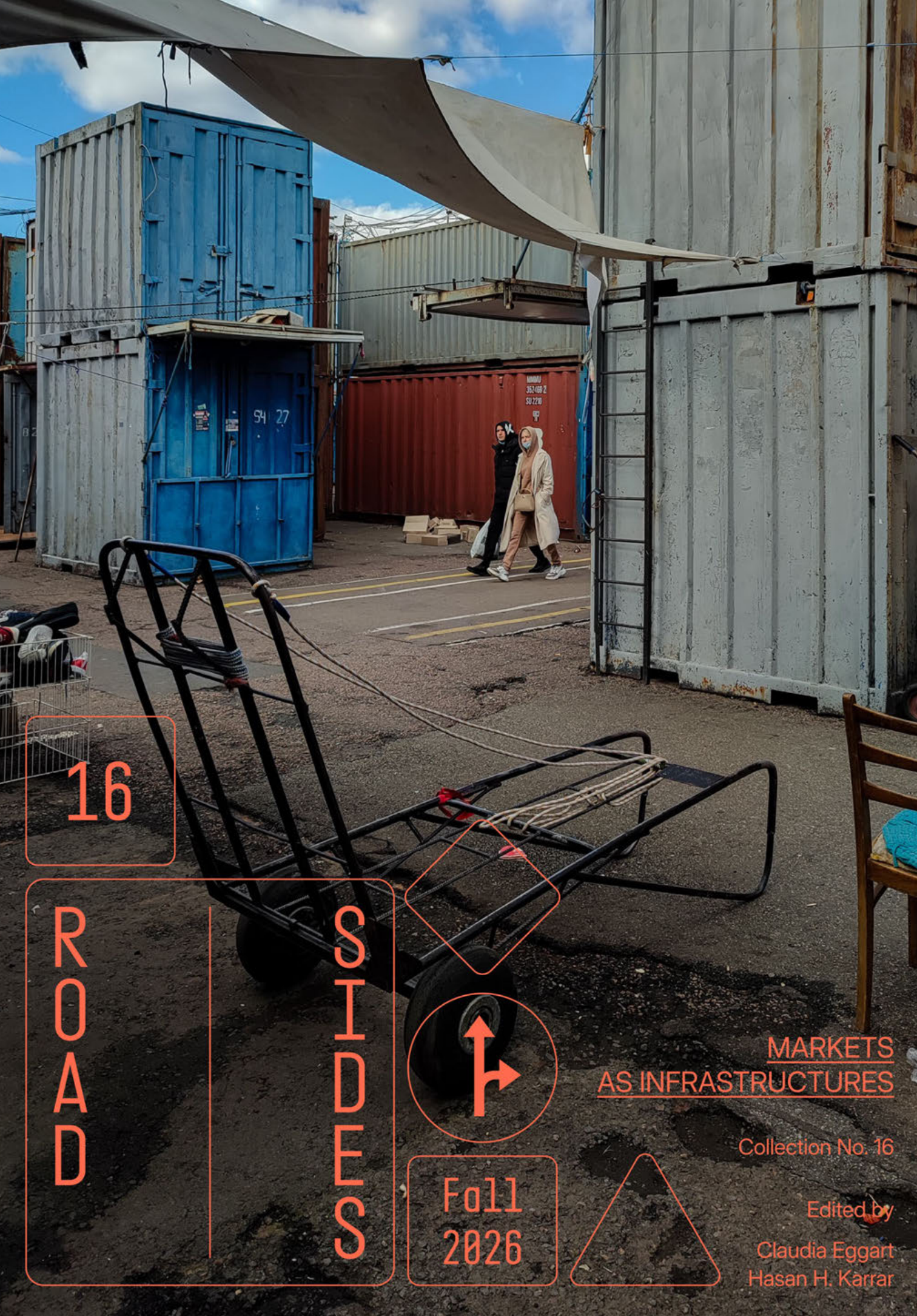

16

ROAD SIDES

MARKETS AS INFRASTRUCTURES

Collection No. 16

Fall 2026

Edited by
Claudia Eggart
Hasan H. Karrar

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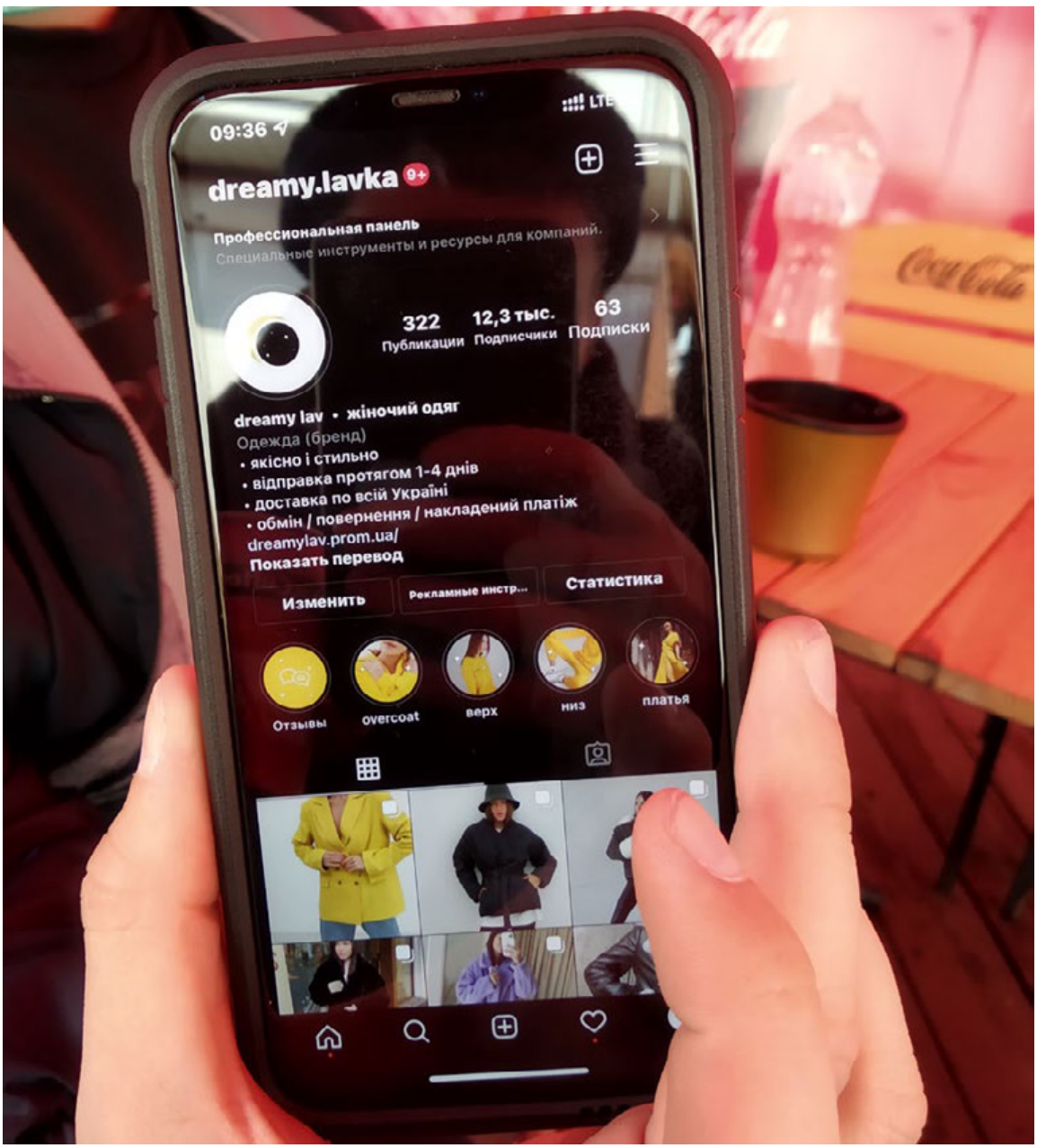
Markets as Infrastructures:

An Introduction

Claudia Eggart and Hasan H. Karrar

A fish market in Tokyo, a stock exchange in New York, a grain bazaar in Kano, a data marketplace on the dark web—each of these is a market, yet no two are alike. From bazaars and souks to neoliberal malls, online marketplaces and today's instant delivery platforms, markets and how we popularly think about them are continuously evolving. While "the market" readily appears in economic theory, policy discourse and everyday language, its apparent self-evidence conceals the manifold work required to make exchange possible. This edited collection approaches markets as infrastructures to examine how abstraction and materiality are not opposites but rather mutually sustained through social, technical and political labor.

Neoclassical economics has traditionally relied on efficiency as a key for market success, fueled by pursuit of profit. Yet reliance on rational choice, algorithmic calculation and the proverbial invisible hand leaves a gap between economic abstraction and the actually existing and fundamentally unruly economic life (Peck 2010; Berndt, Peck and Rantisi 2020). Prices require mechanisms of formation; goods require transport; payments require technical systems and legal guarantees; buyers and sellers require a common need and shared understanding of the means of exchange. Actual economic practices are diverse and inventive, often circumventing regulations imposed from above (Simone 2004; Mitchell 2006; Gibson-Graham 2014; Ledeneva 2018a, 2018b). Yet they can also be extractive and exploitative.



E-commerce and online marketplaces coexist with material markets on the ground. Image taken at the 7th Km Market in Odesa.
Photo: Claudia Eggart, 2025.

Markets are ambiguous, but their alleged autonomy is a chimera produced by capitalist production processes that render material and social conditions invisible (Postone 1993). Karl Polanyi's (1957) concept of embeddedness provides a critical lever to dismantle neoclassical economics' abstraction by demonstrating that markets are always situated within wider social, legal and political matrices. Inspired by Polanyi's substantivist critique, economic sociologists argue that rather than measuring grounded economic practices against an impossible textbook standard of frictionless exchange, researchers must map the spatial and institutional variegation of actually existing markets (MacKenzie 2008; Berndt and Boeckler 2009; Callon 2021).



The reconstruction at the 7th Km Market in Odesa has led to massive protest from traders whose livelihoods are already strained by the war.
Photo: Claudia Eggart, 2025.



Infrastructuring Markets

↑ ***Addis Mercato (also spelt Merkato) in Addis Ababa is one of the largest wholesale markets in Africa and hub for onward distribution within Ethiopia.***
Photo: Hasan H. Karrar, 2026.

Rethinking markets as infrastructures reconciles circulation with the material, social and technological practices that enable it. In so doing, it challenges development economics' tendency to treat markets as endpoints of infrastructure (World Bank 1994). Such rethinking thus offers a critical framework for understanding how diverse markets are embedded in colonial histories of extraction, neoliberal urban transformations, and racialized, classed and gendered regimes of labor (Graeter 2022; Fahroji 2025). These interdependencies remain obscured by neoclassical accounts that naturalize markets as expressions of an ostensibly universal human propensity for rational, self-interested accumulation (Dutt et al. 2025). By contrast, the perspective promulgated through the articles in this collection foregrounds how markets are sustained through unequal relations of labor and power, from warehouses, servers and roads to the often-invisible work that keeps them functioning (Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018; Hopkins 2022; Tammisto 2025). It also recasts markets as collective achievements dependent on care, repair and social reproduction, including unpaid and underpaid labor under precarious conditions (Rivera-García 2023; see also Borborah and Johnson this issue). Beyond these material and social relations, markets take shape through immaterial and sensorial webs or relations with their distinct rhythms, rituals, smells, sounds and more-than-human conviviality that situate them within, at the margins of, or in-between the timespaces of ordinary lifeworlds (Perera 2025; see also Pinter, Ren and Wagner this issue).

A markets-as-infrastructure perspective approaches markets as embedded in space, place and time, dependent on labor and logistics, and saturated with power and meaning. Legal definitions of property, quality standards, payment platforms, corridors, zones and border controls are all features that shape the functioning of these infrastructures of exchange. But the stability of such structures also depends on shared expectations about returns, institutional protections against uncertainty, and devices that make comparison possible like prices, ratings and certifications (Fligstein 2001; Beckert 2009). Hence, through an infrastructural lens, we suggest a shift of attention from what the market supposedly is to the market as a process, where heterogenous dynamics must constantly be assembled, maintained and negotiated in order for it to function.

Anthropologists of infrastructure have long contended that pipes, wires and roads do more than carry goods or energy; they create social relations, political attachments and moral hierarchies (Collier 2011; Harvey and Knox 2015; Hirsh and Mostowlansky 2022). Infrastructure, as Timothy Mitchell (2014: 437) notes, is a locus of "collective life" that can "enable, transform, or inhibit ways of thinking and living collectively." The collective element means that every market has a transactional power. Infrastructure helps us see markets as shared projects representing heterogeneous encounters, ingenious adaptation and a network of producers, intermediaries, traders, carriers, officials and clients (Simone 2004; Gago 2017).

