SPECIAL SECTION

Transnational Street Business
Migrants in the Informal Urban Economy

Introduction

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ABSTRACT: This special issue sheds light on transnational migrants’ engagement with informal urban economies worldwide. Building on anthropological literature on migration and economy, it proposes “transnational street business” as a new concept for grasping transnational dynamics in the informal urban economy. Through ethnographic case studies from different regions, the special issue illuminates how the concept of “transnational street business” serves to analytically capture the urban street’s multitude of economically entangled and interdependent transnational social alliances, hierarchies, friendships, and networks. The concept encompasses the materiality of the street and the goods that are exchanged and transacted in trade relations. It also highlights the skills for competition that are needed for orientation in legal and political landscapes that cut across the formal and informal divides that migrants are faced with when setting out to create a livelihood abroad.

KEYWORDS: business, ethnography, informal urban economy, trade, transnational migration

Urban populations have been rapidly increasing in the last century, with approximately 55 percent of the global population residing in cities in 2018. Alongside massive urbanization and the increased population mobility, the confinement and control of mobile populations is accelerating, especially for those who cross national borders. In urban areas, transnational migrants are trying to create economic livelihoods in contexts of growing state control and marginalization, and many migrant groups have come to inhabit the streets, as they live and/or work in multifaceted and informal street economies (Hall 2021; Hart 1985; Sassen 1994).

In this special issue, we seek to address the call for more research on precarious and informal workers in the global economy (Alford et al. 2019). The existing literature shows how migrants feed into informal economies in local contexts (Hall, King, and Finlay 2017; Schindler 2014; Thieme 2018). Here we add to these existing studies by exploring “informal street economies,” which we define as economic practices that take place or refer directly to activities in the street
as well as economic networking practices confined to public and semi-public spaces (Hall 2021; Hart 1985; Sassen 1994). Empirically, we approach informal street economies as including many kinds of activities, such as street vending, selling sexual services, pimping, begging, selling street magazines, day laboring without contracts, scavenging scrap, and peddling merchandise. It also includes the organization of border crossings in public settings, and the sale of information on where to purchase fake identity documents on a street corner. To explore such informal economies, we suggest the concept of “transnational street business,” which we unfold in the next section.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated how informal economies exist alongside formal ones, since it has entrenched social inequalities and demonstrated the extent to which public services such as health care, social housing, and unemployment benefits are limited, if not entirely unavailable, to undocumented and unregistered migrants. As international borders closed in response to the pandemic, transnational migrants’ networks and livelihoods were increasingly challenged, and the shutting down of public spaces due to the pandemic left many without an income. However, for many transnational migrants, particularly those “without (the right) papers,” work in informal street economies is the only option for generating an income (Sen 2020). Despite these challenges, transnational migrants are adept at developing new skills and strategies for creating a livelihood in response to the constant restraints imposed by national legal and political frameworks (Hall 2012: 6; Lucht 2012). Innovative business niches are emerging in urban centers as a response to transnational migrants’ essential needs for earning an income. One obvious example is smuggling migrants as a transnational business niche, which often involves a range of local and transnational actors in various roles and social positions (Richter 2019). Other examples that have received less media attention are the various innovative niche street businesses that pop up across urban centers, involving material exchanges and transactions (e.g., the street vending of fake designer merchandise) and establishing social networks (e.g., selling information about safer border passages). A recent ILO report estimated the number of international migrant workers to be 169 million in 2019, an increase of 5 million (3 percent) from the ILO’s estimate in 2017. However, this figure says nothing about the numbers of workers within informal economies worldwide. While migration and informal economies have received a fair amount of scholarly attention, we know surprisingly little about the nexus between these two fields, especially in terms of how transnational migrants participate in informal urban economies.

This special issue is a response to this underexplored phenomenon and contributes to important ongoing debates about informal economies, transnational migration and urban environments. Through ethnographic case studies from different regional settings, it explores how transnational migrants navigate informal urban economies, and which border-crossing social networks they rely on in the process. We, as editors, take a special interest in how they, as non-citizens, navigate the constraints of legal and political frameworks governing cities and migrants and the extent to which, in various ways, they inhabit urban space while doing this. In other words, we explore how migrants venture into informal street economies in larger cities around the globe.

