hansen notes—“courted by political parties and . . . groups contending for power.” (For another account of the ways street vending is policed in gendered ways, see Mlambo 2021.)

### Taxes

Piot raises a key question about the recognition of value that is helpful to think of alongside Hansen’s and Melly’s readings of vending as productive. Piot asks whether vendors are disavowed as not paying taxes or generating value. It bears stating that vendors do pay taxes. Vendors are subject to informal traders’ presumptive tax, in addition to licensing fees to local city councils and a myriad of other taxes like VAT (sales tax), customs levied on their imports, and so on. My paper highlights the value that vending has beyond (i.e., in addition to) contributing fiscally. It seeks to show, as Melly writes, how vending infrastructures do more than “channel currency and goods; they also generate and circulate crucial urban insights, information, and expertise.” Vending buttresses those aspects of the economy typically thought of as the mainstays of “conventional economics.” Vendors go further, to “turn space into a critical resource,” as Hansen notes.

### Larger Political Climate

*Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF)*

The commentaries draw attention to the larger political climate in Zimbabwe, with Fontein underlining the centrality of party politics, Hansen drawing attention to the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other forms of organizing among vendors, and Ndlovu-Gatsheni asking how we can understand the “mind” of the state more generally. Fontein’s response centers ZANU PF and traces political and governance actions as stemming from ZANU PF or the Movement for Democratic Change. This framing is helpful insofar as it reminds us of the centrality of party politics to governance. In my paper, I chose not to mark ZANU PF as the principal actor and instead attribute government action to “the government” or “the police” to hold in view the ways that national governance and political discourse may be deeply party-centric yet everyday governance—like arrests or clearances—is conducted by officials of various political persuasions.

### *NGOs and Organizing*

As Hansen rightly notes, the government passed legislation and policies that restrict NGOs in Zimbabwe, especially foreign-run or foreign-funded NGOs. Street vendors organize among themselves, though—for example, through the National Vendors Union Zimbabwe (<https://zimvendors.wordpress.com/blog>)

/gallery/), which claims to have a membership of 54,000, and the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal Economy Associations.

### “Schizophrenic” State?

Ndlovu-Gatsheni presents Ibbo Mandaza’s (1986) conceptualization of the Zimbabwean state as “schizophrenic,” positing it as a way to understand the disavowal of street vending (cf. Worby 2003:55). While Mandaza’s theory is compelling, I am not sure it applies with street vending. “Schizophrenic” implies inconsistency and internal contradiction. Indeed, the government disavows street vending despite the importance of vending to the national economy. However, the government does not recognize vending as legitimate or recognize those doing the vending as crucial contributors to the economy. Therefore, its actions—brutal and misguided—are not inconsistent or contradictory at a national or abstracted level. Instead, there is a strong internal logic to the violence that my paper seeks to surface. Ndlovu-Gatsheni notes that a schizophrenic state “uses the name of the people to justify its antipeople politics.” However, street vendors are not seen as the people by the government.

### Postcolonial Governance

To Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s comment: while I cannot explain “the mind of the postcolonial state” with regard to vending, I appreciate the invitation to sit with the histories that underpin the policing and ungrounding of street vending. While the paper points to histories of policing women in urban areas and of ethnocentric conceptions of citizenship, these longer histories of gendered and autochthonous governance are discussed in my forthcoming manuscript, which I hope also shows more clearly how thick description helps get at these deep histories and engages Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s excellent work on the history of postcolonial governance in Zimbabwe.

### Boundedness: Does This Travel?

Piot asks: “Is street selling not just ‘African culture?’” and whether the paper is just a “renaming of what anthropologists used to call the local, Indigenous, or non-European.” In short: no. There is nothing essentially “non-European” or “African” about selling goods on the street. The flea markets in London, street vendors in Paris, and food carts in New York attest to this. The idea that vending could be seen as non-European is part of the reason it gets disavowed. In 1994, then-president Robert Mugabe spoke out in favor of street vending, his reasoning illustrative of a Du Boisian “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” that judges local action through a Western gaze (cf. Ake 1979:141). Mugabe said, “We see this type of business in New York and London, why can’t we do it here?” (*Financial Gazette* 2005). In other words, if vending is done in Europe by Europeans, surely it is good enough for

Zimbabwe? This goes to my paper’s contention that street vending is disavowed because of who does it and how they are seen.

Piot also asks whether this analysis applies beyond southern Africa. Nativism is not unique to southern Africa, and neither is settler colonialism. In Zimbabwe, the racialization of urban space, which emerges from settler colonialism, is central to the disavowal of vending. However, vending as infrastructure does not require that there be this specific history of settler colonialism or of nativism.

—Kathryn Takabvirwa

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