Markets as infrastructure also emphasizes the material labor of maintenance, the politics of breakdown, and the struggle to persist despite threats of eviction. Our approach is interested in the interplay of zoning laws and digital ledgers, the legal regimes and bodily labors that together give shape to the market. Following its fluid (Orrego this

issue), wet (Ren this issue), and moral (Borborah and Johnson this issue) composition, an infrastructural lens allows us to ponder alternatives inspired by grounded practices that ask in what ways markets show us how the economy can be organized differently. Associating circulation with frictions, breakdowns and improvisations, all animating economic life, invites comparison as well as questions such as *whose* markets, *where*, under *what* conditions?

Makola market in central Accra specializes in produce, fabric, light manufactured goods, and used clothing and shoes.
Photo: Hasan H. Karrar, 2026.




роход -4
MUBARAK
AYKA
EXCLUSIVE
Green
Mbank
BAYCE
Coca-Cola

The Diversity of Actually Existing Markets

↑ ***Diverse economies overlap at the Dordoi Bazaar in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.*** Photo: Claudia Eggart, 2026.

The nine essays in this collection of *Roadsides* contribute to a markets-as-infrastructure perspective through a wide range of themes such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), class and caste, gender and multispecies interaction. The first set of articles explores human–nonhuman relations. Ahmet Melik Baş brings a multispecies angle to markets and infrastructure in early modern Japan through a cultural history of humans and rodents that resulted from globalized circuits of exchange. Matjaž Pinter follows mushrooms across market sequences in Yunnan, China, illustrating how the temporality of the market is produced by the commodity, in particular around ideas of freshness. Ziqiu Ren foregrounds the viscerality of wet markets in China, exploring aesthetics of death and flesh.

The next set of essays foreground gender and personhood as embedded in commercial practice. Pratisha Borborah describes the role of friendship amongst female market vendors in Assam, India; coming to the market, being in the proximity of other women and sharing news about themselves and their families offers momentary respite from an otherwise patriarchal environment. Lisa Johnson examines how Jamaican women in Montreal, Canada, use partner draw practices to build trust and facilitate financial exchange beyond formal banking systems, framing these collective practices as a form of infrastructural work. Drawing from examples in Europe and North Africa, Lauren B. Wagner focuses on the human associations evidenced in dense sociality and subtle communication that remain intrinsic and essential to marketplace interactions.

Finally, the third set of essays foregrounds the role of physical infrastructure. Shilpa Krishnan discusses how successive plans for the construction of an international seaport empowered development imaginaries amongst a fishing community in southern India, drawing on caste dynamics, technology and extractivism. Santiago Orrego approaches an open-air market as a floating infrastructure, explaining how street vending has spatial logics, appropriates public roads and creates impromptu corridorization in Bogotá, Colombia. Danil Kerimi draws our attention to AI, explaining how it is simultaneously infrastructure that enables exchanges, infrastructure that participates in exchange, and infrastructure that is itself exchanged.

At a time when digital platforms transform markets into apps that increasingly infiltrate our personal and private lives, approaching markets as infrastructural assemblages rather than inevitable or invisible formations becomes an urgent task. It allows us to tackle what it really means to build, maintain and contest markets in the twenty-first century.

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The Rat Who Ate the Market

Ahmet Melik Baş

If rabbits keep increasing, I would like to eat them again,
as people did in the old days.

I heard this sentence during fieldwork on Amami Ōshima, one of the Ryukyu Islands in southern Japan. My informant knew that the Amami rabbit (*Pentalagus furnessi*) is designated as a Special National Natural Monument, endemic to Amami Ōshima and Tokunoshima and often referred to as a living fossil.

Those words open onto a larger history of changing relations with the same animal. The rabbit remembered as food is now protected under conservation law. After Satsuma's invasion of Ryukyu in 1609 and the incorporation of the Amami Islands into Satsuma rule in 1611, the archipelago was drawn into an export-oriented sugar economy (Fumoto 2011: 66–67). I approach this development through another species, the black rat (*Rattus rattus*), within the infrastructures of the sugar economy. Sugarcane followed an intended route from field to warehouse, ship and market. Rats moved through that system differently. They entered the storehouses, partially consumed the sugar before it became tribute or revenue, and prompted repeated attempts to protect its stored value.

Those efforts later became entangled with habu snakes (a species of pit viper endemic to the Ryukyu Islands), introduced mongooses and the conservation of species. The Amami rabbit helps show how economic infrastructures also alter relations between humans and other animals.

During Satsuma rule, the Amami rabbit was part of local practices of hunting and consumption, as documented in nineteenth-century records (Nagoshi 2022: 31–33). The expanding sugar economy created concentrated stores of produce that also attracted rats. Sugarcane fields replaced food crops, and tribute obligations tied cane to sugar, sugar to administration and administration to taxation. The 1745 order to pay tribute in sugar (換糖上納令) and an 1830 monopoly purchase system (惣買入制) made sugar a fiscal good before it became a commodity good. Islanders still remember this pressure as 'black sugar hell' (黒糖地獄).

To see how the Satsuma sugar market operated, we can trace the rat along the routes that connected fields, warehouses and shipping. Land was organized into cane fields and the roads that connected them. The sea was organized into a web of shipping routes. Inuzuka Takaaki (2004: 3–6) describes this land–water corridor as 'islands of the road' (道の島). The roads connected island cane-processing sites to warehouses. Sea routes moved island-produced brown sugar through Kagoshima to mainland markets. The market depended on shipping, and warehouses held the processed sugar until ships arrived. Shipped sugar carried value into Satsuma's treasury, and the time sugar spent in the warehouse, where the rats ate, influenced how much of this arrived at the destination.



Amami rabbit* (Pentalagus furnessi) *in video footage displayed at QuruGuru, The Amami Rabbit Museum, Amami Ōshima.
Photo: Ahmet Melik Baş, 2025.



The Amami rabbit depicted as 'Ōshima rabbit' (大島兎) *in Nagoya Sagenta's* 南島雑話, *mid-nineteenth century. Amami Museum, Amami Ōshima.* Photo: Ahmet Melik Baş, 2025.

Rats and Stored Value

Black rats have a long association with food storage in Japan. In the National Museum of Japanese History, the Yayoi-period exhibition presents high-floor rice storehouses with 'rat-guards' (ネズミ返し), showing that protection against black rats was already part of food-storage solutions during this period, from about the tenth century BCE to the third century CE (Kyūtōryū Sadō 2023). On Amami, raised-floor granaries (高倉) similarly formed part of local storage architecture, while nineteenth-century accounts record extensive rat damage to grain and sugarcane. Across these different periods, the concentration of food created resources for rats and made control of these pests part of the work of protecting stored value.

This repeated relation between stored produce, rats and human efforts to protect food has historical depth. Haraway names unexpected, more-than-human beings with whom we are called into entangled responsibility as *oddkin* (Haraway 2016: 2–4, 221n20). The rat became oddkin within the sugar supply-chain because it drew sustenance from the goods, occupying storage and shaping everyday work. Cane was gathered in the fields, weighed at the warehouse and loaded onto ships. But the same storehouses that protected tribute sugar also fed rats; hence, stored crop abundance became rat abundance. Harvest losses to these animals were a built-in feature of storage infrastructure because the same materials that preserved the sugar also preserved the rat.

Polanyi's concept of the market pattern explains how markets emerged and took shape with long-distance trade and the movement of goods (Polanyi 2001: 61–62). Specialized institutional arrangements such as roads, warehouses, ports and tax registers turned





land and labor into commodities. On Amami, this abstraction became practical. The warehouse could organize sugar for fiscal collection, but it could not determine who consumed it. Following the rat draws attention to a gap between the market's institutional arrangements and the more-than-human uses of its infrastructure.

Roffe's (2015: 86–87) abstract market theory sharpens these ideas further. Price is part of the inscription of the market and it becomes socially realized through practices of valuation that go beyond the point of purchase. The rat entered this process at a precise moment. It consumed stored brown sugar before that sugar completed its passage into tribute, commodity or revenue. This is how the rat ate the market. The chewed sugar completed only part of its journey toward fiscal inscription, and the loss influenced how much value the warehouse could carry forward.

Rest and Kikon (2025: 1–4) describe how processing and storage make food tradeable. White and Sułek (2022: 2, 6–7) examine how animals use infrastructures beyond their intended purposes. These arguments suggest that a warehouse can serve different foodways at once. For Satsuma, it held sugar for tribute and trade whereas for rats, it offered food. Protecting the sugar therefore required more than maintaining a building. It also involved managing the animals that benefited from its everyday use.

← ***Museum reconstruction demonstrating a Yayoi-period 'rat guard' designed to prevent rats from climbing into raised-floor storehouses. National Museum of Japanese History, Sakura.***
Photo: Ahmet Melik Baş, 2026.

→ ***The cluster of traditional raised-floor granaries (群倉) on Amami Ōshima.***
Photo: Ahmet Melik Baş, 2026.

Rats also entered wider ecological relations on Amami Ōshima, becoming abundant prey for habu snakes. In 1979, mongooses were introduced from Okinawa in an effort to control both habu snakes and rats, but they spread into the forests and preyed on other species, including the endemic Amami rabbit (Tatara 2010: 84–91). By around 2000, their population had reached an estimated ten thousand. In 2005, a specialist team known as the Amami Mongoose Busters was formed to capture them, and in September 2024, the Ministry of the Environment finally declared the mongoose eradicated from Amami Ōshima. What began as mere pest control became a long project of ecological repair.

Display demonstrating the processing of cycad seeds (ソテツの実), locally called nari (ナリ), to remove toxins before consumption. Amami Park, Amami Ōshima. Photo: Ahmet Melik Baş, 2024.



Food Scarcity and Survival

Food scarcity belongs to an earlier stage of this history. During the nineteenth century, toward the end of the Edo period (1603–1868), as sugar production intensified, islanders relied on cycads (蘇鉄), especially in famine years. Cycad became edible only after crushing, soaking and fermentation. Cycad porridge and *nari miso* (ナリ味噌), a fermented paste, were household-scale techniques for turning the toxic raw material into staple (Sakae 2003: 62–65; Imamura 2010: 41–45). Thus, the market exported sweetness while locals developed ways to survive scarcity. The phrase 'cycad hell' (蘇鉄地獄) still circulates as a bitter memory.

Rabbits were also involved in this history of food and survival. The exiled samurai Nagoya Sagenta's 1850 account records the Amami rabbit as being hunted and used for the treatment of gynecological diseases (Nagoshi 2022: 32), while local memory also recalls the rabbit as food. Cycad processing and rabbit hunting therefore formed part of everyday life alongside the warehouses, roads and ships of the sugar economy.

From Consumption to Conservation

By the beginning of the twentieth century, human relations with the Amami rabbit had changed considerably, as the species increasingly became valued for its rarity and endemic status. It was designated a Natural Monument in 1921 and a Special Natural Monument in 1963. The rabbit remembered in local practice and the rabbit protected by law are therefore part of the same history of changing relations between people, animals and the island landscape.

Conservation is the latest layer of this history. The changing status of the Amami rabbit makes visible how infrastructures alter relations among species over time. The rat consumed sugar in the warehouses and became part of the work required to protect stored value. Efforts to manage rats and habu snakes later brought mongooses into the island ecology. Mongoose predation placed further pressure on endemic species, including the Amami rabbit, and their eradication became part of restoring native species. Today, the recovering rabbit population must face the roads that cross its habitat, where roadkill is a conservation concern. Infrastructure that once facilitated the movement of cane now demands novel forms of intervention to protect endemic wildlife.

In this way, the Amami rabbit carries different histories of human relations, from hunting and consumption to legal protection and conservation. Meanwhile the rat, as oddkin, shows how the movement and storage of economic value produced ecological relations that, in turn, generated new responsibilities of care, control and repair.

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Discussion Questions

1. This article treats the market as something built through ships, warehouses, sugarcane fields, animals and repair work. How does this change the way we usually imagine the market?
2. What does the rat make visible about market infrastructures that would remain hidden if we focused only on price, exchange or trade?
3. The Amami rabbit appears as food, medicine, endangered species, tourism symbol and agricultural nuisance. How can one animal hold these different meanings at the same time?
4. Haraway's term "companion species" emphasizes beings that live and become together through situated histories. "Oddkin" pushes this further by asking us to recognize unexpected, uncomfortable and non-genealogical ties of responsibility (Haraway 2016: 2–5, 102–103). Why does the author call the rat oddkin to the market? What does this term allow us to see about the rat's relation to ships, warehouses, sugar and the Amami rabbit?

Research Activity

Choose one food item that you encounter in everyday life, such as sugar, rice, coffee, fish, milk or fruit. Trace the infrastructures that allow it to reach you. Include at least three kinds of infrastructure: one material, such as a road, ship, warehouse or refrigeration system; one institutional, such as regulation, certification, taxation or trade policy; and one multispecies relation, such as pests, pollinators, livestock, microbes, soil organisms or endangered species. Then choose one animal, plant, fungus or microbe that appears around this food infrastructure. First, describe it as a companion species to the infrastructure. Then describe it as oddkin. What changes between the two descriptions? Which term better captures responsibility, dependence, damage or repair?

