Stigma and the Social Production of Space in Nairobi's Informal Transportation Sector

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Kenya's informal transportation sector, commonly referred to the *matatu* sector, is a privately owned, publicly operated system of mini-bus taxis providing inexpensive, intra- and inter-city travel for over 85% of the population. The transportation sector also provides employment for almost half of the young people in the country. The *matatu* industry, and those who work in it, is an ideal realm for anthropological, geographical and historical inquiry. In this paper, I discuss how transport crews in Nairobi negotiate their crucial role in the day to day functioning of the city with the constant stream of negative stereotypes and stigma that follow them throughout their lives using examples from *matatu* operators, owners and commuters. *Matatu* crewmembers, both men and women, are the personification of a certain type of Kenyan masculinity, even as more and more women join the ranks of conductors and even drivers. It is the crewmember's performance of urbanity through fashion, style, linguistic change and spatiality, which becomes a particular type of masculine representation. This urban masculinity is both envied and stigmatized. *Matatu* drivers are always making new routes, taking short cuts and roads less traveled, like the sidewalk or shoulder of the road, just to get ahead. I link this to what the Marxist group, the Situationist International, termed 'psychogeography', in 1955. Psychogeography was defined as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." *Matatu* operators respond to the desires of their customers by driving fast and by making and taking short-cuts while they are simultaneously loathed and feared for providing this service. I argue that a particular type of Kenyan masculinity is associated with emotional responses such as stigma, fear, and desire as well as social responses such as the creation of new routes and the making of a particular kind of contemporary and historical Kenyan nation-state.