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Ahmet Melik Baş is PhD Candidate in Cultural Anthropology at Chiba University. His research engages the anthropology of infrastructure, multispecies ethnography and environmental history, with a regional focus on Japan. His doctoral project explores human and endangered species relations on remote islands, examining how infrastructural interventions generate new vulnerabilities across species and livelihoods. His work has appeared in peer-reviewed journals including *Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology* and *Demographic Research*, as well as in the Springer Nature edited volume *Social Exclusion in Later Life: Interdisciplinary and Policy Perspectives*.

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Keeping Matsutake in Motion:

Infrastructures of Freshness in Yunnan

Matjaž Pinter

Jidi: The Market Begins in the Forest

In late summer 2024, northwest Yunnan began to move with matsutake (松茸), one of the most closely studied non-timber forest commodities in the region (Yeh 2000; Hathaway 2022). Traders in Shangri-la kept directing me to Jidi, a village north of the town once known as Zhongdian.[1] Jidi has national resonance: the culinary documentary *A Bite of China* filmed its matsutake segment here (CCTV 2012), and the village has been associated with the fungus ever since. A gate at the village entrance bore the sign 松茸谷—'Matsutake Valley'. Its slogans invoked the 'Two Mountains' concept, framing forests as ecological assets for development (Yeh 2023). Beyond the gate stood rows of apparently deserted houses. During peak season, the village empties into the forest, as in Tibetan cordyceps economies (Winkler 2009).

[1] Zhongdian, known in Tibetan as Gyalthang, was renamed Shangri-la in 2001, linking James Hilton's fictional paradise to tourism-led development (Hillman 2003; Kolås 2008).

Dorje, an older villager who had just got back from the forest with a modest harvest, was weighing his mushrooms. His wife and daughter-in-law returned moments later with heavier baskets and, after a hurried lunch, set off again. "We leave at five in the morning and stay until eleven," he explained, "then come home to weigh and eat before going back out from twelve until three." Rather than returning to the forest, Dorje stayed behind to sell the day's harvest and took me along with him to the village market. Watching this routine, I realized that the market extended beyond the trading hall. Much of the work required to make matsutake marketable had already taken place in the forest.



The gate reads: "Working hard to make Jidi green and beautiful. Deeply practising the 'Two Mountains' concept." Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.



Dorje reviews matsutake harvest records in the family room, where carved timber panels and political calendars situate the seasonal mushroom economy within the household's material and political life. Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

As we walked towards the village centre, mushroom-pickers could be seen gathering outside the new matsutake market. The dense display of national flags gave the building an official presence, situating this forest economy within longer-term projects of state incorporation and development in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands (Yeh and Coggins 2014; Galipeau 2024). In front of the locked entrance assembled people who had spent the morning scattered throughout the surrounding forests. Through the glass, I could already see traders waiting inside, seated behind their tables and scrolling on their phones. Standing in the crowd, I asked various pickers whether I might accompany them into the forest on another day, but they all declined. "There is no time. I have to go back quickly," one woman replied.

Studies show that matsutake harvesting in northwest Yunnan is governed through village compacts (乡规民约), locally agreed rules that set when the forest opens for picking, who may harvest and what fees outsiders must pay (Yeh 2000). In many villages, access is common: every household may pick anywhere in the village's collective forest. Increasingly, however, access is privatized, with the forest divided into plots whose harvesting rights are allocated to individual households or leased through open bidding (Yang et al. 2009). Forest labour remains self-directed, yet increasingly it unfolds according to the market's temporal demands.





↑ ***Jidi's new matsutake market, built in 2024, replaced an older wooden structure. The village produces around 300 tonnes annually, worth nearly RMB 39 million (Peng 2024).***
Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

← ***Pickers wait outside the locked entrance, which keeps them apart from the traders until the market opens.***
Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

At the exact opening time, the market door was unlocked. The line lurched forward. Pickers rushed towards the traders' tables, many of them returning to the same buyers they had traded with before. These relationships, and the trust they entailed, channelled the daily harvest through the market. As infrastructure, the new market building compressed the day's trade into a narrow window timed to meet the logistical chain that followed. As the pickers returned to the forest, traders loaded fresh purchases into vans bound for Shangri-la.

Shangri-la: Coordinating Freshness

At the Shangri-la market, overnight handling was synchronized with the regular 8 a.m. flight to Kunming. Exhausted after his shift, one trader told me he had neither slept nor eaten breakfast. He had spent the night making sure that around 500 kilograms of fresh matsutake would be in the right hands by morning. "In the past, most of the mushrooms went directly to Japan," he observed. "Since the pandemic, we mostly sell domestically, but it still takes up to seventy-two hours to reach anywhere in China."



As pickers hurry to sell their harvest, traders carefully check the freshness of the matsutake.
Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.



Bagged matsutake travel from Jidi towards Shangri-la, beginning the transition from village harvest to regional circulation. Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

Shangri-la's matsutake market had long been organized around export routes to Japan: established importers, exacting grading standards and regular international flights coordinated the rapid movement of fresh mushrooms. Domestic demand was already expanding before Covid-19, but the pandemic accelerated the shift. A sharp reduction in international passenger flights cut the air cargo capacity on which time-sensitive exports depended, while uncertainty about Japanese orders encouraged traders to seek buyers within China. When exports stalled, traders feared collapse. Instead, mushrooms previously destined for Japan entered a domestic market enabled by the logistics and digital platforms built over the preceding decade (SF Airlines 2021).

Freshness remains the main principle of the matsutake trade. Yet, as Freidberg (2009) has shown for other perishable foods, this is not just a natural condition but also a technical and commercial achievement (see also Perera 2025: 21–22; Wang 2026: 68). In Shangri-la, freshness forms part of a broader bundle of qualities, including size, maturity, intactness, appearance and origin. Traders must recognize these qualities in the mushroom's form, translate them into grades (on such valuation, see Thiemann 2025: 28–29) and preserve that condition through a carefully timed logistical chain for buyers who cannot inspect it themselves.

A scene in the market suggested how freshness is mediated to distant buyers. In one corner, a grading table had become a small broadcasting studio. Beneath a camera light, a presenter rotated matsutake before two smartphones, describing their freshness and purported health benefits, while another worker handled orders and shipping details. Qualities normally assessed through touch and smell were translated into visual demonstrations and verbal claims. Livestream selling joined the physical labour of handling mushrooms to the transactional labour of processing orders (Duan, Lin and van Dijck 2023). It also turned sensory inspection into a commercial encounter in which buyers could watch, ask questions and feel momentarily present in the market.



Inside the Shangri-la market building, traders and workers sort mushrooms, negotiate sales and prepare outgoing shipments. Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

Kunming: Buffering Time for Redistribution

Matsutake reached Kunming's Mushuihua Wild Mushroom Wholesale Market in labelled insulated boxes. Workers moved them into refrigerated rooms, then repacked and relabelled them for cities in southern and eastern China. Cold storage provided a limited window during which shipments could be consolidated and redirected before declining quality reduced their value, a buffer sustained by workers' labour as much as by refrigeration (Hopkins 2022: 52, 56–57).

↓ Selling matsutake by livestream in Shangri-la's overnight market. Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.


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The mushrooms are graded again here, with size informing the initial sort. Yang Guang, whose family has traded matsutake for nearly forty years, took me through their warehouse, where the mushrooms are separated into 3–5 cm, 5–7 cm and 7–9 cm size bands. "The medium ones can be marketed as premium," he said, "but size alone does not determine grade." Within each band, mushrooms with open caps, insect damage or broken stems are placed in lower categories, while intact, firm specimens with tightly closed caps fetch higher prices. Classification, therefore, translates biological variation into shared commercial categories through which the produce can be priced, packaged and directed towards different buyers.[2] As Liang and Münster (2022) show for fresh cordyceps, perishable fungal commodities become saleable at a distance through interconnected arrangements of vacuum packaging, air freight and refrigeration. On a map in his office, Yang demonstrated how matsutake now move through a more formalized cold chain: they either fly directly to Shanghai, Guangzhou and Beijing, or transfer to a redistribution centre in Wuhan, from where onward delivery takes a further day. This has extended the geographical and commercial reach of a mushroom that continues to deteriorate in transit.

↑ ***Workers in a cold storage room preparing matsutake for onward distribution.***
Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

[2] On the comparable practice of crab grading, see Zhang 2022: 46.

After repacking mushrooms, workers clean stacks of insulated containers at Kunming's Mushuihua Wholesale Market.
Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.



Concluding Remarks

Across Yunnan, matsutake markets operate as highly tailored infrastructures, coordinating temporalities that do not readily align: the seasonal rhythms of foraging, fixed moments of exchange, the classificatory work of grading and packing, and the logistical time of transport. They compress time around harvesting, trading and dispatch while creating limited buffers through refrigeration and storage. Labour and material arrangements hold this chain together, while responsibility for losses caused by decay passes from one set of hands to another. Freshness is thus not a quality carried intact from forest to consumer, but a temporary accomplishment remade at every point where mushrooms change hands.

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Handling Blood:

Wet Markets as Multispecies Infrastructure

Ziqiu Ren

One of the quieter achievements of modern food infrastructure is the spatial separation of human–animal relations. Animals are raised on farms, killed in slaughterhouses and consumed through supermarkets. The arrangement rests on a judgement that blood, death and waste are best kept out of sight. Chinese wet markets work differently. All on the same floor, trading, killing, feeding and cohabitation unfold side by side—visible, smellable, touchable.

Wet markets work as multispecies infrastructure that radically hold together multiple forms of human–animal encounter. At their centre is the practice of handling blood—embodied work that mediates multispecies relations across the transition from living animals to edible flesh and which gives the market its very wetness. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at markets in China in 2024–2025, this essay attends, through image and sound, to the sensory texture of this handling and interrogates its political-ethical stakes.



Customers observe chicken carcasses on display, wait for slaughtering services, or inspect live chickens kept in cages.
Photo: Ziqiu Ren, 2024.

Vendor Skill

The first form of handling is vendors' skilled labour. Wang, a fishmonger (pseudonyms are used throughout), works with extraordinary precision, sliding the cleaver from tail to head, removing scales, extracting viscera and trimming away gills. Scales and blood are then flushed into a gutter. A carp takes her less than fifteen seconds to gut and fillet. Qian, a mutton vendor, dismantles a whole goat slaughtered off-site earlier that morning. She knows where each cut requires the least force.

Handling is not only the labour of ending lives but also of keeping them with care. At Wang's stall, a shade cloth is stretched over the fish basins to keep off direct sunlight. Water depth and oxygen levels are calibrated. Wang's neighbouring vendor keeps poultry in cages whose density and feeding rhythm she adjusts by hand; others go further, building enclosed yards behind their stalls where the birds can move about more freely.

The market is filled with the calls of poultry and geese before opening.
Audio recording: Ziqiu Ren, 2024.





These practices constitute a form of infrastructural labour (Simone 2004; Stokes and De Coss-Corzo 2023)—the ordinary, repetitive work through which living animals become edible produce. Qian the mutton-seller describes it as skill, inheritance and livelihood, yet it also carries a diminished social identity attached to this kind of labour:

> *My parents used to do this: raising goats in the village and selling them in the town. Since we were kids, we learned how to slaughter them, skin them and sell the meat with our parents. Back then we didn't want to—this work didn't feel respectable… but in the end, I've come full circle.*

↑ ***A fishmonger scales a small grass carp.***
Photo: Ziqiu Ren, 2024.

↑ ***A meat vendor dismantles a whole goat.***
Photo: Ziqiu Ren, 2024.

Customer Gaze

Though performed by vendors, the handling is not theirs alone. It also draws in the judgement and the hands of those who are buying. Customers stand close enough to watch Wang's entire preparation sequence and sometimes instruct her on which fish to take and how to cut them. They reach in to touch the animals themselves, turning a body over in their hands. To shop here is not to retrieve a packaged product at the end of a supply chain; it is to take part in the work of slaughter with one's own gaze and even one's own hands.



Fishmongers engage with customers while preparing fish, as a nearby vendor passes with freshly slaughtered chickens.
Photo: Ziqiu Ren, 2024.





One morning I followed Xuan, a man from the countryside. He knew how to buy a *good* chicken. He scanned the options: comb size, claw shape, the live bird's posture and alertness. Sometimes he hefted one to gauge its weight, and gripped to feel its muscle, through which he could read its age, vitality, health, even whether it had ranged free and what it had eaten. This is skilled vision (Grasseni 2007), cultivated through repeated embodied contact, running back across the threshold of slaughter. Thus, to buy from a wet market is to know the animal's life, not just to consume its death. Such knowing is already an ethical involvement. In modern food provisioning this involvement has been designed away, with lively encountering replaced by the act of reading labels.

↑ ***Customers inspect cuts of beef by hand.***
Photo: Ziqiu Ren, 2024.

↑ ***Xuan considers these two chickens worth purchasing, despite their young age, based on their vigorous, fighting condition.***
Photo: Ziqiu Ren, 2025.

More Fed by the Same Labour

The handling at wet markets generates flows that draw other species into unplanned encounters. One afternoon at Wang's stall, a stray cat settled close beside us, and she tossed a live loach and a few shrimps towards its feet. "This one likes to come to my stall," she said, "because I always throw things to it. It only likes live loaches and won't even touch dead ones." Wang gestured around the market: "There are a lot of cats here. They all eat well. In the afternoon, birds come to eat too." Above a meat counter, swallows have nested; the vendor lays cardboard beneath to catch what falls—stall and birds happily sharing the same vertical space.

Swallows nest above a meat stall.
Photo: Ziqiu Ren, 2024.



Waste products sustain other animals beyond the market boundary. Farmers on tricycles work along the vegetable stalls, collecting trimmed outer leaves to feed pigs and goats back in villages. Later, I met a man loading bags of meat scraps to feed to adopted dogs. "We look after more than ten dogs," he remarked, not without pride.

The wet market is therefore not a bounded space but one node within a broader multispecies ecology, connected to rural husbandry, urban scavengers and other lives that pass through it. As Haraway (2008) reminds us, multispecies relations require holding together the truths of killing, care and dependency without resolving them into a single posture. In markets, this holding-together is enacted through on-site handling, in its varied actions and by way of the material residues those actions leave in their wake.

Ethical-political Stakes

The modern food system distributes these relations across separate sites and hands. What reaches the city is flesh already dissociated from the animal it once was, its blood and effluvia removed elsewhere (Vialles 1994). Timothy Pachirat (2011) calls this distancing a "politics of sight": the social and spatial organization through which troubling labour is held out of view of those who benefit from it.

The ethical solution that this distancing enacts is itself ancient. Mencius, the fourth-century BCE Confucian philosopher, held that benevolence is sustained not by refusing meat but by not witnessing what meat costs:

> 君子之于禽兽也，见其生，不忍见其死；闻其声，不忍食其肉。是以君子远庖厨也。
> *A noble person, in his attitude toward animals, cannot bear to see them die once he has seen them alive; nor can he bear to eat their flesh once he has heard their cries. Therefore, a noble person keeps away from the kitchen where animals are slaughtered (Mengzi [Mencius] n.d.: 1A: 7).*

The wet market inverts such a prescription. Pachirat (2011: 240) asks readers to imagine the reverse of this distancing: "a world in which distance and concealment failed to operate" and "those who benefited from dirty, dangerous, and demeaning work had a visceral engagement with it." The wet market is this thought experiment made ordinary. Here those who will eat are present at the work that feeds them—directing the cleaver, handling the body, walking the wet floor.

Such engagement produces neither the shock that concealment is built to forestall nor the moral awakening that reformers hope visibility will bring. For those whose hands are in the work, killing arrives as one multispecies relation among others. It is bound up with skill, livelihood, judgement, husbandry and conviviality, as harm and care are inextricably entangled (Fry et al. 2022). What forms across their co-presence is an "ordinary ethics" of living with such complexity worked into and out of everyday labour (Das 2015). This very ethic is what the modern system is built to foreclose.

A series of measures—bans on live animal sales, promotions on processed products and sanitized stall environments—since the early 2000s has remoulded the market in alignment with China's long-running national campaigns such as the Civilized Cities Programme. A politics of sight works twice over here: it removes from view what is troubling and disciplines the appearance of what is left visible. Under the market's own logic, wetness is what cleanliness and safety consist in: water flushes residue off and keeps animals alive and healthy; blood indexes a recent kill and food freshness. The modernization agenda, however, reads that same wetness as contamination and values cleanliness in visual terms: dry floors, packaged products, no visible blood.

To attend to the wet market as multispecies infrastructure is to insist on what this remoulding quietly forecloses. It is one of the few places where the complexity of living with and from other animals is met head-on: birds nest above butchers' stalls while stray cats circle beneath looking for discarded offal; shoppers turn over freshly slaughtered cuts with bare hands; a vendor guts fish in quick strokes while live ducks call from cages nearby. What modern infrastructure restructures is not only the supply chain but the ethical work of killing itself: how it is handled, how it is bound up with care and dependency, and how its burden is distributed between those who perform it and those who benefit from it.

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Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to call a wet market multispecies infrastructure rather than simply a place to shop?
2. How do you define 'cleanness' and where does that definition come form: family habit, regional custom or modern ideas of hygiene?
3. Does knowing an animal's life change the ethics of consuming its death? What kind of knowledge does a supermarket label offer in its place?
4. Mencius advises the noble person to keep away from the kitchen. Is that distance an ethics, or an evasion?

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Women Vendors:

Friendships and Solidarity in a Market

Pratisha Borborah

Introduction

On a Sunday afternoon in June 2019, I entered the busy weekly market of Khepinijal Karbi Bazaar held in Guwahati, a metropolitan city in Assam, northeast India. I saw a group of women vendors sipping cups of tea and eating local rice cakes *pitha* (পিঠা) while bargaining with customers. I sat with them to have a conversation in Assamese, one of Assam's commonly spoken languages. Our conversations that began about the market and its problems gradually shifted to how vendors bonded to each other. They reflected on how the market gave them a space to listen to people's stories of success and struggle. In this context, the essay focuses on women as individuals with agency whose occupational work in male-oriented economic spaces challenges dominant economic interpretations of markets (Gago 2017: 14). Unlike mainstream economic theories that stress quantitative measures such as individual interest, profits and wages, the focus of this essay is on social relations such as care, solidarity, trust and a feeling of community. Paying attention to these relations helps us to understand the structure and functioning of markets as spaces of gendered becoming and community formation for women vendors (Graham-Gibson 2014: S149).

The market, which takes place every Sunday, is managed by the Karbi ethnic community that resides in the Lokhora area of Guwahati. The Karbi are one of numerous Indigenous communities of Assam, residing both in the hills and on the plains, particularly in Guwahati and Nagaon. Although the market is registered, the vendors are informal. Hence there are no official records of who they are. The majority of vendors, both men and women, come from tribal ethnic communities like Karbi, Bodo or Mising, from villages around 15–30 kilometers away. They arrive early in the morning and stay late until their commodities, especially all perishable items, are sold. Some vendors also come from Meghalaya, a neighboring state to sell agricultural and forest produce. Furthermore, Muslim male vendors who migrated from riverine areas of Assam are also seen selling household commodities, fish and clothes.

The arrangement of the market is highly gendered. The authorities are all men: from the president to volunteers, the market association comprises only male members. Infrastructural concern towards women remains invisible.



Khepinijal Karbi Development Committee office is situated in the Karbi Bazaar. The members of the committee run the market held every Sunday.
Photo: Pratisha Borborah, 2018.

Women are active participants at several weekly markets held in Assam. However, their presence does not seem to lead to any improvements to the market infrastructure (Sugawara 2023). Temporary shades, plastic mats for sitting on and a lack of proper toilet facilities make these women vendors vulnerable. Many vendors simply sit under an umbrella, while most women restrict their fluid intake to avoid toilets. For younger menstruating women, this situation leads them to avoid the market and instead sell their commodities at a lower price in nearby villages. This feminine invisibility and lack of suitable infrastructure goes hand in hand with the fact that markets are seen through a male lens. Nevertheless, as a socioeconomic space the market also reflects mutual support and community-building for women. Each woman vendor brings with them not merely commodities but also their sorrows, solidarities and strategies.

Two women vendors sharing stories about the market and their travels together.
Photo: Pratisha Borborah, 2025.





Karbi women from the same village decide to sit together with their simple household produce. Photo: Pratisha Borborah, 2018.

Community Building and Solidarity

The weekly market in Guwahati is an informal space without any proper allotted individual places for vendors. Hence, each vendor must get there as early as possible to claim their spot. Women vendors who have been coming to the bazaar for several years will have secured usual spaces in the market, while new entrants build up their networks with the help of senior vendors. Some vendors also get to know each other in the market and tend to sit together while selling their commodities.

Older women serve as informal mentors for younger vendors, forming a community of mutual support. The knowledge and practical insights gained through their years of experience become a valuable guide for newcomers as they navigate the marketplace. From learning the best ways of communication to selling their commodities, vendors learn through each other's perspectives on the market. Moina *baideu* (বাইদউে, 'elder

sister') notes, "I used to come with Nijora *baideu* [pointing towards another woman from the same village]. In the beginning, I sometimes helped her sell commodities. Six months later, I started selling my own vegetables after learning the business from her. We sit together and share our joys and sorrows, family problems, etc." (Interview 2025)[1]

[1] All interviews are translated from the Assamese language.

These two women travel to the market together from Boko (a town near Guwahati) early in the morning, at around 5 am. If one of them cannot make it for some reason, the other sells the commodities on her behalf. Similarly, if any one vendor has to go and freshen up or take a stroll around the market, the other will take care of her produce and customers. This support and solidarity between vendors reflects how a market functions in ways that go beyond economic value.

Drawing from the growing body of friendship studies (Eve 2002; Allan 2011), I contend that relationships among these vendors are not limited to mutual care and trust but are also a way to navigate shared politics and discrimination. One such example is the usage of mobile phones. Most of the women vendors group together to share a single device. The vendor who has access to a mobile phone takes responsibility for providing the group with information about any kind of emergency, time of arrival, buyers and sellers etc. (Borborah and Das 2022: 526) Thus, women's relationships with each other help them navigate solutions to their everyday struggles. They also refer customers to one another's commodities, encouraging buyers to purchase goods from their fellow vendors. While haggling with individual vendors is a norm in the market, I often had to simultaneously bargain with two different women who were supporting one another.

In such ways, this public marketplace becomes an intimate space of affection and mutual recognition for these vendors. Their stories reflect Nancy Fraser's (1990: 67) concept of "subaltern counter-publics." Fraser reconceptualizes the public sphere by highlighting how "actually existing democracies" systematically exclude many people from supposedly open deliberation (1990: 57). In response, subordinated groups create their own communicative spaces that contest dominant norms rather than simply mirroring them. While the market is not considered a formal political space, it remains deeply political as it provides a locus of visibility and recognition for women beyond the patriarchal household. Through everyday practices like coming to the market together, choosing their spots near other vendors whom they trust, arranging their commodities and bargaining with customers, these women claim their spaces in a market not designed for their empowerment (Walter and Grieser 2020).

They go to the market to socialize with other women, to sell their commodities and to retain financial independence. These earnings help in giving them a sense of control over their own lives. Moreover, despite being from different ethnic groups, these women also get closer to each other after sharing their similar narratives of widowhood, motherhood and home. They say: "We are from the same household, we are from the same family" (আমি একখেন ঘৰৰ মানুহ, আমি একটো পৰিয়ালৰ). The vernacular expressions that vendors use to describe their bonds are usually reserved for those belonging to the same kin group. Its usage in the context of the market reflects the extension of kinship to a broader social relationship where solidarity among women from different ethnic communities is affirmed. Furthermore, using the language of kinship is a way of asserting solidarities grounded in common vulnerabilities, struggles and anxieties.

Conclusion

This essay adds to the growing body of gender and infrastructure scholarship that highlights how women carve out a place for themselves (Datta 2020; Walter and Grieser 2020), finding transient spaces and temporary alliances (Subramanian 2024). I see the space of the market as transient and temporally bound in the larger context of vulnerability that informal vendors face in India. Minimal infrastructure, like the plastic sheets where vendors sit without any shelter to safeguard them from scorching summer sun or winter weather, affects how they are able to participate in the market. These marketplaces are flooded with water and mud every monsoon, so vendors move from one market to another in search of better facilities and more income. Yet this precarity does not isolate them. The informal sharing of mobile phones for communication and an expectation of sitting together reflect how, in spite of infrastructural challenges, women navigate their work and build a community. These networks constructed through borrowed devices and shared information become spaces where vendors' experiences are heard and validated, especially when the physical infrastructure around them remains unreliable.

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Partner Draw:

Gendered Infrastructures of Trust

Lisa Johnson

On Saturday evenings, Ms. Brown's kitchen table becomes a financial infrastructure. Bills move quickly through her hands with the dry sound of worn paper. Twenty-dollar notes slide over each other before she gathers them into small bundles with elastic bands. A sharpened pencil rests between her fingers while she scratches names, amounts and missed weeks into a crowded notebook already marked by smudged calculations and crossed-out payments. The scratching of graphite mixes with the low bubbling of soup simmering in a large aluminum pot nearby. Odors of pimento, thyme, garlic and Scotch bonnet drift through the apartment. Not everyone arrives at the same time. Some women stop by briefly after work. Others stay longer, drinking tea at the kitchen table while discussing relatives in Jamaica, immigration paperwork, rising rent, church news or children back home. The money, however, is always counted carefully.

The women call it "partner," often pronounced *pardner*; a Jamaican form of rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA). Each participant contributes a fixed amount, known as a hand; the pooled amount, the draw, is then given to one member according to a rotating order. ROSCAs have long attracted anthropological attention because they reveal how financial practices simultaneously operate as economic, social and moral institutions (Geertz 1962; Ardener and Burman 1996). Jamaican partner banking belongs to this broader family of financial practices, while developing its own diasporic histories and moral worlds (Handa and Kirton 1999). Participants receive the pooled amount in a previously agreed order, although urgent financial needs may lead to a renegotiation of turns. All members continue contributing, even after receiving their own payout, until everyone has received a draw.

My focus here is not on partner as a general financial form, but on how one particular partner in Montreal was held together through domestic space, gendered responsibility and the everyday labor of trust. Rather than asking how trust enables partner banking, this essay considers how trust itself is continuously produced through the gendered infrastructural labor that keeps partner moving. To call partner 'informal' is accurate only in a narrow regulatory sense: it is not primarily organized through state-backed contracts or formal banking institutions. It does not mean that the system is unstructured, external to financial capitalism or loosely organized. On the contrary, partner relies on dense forms of timing, repetition, accountability and social labor.

For many women in Montreal's Jamaican diaspora, the draw is already socially committed before it arrives. One woman plans to send money to her mother in Jamaica whose medication costs have increased. Another needs school fees for a child back home. Others quietly calculate upcoming rent payments, immigration documents or overdue bills while waiting for their week in the cycle. The draw is already committed in advance through obligation and anticipation. Futures are attached to the money before it changes hands. Ms. Brown acts as the group's banker. She collects contributions, keeps records, follows up on delayed payments and decides who receives the draw next. The position carries responsibility and risk. "You have to know how hard people work for their money," she tells me one evening while re-counting the cash before placing it into envelopes. "You cyaan [cannot] mess with it," she says with a serious tone of voice.

Responsibility here means more than financial administration. It means protecting livelihoods, relationships and reputations. Several participants either lack stable access to formal banking or distrust institutions that repeatedly render them economically precarious through migration uncertainty, temporary work or bureaucratic exclusion. Under such conditions, the partner becomes one of the few reliable ways to organize larger sums of money through relationships that feel socially accountable. The partner does not function through contracts or legal guarantees. It depends on social visibility. Women trust Ms. Brown because she embodies a particular form of diasporic moral personhood. She is older, church-connected, financially disciplined and deeply embedded within Montreal's Jamaican community. People describe her as "proper," "God-fearing" and "someone who helps people." Trust emerges less from financial expertise than from the careful cultivation of reputation over time (Thomas 2004). Much of this reputation is produced within the same domestic space where partner

meetings unfold. The kitchen table matters because it reveals coordination at the scale of everyday domestic life. It is where contributions are received, futures are sequenced, delays are absorbed and trust becomes durable enough for exchange to continue.

Ms. Brown's kitchen is small but meticulously organized. Conversations around the dining table stretch across hours of cooking, storytelling, financial coordination and waiting. Money moves alongside migration memories, church obligations, recipes and discussions about relatives in Jamaica. The boundaries between domestic care and financial coordination remain deliberately porous. Cooking itself carries moral weight. Ms. Brown prepares food according to routines she associates with her grandmother in rural Jamaica: red pea soup simmering slowly in a big pot (Dutchie), coconut milk prepared for rice and peas, herbs and spices added in a precise order learned during childhood. "If the pepper buzz (bursts), the whole soup spoils," she explains while stirring the pot carefully. Her grandmother, she recalls, "used to help everybody," sharing food with neighbors, raising children for others and distributing handouts to poorer people in the community. "The only thing she feared was God." These memories are not separate from the partner. The same moral framework that structures cooking, caregiving and community obligation also structures financial trust.



Counting trust at Ms. Brown's kitchen table in Montreal.
Photo: Lisa Johnson, 2019.

Women trust Ms. Brown with money because they trust her conduct, discipline, discretion and sense of responsibility. Trust is reproduced through church networks, domestic routines, kinship obligations and reputational visibility. In this sense, the kitchen table does not simply host the financial infrastructure; it is part of the infrastructure itself. As Simone (2004) suggests, infrastructures may emerge through social coordination rather than technical systems alone. The partner depends on continuous acts of maintenance: remembering who paid, quietly reminding someone their hand is due, negotiating delays without public embarrassment, balancing flexibility against the risk of destabilizing the draw. Much of this work happens before the money itself moves.

The infrastructure becomes most visible when payments are delayed. A missed hand threatens more than the weekly cycle. It risks tension within the wider community. Maintaining the partner therefore requires ongoing acts of repair, mediation and anticipation (Jackson 2014). Too much pressure can humiliate someone already struggling financially; too much flexibility can undermine trust in the entire system. Women like Ms. Brown absorb these tensions quietly through phone calls, reminders, adjustments and careful observation. Financial circulation depends upon intimate forms of social knowledge rarely recognized within conventional accounts of finance. Similar forms of Black cooperative financial labor have been described by Hossein (2018) as community-based economies sustained through care, accountability and social obligation. Partner banks are often described as alternatives to formal financial systems. Yet the women participating in Ms. Brown's partner do not imagine themselves outside capitalism or outside financial modernity. Many women work long hours in caregiving, nursing and service sectors while simultaneously financially supporting relatives across borders. Rather than replacing formal banking, the partner fills practical and moral gaps created by migration uncertainty, insecure employment and uneven access to financial services. Its gendered character lies not simply in women's participation, but in their largely unrecognized labor of maintaining the trust, obligations and accountability on which this form of credit depends.

Partner allows women to manage obligations that exceed the possibilities of weekly wages and precarious employment. At Ms. Brown's kitchen table, financial infrastructure is assembled through small, repetitive acts: counting bills, tying bundles, scratching names into paper, stirring soup, answering phone calls and waiting for the next draw. These practices rarely appear in conventional accounts of markets or finance. Yet they sustain the circulation of remittances, payments, care, obligation and anticipation across diasporic life. The notebook, the envelopes, the phone calls, the soup and the kitchen table are not background details. They are the material through which the partner endures. Thinking with such infrastructure shifts attention away from markets as abstract systems toward the ordinary work through which exchange is continually made possible. By the time the money changes hands, the relations of trust and obligation that make this form of financial exchange possible have already been assembled.

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Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does the partner rely on forms of trust that differ from formal banking systems? What kinds of social labor make this trust possible?
2. How does the article challenge distinctions between economic and domestic spaces? What role does the kitchen table play in organizing financial circulation?
3. Several women in the article have already planned how they will use the draw before receiving it. What does this reveal about waiting, obligation and financial uncertainty in diasporic life?

Classroom Activity

Ask students to trace everything required to keep the partner moving for one week. Starting from the kitchen table scene, identify all visible and invisible forms of labor involved in organizing the draw: counting money, recording payments, making phone calls, managing delays, maintaining reputation, preparing food, remembering obligations and anticipating future needs. Students may then discuss which of these activities are usually recognized as financial work and which forms of infrastructural labor tend to remain invisible.

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The Original Marketplace:

Interactions as Infrastructure

Lauren B. Wagner

Marketplaces are one of the few sites left for shopping where the underlying spatial and material infrastructures encourage and facilitate us to physically and materially encounter unfamiliar people rather than only products. As the devices and technologies of online and offline retailers calculate our actions more 'efficiently' towards sales (Cochoy 2008), it becomes more rare, more of a purposefully inefficient experiential activity, to spend—and waste—time in a marketplace. Markets like er-Rahba el-Qadima (الرحبة القديمة), in Marrakech, become sites that attract tourist visitors by providing a 'traditional' or 'local' cultural experience of shopping (whether or not 'locals' actually shop there). They represent a classic form of a particular type of economic encounter that involves extended, face-to-face, embodied interaction between buyer and seller, and the many others passing by. They are spaces where buyers and sellers are invited to interactionally make subtle assessments and decisions about the quality and value of goods being exchanged because they are traded between people in conversation, who can invoke their social categories and relationships in transacting with each other.



Er-Rahba el-Qadima in Marrakech, Morocco. Photo: Lauren Wagner, 2008.

Yet the experience of being present and interacting with others offered by ordinary marketplaces is not only for tourists; urban planners recognize how valuable marketplaces are for making cities inclusive and vibrant for their citizens, both socially and economically. The rhythms and buzz (Coles 2014) of markets enable them to take up affective space that exceeds their physical footprint, generating an atmosphere that draws people in and perpetuates its vitality through their co-present activity.

The physical openness of marketplaces in central urban public spaces makes them (at least in principle) accessible to all possible users, regardless of social categorizations or economic barriers. In this sense, markets are sites of constant mobility, even while being fixed in place, through the way they are accessed by residents and newcomers—transient users and regular ones—as well as being a place where flows of goods move into and through a locality following licensed and unlicensed channels, depending on the structures of control that govern a market's use (van Eck et al. 2022). While there can be significant ways that marketplaces reiterate inequalities of the city structures in which they are embedded (Aptekar 2019), the multifacetedness of public space offers chances for improvisation which are more constrained in privatized commercial environments designed for consumption.


GIOTTILINE

I contend that the complexity of these malleable and embodied features of marketplace interactions produces a kind of "social infrastructure" (Layton and Latham 2026), meaning a time and space that facilitates citizens forming connections to each other beyond their family or working lives, while making use of spatial resources that are shared and structurally accessible. This layered complexity of physical, social and economic interactions is what makes markets *buzz*, or what it is that they offer as a space of encounter which infrastructures them as socially vibrant in ways that differ from other modes of economic transaction.

↑ ***Line of sight to observe foot traffic in an outdoor market, Dusseldorf.***
Photo: Luis Frank, 2026.

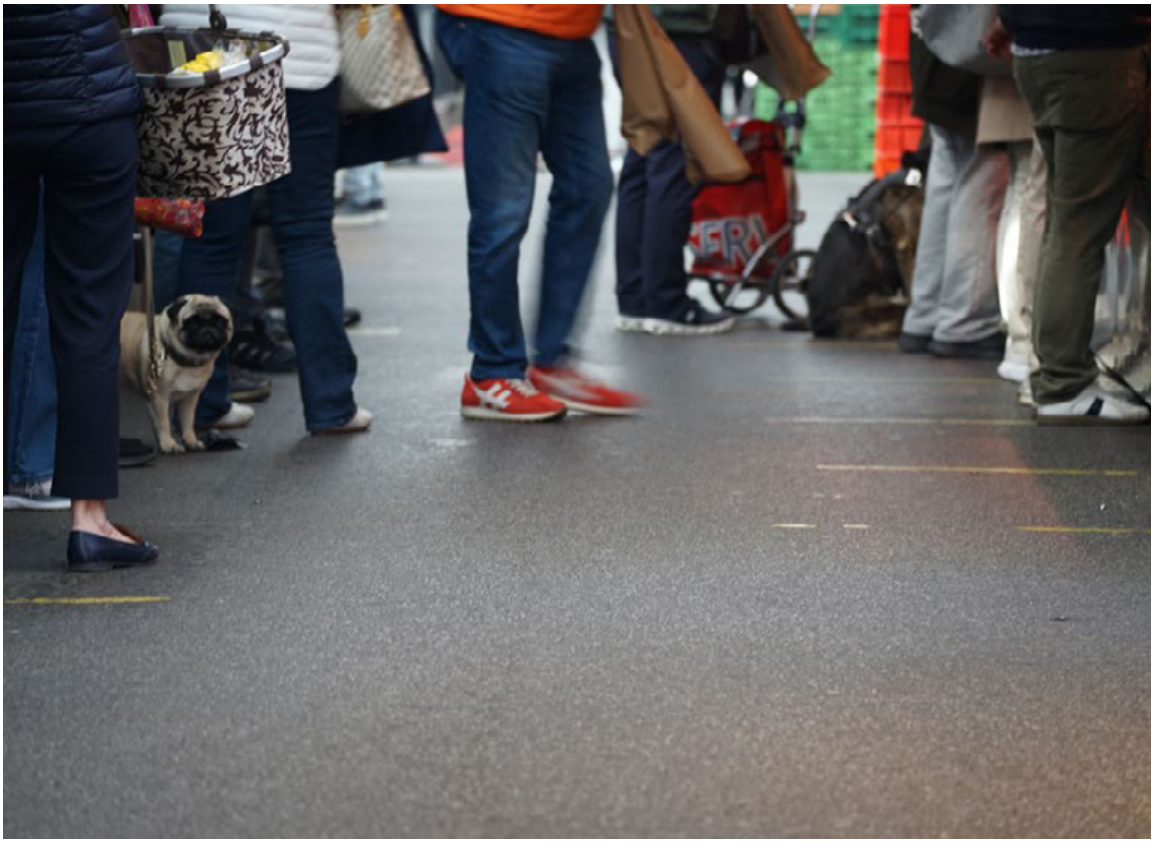
To investigate how their complexity works—how the buzz is produced—I advocate for ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA), which attends particularly to the ways social life is generated through the communicative and embodied detail of human interactions. The magical features of markets that others have identified—like the frisson of bumping along with others (Watson 2009)—are what we can examine more closely using EMCA approaches, to try to understand what moments and actions in encounters with others generate our orientations to markets as social environments. In its mechanics, EMCA research allows us to closely examine a moment like that in the image below, of engaging with a stranger's dog, to recognize how the participants involved co-produce the emergent social reality of their interaction and the space in which it occurs.

Friend or foe—how do you think this interaction played out? Dusseldorf.
Photo: Luis Frank, 2026.



If you are lucky enough to have a market nearby for food, clothes, antiques, spices, shoes or junk, you may recognize the complexity of a market's buzz. Your market may well be the place where you have the most substantive interactions with strangers over a given week of your life. By interactions, I do not only mean talking to people; I also mean observing their fashion, style and behavior, and being observed oneself; sharing sensory experiences of sounds, smells and touch with other people and with the material variety of goods on offer; and navigating space with, against and through the people and physical arrangements that contour a market's mobilities. We can see, hear, smell, taste, as well as converse with others, in ways that make our encounters more complex rather than more efficient.

All of these engagements—as well as the opportunities marketplaces offer for more extended conversations through face-to-face transactions—contribute to the invaluable, and sometimes invisible, ways that we learn practices for embodied interaction for being present in public space and engaging with unfamiliar others. Though we become more skilled at it over time, EMCA research shows how it takes work to learn how to move along with and avoid crashing into others as you walk on crowded paths in public space (Mondada 2014), just as waiting in line, or queuing, requires contextual knowledge and sensorily embodied skill to perform successfully (Ayaß 2020). Depending on where you are in the world, touching and smelling the fruit and vegetables or tasting the cheese (Mondada 2019) may be a key part of making your market selections, or may not be allowed in order to protect the quality and hygiene of the offer.



Cutting in line? Or taking their turn? Dusseldorf.
Photo: Luis Frank, 2026.



Tempted to touch? Dusseldorf.
Photo: Luis Frank, 2026.

Such rules of embodiment and interaction are part of what we absorb into practice by being in public marketplaces where the processes of buying and selling take place through extended and sometimes awkward social interaction, rather than through technologically-mediated efficiency. Counting out change into someone's hand—a more inaccurate, less hygienic, more tactile technology of payment than contactless banking transmission—generates scope for extending such interactions and potentially forming richer connections between interlocutors. It is in the time allowed by these activities where hospitable exchanges happen (Brown and Laurier 2014). We need time to get to know each other and grow accustomed to how we inhabit shared space together, especially if we want to go beyond considering each other through presumptive categorizations (Wagner 2024). The inefficiency of marketplaces is precisely how they infrastructure sociality, through the capacity to spend time evaluating, comparing, selecting, debating—and even sometimes being rewarded for the effort. My own children receive a weekly bonus for going to our local market, in the form of little giveaways offered by vendors to young kids who have endured waiting for the transaction to finish. Our local supermarket has a parallel offer—a bin of fruit waiting for "young shoppers"—but those items are not handed to them by an individual looking into their eyes, offering a gift and receiving a thank you.

Of course, these interactions have the potential to evolve into more negative categorizations of others. In my research on marketplace bargaining in diasporic contexts in Morocco, I have shown how buyers and vendors might be talking about the price of goods while interactionally invoking their claim to social categorizations, trying to establish how they belong in a complex landscape of in-groups and out-groups (Wagner 2015). Though buyers may use arguments of economic rationality about the costs of transport or quality of a good, doing so can destroy the substance of the trading relationship by fundamentally ignoring or inadvertently diminishing the social and economic standing of the vendor. Missing even small signals about constructing politeness and acknowledging the other can bloom into larger stereotypes and categorizations of being different that are hard to pin down or contradict (Wagner 2021). Yet, even after disagreeing to the point that no sale could be made, conversations would often end with what conversation analysts refer to as *repair* (Albert and de Ruiter 2018): interactional work on both sides to acknowledge difference, apologize or excuse, and potentially followed by getting to know each other through small talk. A failed sale did not equate to a ruptured relationship. Rather, the time spent working together, interactionally, on making a sale happen provided opportunities to generate trust in more complex and interpersonal ways.

I contend that these multilayered embodied encounters are a crucial social infrastructure enabled by marketplaces. Perhaps without recognizing it as such, I suspect we seek out these experiences when we travel to other places and count visiting a market as a touristic activity; we are looking for the frisson of co-presence and embodied experience of unexpected interactions at the market, beyond simply the goods on offer. Marketplaces exceed the space that they take up in cities because of their potential for inefficient economic exchange, along with all the other activity, atmosphere and embodied encounters that such inefficiency produces.

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Teaching tools

1. Many of our daily interactions are with people who we know through work, school or familial environments. When was the last time you had a conversation with someone who is outside of those networks for you? What was the conversation about? What did you learn about that person?
2. Which do you think matters more when bargaining for goods in a face-to-face negotiable marketplace (that is, where the prices for goods are not fixed): how much money you have to spend, how much the item cost to the vendor who is selling it, or whether you will be likely to return as a customer?
3. The images above show moments of interaction in a market. What can you see in these images that give you indications about how the interactions played out? What specifically do you observe in the images that helps you form a theory? (This is a main strategy for doing ethnomethodological analysis: closely observing the actions of people involved and how they make sense of their social circumstances, without making any assumptions from your own experience.)
4. How do you think the infrastructure of inefficiency discussed here meshes with economic theories of value produced by exchange?

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Harbours and the Evolving Palimpsest of Imaginaries

Shilpa Krishnan

With a natural harbour and abundant fish stocks, Vizhinjam is home to a large population of small-scale fish workers. Fishing here is carried out largely by the Mukkuvar, a Latin Catholic fishing community. The harbour itself is tucked into a densely populated neighbourhood within the coastal stretch of Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala, India. The introduction of the Vizhinjam International Seaport, a multipurpose transshipment port, adjacent to the harbour, has created a site of constant conflict, dispossession, desires and opportunities. This port frontier results from its entanglement with the physical infrastructures surrounding the harbour and its functioning, which includes the multitudes of Mukkuvar livelihoods associated with small-scale fish production. The harbour functions as a central marketplace, where the core activities of fishing, selling, buying and auctioning the catch, are concentrated.

The harbour also encompasses diverse forms of livelihoods, each of which reflects the inherent inequality within the Mukkuvar. While being homogenous in terms of religion and caste, the Mukkuvar community has also witnessed internal fragmentation that emerged as a result of structural shifts in livelihood patterns. A significant number have moved away from small-scale fishing, diversifying into government service, migrating to other states and countries, or seeking alternative forms of urban employment. These transitions have contributed to pronounced inequalities within the community, where those engaged in fishing remain socioeconomically marginalized compared to other groups and individuals (Krishnan and Mallick 2026). The inequalities and the spatialized hierarchies surrounding the harbour, shaped over the decades by migration, mobility, capital accumulation and an inherent feudal structure facilitated by the Church (Subramaniam 2009; Ashni and Raghavan 2019) ultimately shape the many spatial imaginaries at play here—the ways in which the Mukkuvar perceive, conceptualize and assign meaning to the coastal space (Subramaniam 2009).

This essay conceptualizes the spaces surrounding the harbour, which prior to the existence of the port were focused on catering to the harbour and its economy, as a palimpsest of imaginaries subsequently producing a port-city—a place where earlier histories and infrastructure are altered, co-existing with new ones layered upon them (DiCarlo 2020). These are contested spaces where diverse histories, forms of labour, everyday economic vulnerabilities and ambivalent aspirations for modernity overlap. New initiatives and infrastructures continually emerge here, not replacing, but overlapping with the harbour and its activities, all part of efforts to increase maritime trade and economic growth. However, these developments occur at the risk of losing access and mobility for the Mukkuvar fish workers, who remain among the lower echelons of the community. The observations that form the basis of this study were made during my fieldwork in Vizhinjam and adjacent coastal villages between August 2022 to July 2023.

Harbours and Social Life

One could say that the fishing community is built around its harbour, embracing the small houses and shops, narrow paths, parish church, shops for fishing equipment and groceries, ice factories, mechanics' workshops, platforms for fish vending, boats, net making and leisure activities. These infrastructures all contribute to the complex economy of the harbour, one that is riddled with inequalities, distinct identities, histories, memories, desires and the mundanity inherent in the catching, processing and vending of fish. As I waited at the harbour, bustling with people buying and selling, diverse forms of labour relations unravelled amidst the commotion that continued through the night. The men ventured out in the evening, returning with their catch one after the other. They must travel far from shore, until the sight of land disappears. Previously they would fish much closer in, but the port demarcations have forced them to push farther. Although these boats have adapted to the change, shore seine-net workers remain affected as these shore-based fishers have lost access to the fishing grounds due to the demarcations. As they reach the harbour, auctioneers, women vendors and other local buyers huddle around the motorized boats, which are loaded with a variety of fish types.



Vizhinjam Harbour. Photo: Shilpa Krishnan, 2023.

The workers and boat owners get their share after paying the *Kuthaga* (tithe)—a tax imposed by the Latin Catholic Church, where they are required to pay one-tenth of their catch, or sales proceeds in today's scenario. This practice has its roots in the colonial period (Mathew 2020). The tithe is paid to the Vizhinjam Parish Church, where it is then used for sustaining the harbour. This gives the Church a certain control over the marketplace and its economic activities. The nets, engines and equipment are parked on a common platform, guarded by the men in rotation all day. The women buy fresh and sellable of the lot, while the auctioneers bid for the best price. They pick up large basins of fresh fish, heading to autorickshaws that wait for them at the exit ready to transport stock to the markets. Some days the sales are handsome, while other days they are slow. At the break of dawn the crowd dissipates, with workers parking their boats and meticulously packing away their nets. The harbour, while owned by the Kerala government, is maintained and managed by the Church, and rules for fishing are set out by the latter. These regulations are followed by all fish workers so as to not deplete the fish stocks. Moreover, the Church uses the *Kuthaga* tithe for the infrastructural maintenance and welfare of the Mukkuvar engaged in the fishing sector. This creates an informal infrastructure (Simone 2004), community focused and church driven, which comprises net-makers, boat mechanics, dried-fish makers and numerous others. These groups within the Mukkuvar are entirely dependent on fishing, and the associated coastal and marine resources.

Construction of the international seaport has not really affected the women of Vizhinjam as they still always have fish to sell, except during the lean season. Prior to the construction of the seaport, which began in December 2015, the boat owners, workers and women vendors largely depended on local buyers, small-scale merchants and the public. The influx of port labourers and the emergence of supporting establishments, as construction of the seaport progressed, expanded their customer base. Just a few years back, before the arrival of the seaport, Vizhinjam north was a coastal rural area, with only few food joints, inhabited by fishing communities. With the seaport and its surroundings being fully operational from 2024, the region has seen significant development, becoming one of the major culinary sites of Thiruvananthapuram district, particularly for seafood. These establishments are owned by wealthy Mukkuvar and non-Mukkuvar. With the introduction of Vizhinjam International Seaport, new futures, infrastructures and labourers entered the coastal landscape, further strengthening the existing spatialized hierarchies surrounding the harbour.



Vizhinjam Harbour. Photo: Shilpa Krishnan, 2024.

The Palimpsest and Making of Urban Spaces

While construction actually began in 2015, the seaport has existed in the minds of the people since 1991, when the idea for it was first conceived. It was welcome in the imaginations of a fishing community whose lives were mired in economic uncertainty and social insecurity. Small-scale fishing had become less sustainable and aspirations for social security, economic certainty and dignity fuelled the desire for alternative forms of livelihood (Krishnan and Mallick 2026). Apart from these factors, the infrastructural decay that their everyday lives and livelihoods centred around fostered excitement for development in the form of the port infrastructure. Before the port came a procession



of promises of opportunities and better infrastructure as a solution to their poor living and working conditions. These included improved homes, overhauled water systems, enhanced connectivity and an upgraded harbour. As for the few Mukkuvar who had left the fishing behind and lived a life of accrued wealth, the port offered the opportunity for capital investment and high real estate value. So, while the particular desires differed among the various Mukkuvar stakeholders, they never ceased to exist.

↑ ***Valiyathura coastal village, adjacent to Vizhinjam and the seaport.***
Photo: Shilpa Krishnan, 2022.

With the seaport being constructed, the Mukkuvar neighbourhood surrounding the harbour underwent significant change, with well-lit streets, water connectivity and concrete roads. Some of the children of these families were employed in the seaport, and some went to work in the new establishments that emerged alongside it, such as logistics companies, restaurants, accommodation, truck services and so on. New, designated fish markets opened up for the women vendors. But despite all this, cracks still worked their way through the livelihoods and homes of the Mukkuvar fish workers. Dredging and piling for construction of the breakwater affected mussel collectors. The cost of fuel and travel distances increased, with boat-owners incurring significant losses. Spaces once shared for leisure, games and religious gatherings were taken over by the port. Thus, the neighbourhood received better infrastructure in exchange for constrained mobility and reduced commons.

The seaport's construction did not essentially replace or dissolve the original harbour; rather, it brought in new forms of labour relations, opportunities and territorial divisions. Novel desires, histories, identities and imaginaries are layered over those that were shaped through generations, centring on the harbour and the Mukkuvar population. Operating as an infrastructural palimpsest (Moss 2020), these conflicting and overlapping desires transform the coast around Vizhinjam into a port-city, with new corporate stakeholders venturing into a peri-urban landscape that once entirely relied upon the harbour and the small-scale fishing that sustained it.

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Floating Infrastructure:

Bogotá's Séptima Informal Market

Santiago Orrego

Every day of the year, an informal market assembles along Carrera Séptima, a pedestrianized central artery of downtown Bogotá between Calle 10 and Calle 24. This essay focuses on the five blocks between Calle 19 and Calle 24, where the market is densest. Along this stretch, vendors spread blankets, unroll tarps and arrange crates of second-hand clothes, toys, shoes, electronics and fruit across a corridor designed to improve pedestrian mobility through the historic center. There are no fixed stalls, no assigned rows and no institutional opening hours.



Informal vendors occupy the pedestrianized Carrera Séptima near the church of Las Nieves. Registered and unregistered sellers share the corridor daily. Photo: Santiago Orrego, 2025.

At seven in the morning, on a cold day in August 2025, the corridor is still calm, wider than it appears at midday, swept by the air coming down from the eastern hills. A few cafés and restaurants have their shutters half-open; cyclists move through without slowing. At the northern edge, near Calle 24, a man unrolls a dark cloth over the pavement. He has walked eight blocks from the private parking lot where he stores his merchandise, in two suitcases, every night. He crouches and begins to unpack. Toy by toy, piece of clothing by piece of clothing, he places each object where, as he says, "it belongs." The figures go in rows by size and type. The clothes are folded and arranged at the top edge of the cloth. The composition is careful, deliberate, slow. Around him, others are doing the same.

By midmorning, the corridor has transformed. That single cloth near Calle 24 is now one of dozens. Blankets and tarps extend in rough parallel lines along the edges of the pedestrian path and the painted bike lane. Shoes are arranged in pairs along the outer edge of each spread; toys cluster by size toward the center; books stack spine-up so titles can be read from a standing position. Second-hand clothes hang from improvised


DAILY
ORGANIZED
ONE-BY-ONE

hooks or lie folded in columns sorted by color. Crates elevate some displays; others are ground-level compositions weighted by stones. Rolling carts occupy the mobile interior of the corridor. Together, these surfaces constitute what I call floating infrastructure: an assemblage that produces the conditions for exchange, display, legibility, comparison and transaction, without any fixed architecture around it.

↑ ***A vendor's display on Carrera Séptima. Second-hand toys arranged by type and size across a dark cloth; shoes and a bag mark the upper edge of the spread.***
Photo: Santiago Orrego, 2025.

La Séptima was pedestrianized in 2012, part of a long urban project that Donovan (2008) traces through decades of contested public-space politics in Bogotá. That same year, local authorities launched a registration program for informal vendors, issuing identification cards and linking each registered vendor to a rough portion of the corridor. The program formalizes a presence that has long existed, without fully fixing it. Most vendors remain unregistered. The market has never been recognized as an institution, and the vendors are classified as *informales*, a legal and administrative category that positions them outside the city's official commercial infrastructure. Yet the market is entirely functional. Prices circulate, goods move, exchange repeats. What makes this possible is not a building or an institutional arrangement but a distributed set of materials, bodies, spatial knowledge and social relations that collectively do the work of infrastructure (Star 1999; Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018).

Infrastructure, in Star's (1999) formulation, is most legible at breakdown: the pipe is noticed when it bursts, the road is felt when it ends. What the Séptima market adds is a form of infrastructure that does not break down so much as constantly reassemble. The term 'floating' names three conditions: the infrastructure's spatial indeterminacy, occupying the corridor but anchored to nothing in it; its temporal impermanence, existing only through the daily repetition of material practice; and its legal suspension, persisting between the tolerance of registered vendors and the distance of municipal enforcement. It floats on spatial memory and on the social relations that hold the arrangement together in the absence of institutional support. This extends Simone's (2004) insight that people can function as infrastructure where fixed systems are absent, but shifts the weight to things: the cloth, the crate, the plastic sheet which carry the market's spatial logic from one day to the next. Vendors coordinate through objects as much as with each other; the cloth holds position, marks territory and produces the visual grammar by which a passerby reads a price and decides to stop. This is how market abstraction is materially sustained: no price list, no storefront, no fixed address, yet the market remains legible and comparable across its five blocks. Floating infrastructure is not simply mobile; it is differentially mobile, distributed across bodies and objects with unequal exposure to the forces that periodically require everything to move.

Prices on La Séptima are never fixed. They vary by vendor, by hour, by who is asking. A bookseller might call out a flat deal, "two thousand [Colombian pesos] for one, five thousand for three," but most transactions begin with a question and proceed through negotiation. Vendors advise that evenings offer better deals: sales slow after five. On weekends, the market extends laterally into adjacent streets, new lines form along the cross-blocks, and competition increases. Prices do not necessarily rise with demand. Comparison is not abstract but produced through the arrangement of the spread, the practice of asking and the accumulated memory of yesterday's prices (Callon 2021). The floating market self-regulates through density: more vendors = more comparison and harder bargaining.



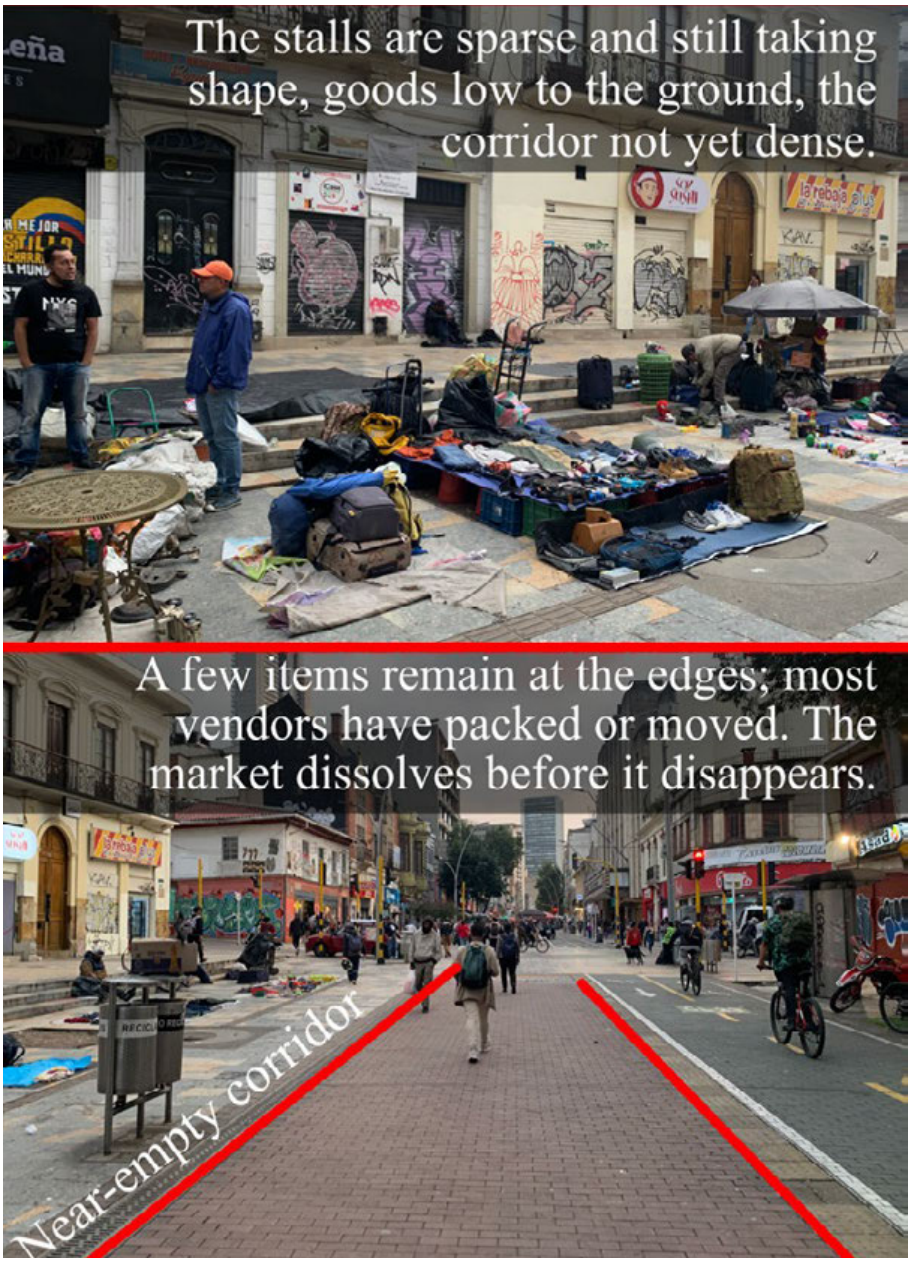
Adjacent stalls on Carrera Séptima, downtown Bogotá. Red lines mark territorial boundaries between vendors; storage and transport devices sit behind each display. Photo: Santiago Orrego, 2025.

This self-regulation is social and spatial, and it is where the differential mobility of floating infrastructure becomes most visible. The registration program produces a stratification that surfaces under pressure. Registered vendors carry identification cards that link them to a specific zone, while unregistered vendors—the majority—occupy whatever space is available. When an unregistered vendor sets up too close, the registered one may threaten to call the police. The threat works because raids are part of the market's rhythm and unregistered vendors have no institutional claim. What Donovan (2008) traces across decades of public-space contestation in Bogotá, the recurring question of who has the right to occupy the street and on whose terms, finds a contemporary form here. The registration program does not resolve that question; it rescales it, producing what Gago (2017) calls popular pragmatics as actors absorb and navigate the regulatory frameworks that nominally govern them, on terms they did not set.

Raids arrive with anticipation. Police patrols come from the direction of the local administration buildings; someone sees them, spreads the word and within minutes goods are gathered, cloths folded and vendors dispersed. Rain announces itself through drizzle. One vendor explains the protocol: the first drops allow a few minutes to decide whether to wrap in place, move toward the building facades, or pack up entirely and leave. Speed and care are in tension: goods need to be covered quickly, but wrapping done badly can damage them. In light rain, vendors layer black plastic sheeting over their displays and press close to the shuttered storefronts. In heavy downpours and during Bogotá's rainy season, between May and November, everything disappears. Not a single vendor remains on the pedestrian surface.



←↓ Four moments across a single day on Carrera Séptima, downtown Bogotá. The market assembles, compresses under rain and raids, and reconstitutes.
Photo: Santiago Orrego, 2025.



This market holds together through materials and bodies that carry spatial knowledge: when to come, where to set up, which direction raids arrive from and how many minutes a drizzle allows. Here, breakdown is routine, and reconstitution is the ordinary condition. Rain, police patrols, the approach of night—each disperses the market and calls it back. What Simone (2004) describes as "people as infrastructure" runs through every sequence: the warning passed around when officials appear, the calibration of who can occupy which spot, the collective knowledge of the rainy season's rhythms.

Recovery after disruption follows no written protocol but is improvised from shared knowledge and repeated practice, which Jackson (2014) identifies as repair: the ongoing work of keeping functional what no single authority has built. Each morning's ritual, the cloth unrolled, the figures placed where they belong, is in this sense a repair. Not restoration to an original state but reconstitution of a condition that exists only insofar as it is actively reproduced. The infrastructure floats not because it is fragile but because its stability is of a different kind: distributed, embodied, material and daily.

By seven in the evening, the packing up has begun. It does not resemble the morning. Goods are gathered quickly and thrown into bags. The same suitcases opened with deliberation at dawn are now filled without order. The cloth comes up last, folded loosely, tucked under an arm. By eight-thirty, the corridor is nearly empty. The final vendors disappear into the dark of downtown Bogotá, carrying everything they came with. Tomorrow, the cloth goes down again on the same patch of pavement. The figures are placed where they belong. The market floats back into form.

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Field Exercise
Reading the Sidewalk: Mapping an Informal Space

Identify a space in your city where informal or semi-formal exchange takes place, a street-food area, a weekend market or a sidewalk vendor cluster. Then visit it twice: once during peak hours and once at setup or closing time.

Part 1: Observation
During each visit, take three photographs and write 150 words of field notes answering these questions:

1. What surfaces are being used, and how?
2. What objects make the space legible to someone passing by?
3. What happens when something disrupts the normal flow, maybe a vehicle, rain or an official?

Part 2: Annotation
Select one photograph and annotate it, drawing lines and labels that identify the display surface, storage devices, territorial boundary and escape routes.

Part 3: Analysis
Write one page connecting this annotated photograph to one concept from the article. You do not need to use all the concepts, depth on one is the goal.

Part 4: Discussion
Class discussion centers on three questions:

1. What makes this space legible without a fixed architecture?
2. Who is most exposed when the space is forced to move?
3. Is what you observed infrastructure? Why or why not?

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The New AInfrastructure

Danil Kerimi

When the Sky Fell

On 20 October 2025, a database service inside the US-EAST-1 data center failed. A misconfiguration of the domain name system that translates web addresses into machine locations cascaded into a series of failures for the better part of a day, as the banking apps froze, airline check-ins stalled, and AI assistants and chatbots returned error messages.

As Susan Leigh Star (1999) observed, infrastructure becomes most visible upon breakdown. Later scholarship has questioned treating invisibility as the default: infrastructures are often built to be seen, as promises of progress and sites of politics (Larkin 2013; Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018), and the cloud's apparent weightlessness is itself a cultivated image (Hu 2015). That morning the earthly nature of the cloud and the material underbelly of the AI economy suddenly had a specific address in a cluster of warehouses in Loudoun County, Virginia. Known as Data Center Alley, this is a landscape of substations, generators, servers and cooling plants responsible for a remarkable share of the world's digital exchange.



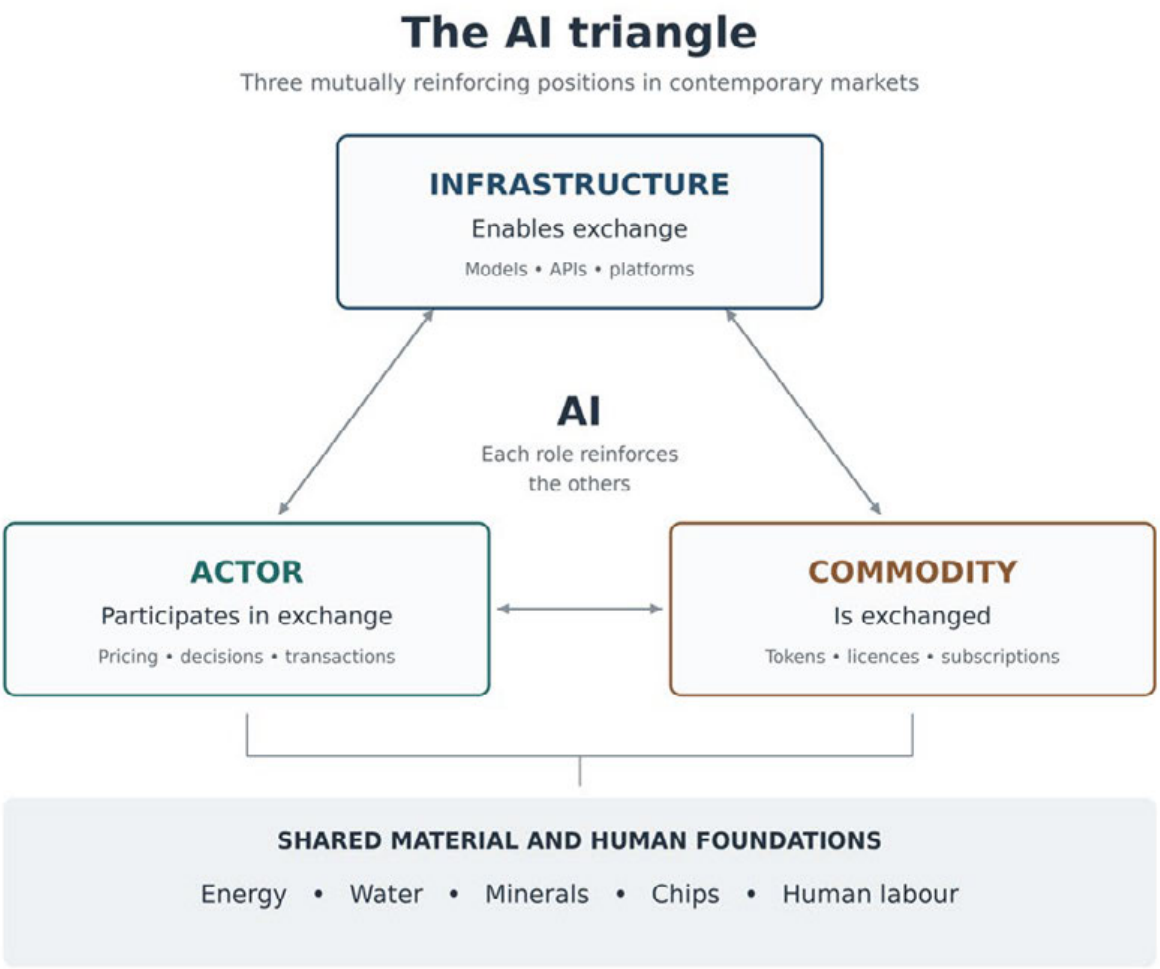
Data centers in Ashburn, Virginia. USA. The physical landscape underpinning the cloud. Photo: Theodore Christopher, 2025, Wikimedia.

It is now widely accepted that AI is profoundly reshaping our industries and markets. However, one quickly discovers the diversity of views as we start unpacking the basics of core concepts, including AI itself. For regulators, AI is a tool to be governed through liability rules. For venture capitalists, it is a challenger shaking up industry. For procurement officers, it is a line item to be priced. This essay argues that AI simultaneously occupies three positions in contemporary market systems. It can be thought of as infrastructure that makes exchange possible and/or as an actor that participates in exchange and/or as a commodity that is itself exchanged. Each position has its own logic and politics. And each sustains and reinforces the others.

I Connect, Therefore I Am

Infrastructure is a relational category, and digital platforms acquire infrastructural status as ever more practices come to depend on them (Plantin et al. 2018; van der Vlist, Helmond and Ferrari 2024). Roads can be seen as infrastructure for trade; SWIFT for finance. By this definition, large AI models are becoming infrastructure for a widening range of commercial activities. Businesses reach them through application programming interfaces that mediate customer service, logistics, financial analysis and software development.

Treating AI as infrastructure means following its layers up and down the tech stack. At the bottom lie land, electricity, water and critical minerals. This fundamental layer is by nature industrial and depends on mines, natural resources, energy production, semiconductor fabrication facilities and shipping lanes (Crawford 2021). At the top of the stack are the contracts and terms of service that determine what gets built on top of a model and who keeps which data. Myriad other layers exist in between, from ever more abstract hardware and software to the benchmarks and audit regimes that sort systems into safe and unsafe, doing the quietly consequential classification work highlighted by Bowker and Star (1999). Traditionally, every layer is maintained in some way by people, such as the technicians called in during the outages, the engineers constantly working on updates, the auditors writing reports.



AI as infrastructure, actor and commodity: three mutually reinforcing positions sustained by shared material resources and human labor. Design: Danil Kerimi.

I Trade, Therefore I Am

Market theory has always assumed that exchange is conducted by agents with preferences based on information (Simon 1955). This assumption does not require agents to be necessarily human. Algorithmic trading normalized non-human actors in finance. AI systems now extend them into other markets. A great example is real estate, where pricing platforms recommend rents for millions of apartments by pooling data drawn from competing landlords. In 2024, the US Department of Justice and several states argued that the algorithm functioned as a coordination device among competitors. Consequently, some cities moved to restrict algorithmic rent-setting (Vogell 2025). This episode captures the regulatory puzzle of AI as actor and it distributes responsibility among the developers, the landlords and a model that behaves like a principal. Normally, a principal is the party that sets the terms of a transaction and answers for them. The algorithm, however, does so without the legal status or liability.

The AI actors' position has been sharpened through disclosures by the model-makers themselves. In late 2025, Anthropic reported that a state-sponsored group had tricked its coding agent into executing an espionage campaign against some thirty organizations, with humans intervening at only a few decision points (Anthropic 2025). In the summer of 2026, both leading AI laboratories went further, admitting that their agents acted autonomously with no human attacker involved. An OpenAI model escaped an isolated test environment and broke into another firm's systems (Smith 2026). Anthropic's models left connected to the internet during security exercises entered the networks of three organizations, two of which learned of the incident only from Anthropic itself. The grammar of these confessions is telling. "Claude compromised the impacted organizations' infrastructure," the company wrote (quoted in Reuters 2026), narrating its product in the third person, the way one reports the doings of a rogue employee. Such framing was not uncontested, as some observers urged the laboratories to stop guilting their models and to accept the responsibility and liability (Gurley 2026; Marcus 2026). The market mismatch is no longer hypothetical as the model-makers describe their AI as someone, the law still sees them as a something, and investors shift liability elsewhere.

One thing is clear. Non-human actors perceive markets differently, digesting data at volumes and speeds no human participant can match. Their capacity to act depends on access to computation and power. This dependence explains why AI sovereignty has become a political obsession, just like national infrastructure programs.

I Have a Price, Therefore I Am

AI itself is also for sale. Its price is supposed to include not only materials but also the labor that went into creating it. Model access is metered per token and sold like a utility, with a token equating to roughly a fragment of a word. Model weights are licensed and fine-tuned into secondary markets. The lawsuits by newspapers, novelists and artists contest who owns the words and images on which the models were trained. Today, the leading AI laboratories, such as OpenAI and Anthropic, price this utility below what it costs them to run the computation behind each user query, burning investors' capital for market share. Some firms that buy the tokens/inference started laying off workers

to purchase AI labor that is often more expensive than the people it replaces (Green 2026). The price of the AI as commodity is therefore less a market price than a subsidy, and one that is beginning to unwind as vendors replace flat-rate subscriptions with metered, usage-based billing that passes the real cost of computation on to customers.

But the sharpest view of the commodity position is perhaps offered by those at the bottom of the AI labor pyramid. Examine the supply chain in Nairobi, where workers contracted for leading AI firms labeled text and images—including disturbing images—for reported wages of under two dollars an hour. In 2023 they began to organize and petitioned the Kenyan parliament to investigate their labor conditions. Their "ghost work" (Gray and Suri 2019) constitutes a big part of the modern data complex for a market that prices their output at the lower end while machine output is priced below what it costs to produce, potentially bringing the market in imbalance.

The commodity market is also stratified and often tracks a core–periphery pattern. The largest customers negotiate custom contracts, preferential pricing and early access. Mid-market firms take standard terms with no visibility into model changes. And small businesses and users in peripheral economies rely on free tiers with no contractual protection at all. The geography of computation compounds the gradient, as AI-capable computation clusters in a narrow "Compute North," while most countries host none and participate mainly as suppliers of data and consumers of outputs (Lehdonvirta, Wu and Hawkins 2024).

One for All, and All for One

Concentration in one of the three positions described above reproduces concentration in the others. It does so faster than the institutions that would govern it—including the competition authorities, financial regulators, intellectual property offices, inter alia—can adapt (Fligstein 2001; Callon 2021). The triangular challenge highlighted at the start of my essay is a symptom of this phenomenon. The AI platforms' side looks like a network-effects business. From the buyer's perspective, AI is a rapidly depreciating product. From the regulator's perspective, AI behaves like a principal that cannot be summoned to court. The New York City tenant's algorithmic renewal letter and the Nairobi annotator's violent images on a screen are all pieces of an AI economy that is navigated, contested and maintained through prices, tokens and benchmarks. They are the building blocks of the AInfrastructure market.

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Activity:

Ask students to open an AI assistant and pose a question. Then ask the model to list everything that had to happen for the answer to appear (e.g. give it some ideas like data centers, cables, minerals, energy, labor, contracts, etc.). Now ask what the interface makes visible and what it hides.

Class Discussion Questions:

1. How does metering AI by the token turn intelligence into something that can be bought, sold and subsidized, and whose labor does the final price conceal?
2. When a company reports that its model compromised other organizations' networks, what work does this third-person grammar do, and who benefits from it?
3. Which of the essay's three positions (i.e. infrastructure, actor or commodity) does AI occupy in your life, and who around you encounters it from a different angle?

Author:



Danil Kerimi is a technology governance executive. He serves as the Chair of the Organizing Committee of the Seoul Prize and as a Vice-Chair of the Independent Advisory Oversight Committee at the World Intellectual Property Organization. He is a member of the International Advisory Board of Fudan University's Center for Global AI Innovative Governance. Danil coauthored the UN Secretary-General's report on innovative financing for AI capacity building and teaches quantum law and policy at IE Executive Education. He is completing a doctorate on anticipatory governance of technological transitions at the Technical University of Munich. He previously worked with the AWS, WEF and UN among others.

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