A New Concept: Transnational Street Business

Much scholarly attention has been given to what Saskia Sassen in 1991 called “the global city,” defined as places of strategic transnational networks of trade and finance, as well as to the ways in which migrants manage situations of pervasive precarity and uncertain futures (Hall
Such studies cast light on the ways people on the move engage in transnational networks in urban metropoles, what Hall has framed “migrant city-making” (Hall 2021). With an empirical focus on the global city—now several decades after Sassen’s initial work—we suggest linking this literature to the vast field of economic anthropology (see, for example, Hann 2014; Hart 1985; Maurer and Mainwarin 2012) and explore the economic activities and social dynamics in which transnational migrants engage. Scholars have employed various concepts to frame how people make a livelihood on the margins of the city by, for example, “hustling” (Thieme 2018; Wacquant 2008) and “street smartness” (Di Nunzio 2012). The term “hustle” is used by Tatiana Thieme to cover “everyday dealings associated with uncertainty and accepted informalities that pervade realms of everyday life amongst youth in precarious urban geographies” (Thieme 2018: 529). Loïc Wacquant defines hustlers as persons who manage to profit from all sorts of schemes in the street economy, ranging from free food to selling drugs (Wacquant 2008: 62). Marco Di Nunzio defines street smartness as the sum of a person’s ability to make the best of a given moment, or to play “tricks” (Di Nunzio 2012: 442). Furthermore, actors who are good at inventing business niches and making a profit from nothing are often associated with the trickster figure (Babcock-Abrahams 1975; Lévi-Strauss 1969). The trickster represents both the good and bad, the cunning, the mischievous, and the hero all in one. The trickster (usually portrayed as a man in the literature), is someone who, much like the West African coxeur (who makes a living as a “middleman”), seems to be “both a crook and a savior” (Richter 2019).

Building on this important work, we identify a need for conceptual development in order to grasp transnational dynamics, where people rely on cross-border networks and movements of goods and people in constantly shifting political and legal contexts. We therefore propose the concept of “transnational street business” as an analytical concept for grasping transnational dynamics in the urban informal economy.

As just noted, transnational street business can include elements of “hustling” and being “street smart,” perhaps even “trickstering.” However, it also includes activities that do not necessarily make the “best of a given moment” or ensure a profit, but which, combined with other mundane economic practices, constitute an everyday “patchwork economy” (Ravnbol 2019) for marginalized migrant women and men to sustain a livelihood in the city. Focusing on transnational street business serves to cast light on the broader structures that migrants move within and sheds light on how they enter into already established informal and formal street economies, as well as constructing new business niches for themselves. With this perspective, we pay attention to how transnational migrants extend their informal, local businesses into international contexts, and which infrastructures they construct and take part in, in order to be successful in this move (Korsby 2017). As a concept, transnational street business thus serves to grasp both local economic contexts and the agents that move within them—in this case, transnational migrants in the city. It serves to illuminate business niches that emerge in direct response to migrants’ need for mobility and their attempts to generate livelihoods in new locations. Finally, it is a terminology that resonates with local descriptions of informal economic activities, including the use of bizness among Malian men in Maghreb (Richter 2019) or afacere (business in Romanian) by Romanian Roma who work the streets of Copenhagen (Ravnbol 2019).

The concept of transnational street business refers specifically to economic practices that take place in the street or that refer directly to activities in the street, such as street vending, selling sexual services, pimping, begging, and selling street magazines. It also refers to economic networking practices that take place in the street, such as striking up business agreements, selling information, organizing border crossings or arranging sex work. This includes examples such as the organization of border crossings over the phone, the sale of information on where to
purchase fake identity documents (Simonsen, forthcoming June 2023), or arranging the sale of sexual services over the phone with a brothel manager abroad (Korsby 2017). These practices usually take place in the informal realm, but they often feed into more formalized segments of the global and local economy. Street vending, for example, ties into the production and sale of merchandise in larger factories and stores (often in other locations, and even on other continents; see, e.g., Haugen 2018), while the sale of street magazines relates to producing, printing, and packaging magazines. Both sectors also employ transnational migrants formally worldwide. Sex work feeds into local and global sex industries, which can also take place in the formal economy with established production companies and online platforms, for example, in camming (Jones 2020). We are interested in how migrants labor within the informal urban economies in the strategic transnational networks of global cities (Sassen 1991 and 2005). Our curiosity lies in exploring how transnational migrants shape and take part in alliances and linkages across formal and informal spheres and how such spheres are intertwined at local and global levels. We therefore approach the informal not only as the domain of the poor and their potential solidarity, but also as a transterritorial terrain in which powerful actors emerge and where power hierarchies are at stake (Di Nunzio 2012: 433; Sassen 2005).

**Defining Conceptual Building Blocks**

Through a rich collection of empirical studies from Africa, Europe, and Latin America, this special issue presents the reader with a view of the multiplicity of realities that exist simultaneously in informal urban economies in a global perspective. Together the contributions present new insights into businesses that transnational migrants engage with, and explore what constitutes the informal and the formal (and their intertwining) and what “transnational” means in such contexts. To create a conceptual framework for the empirical contributions, we first explore further the key debates that have motivated us to propose the concept of transnational street business. This includes debates within the fields of transnational migration and urban studies, as well as business and economy.

**Transnational Migration: Exploring Migratory Practices to Create Livelihoods**

Our attention focuses on the positions, practices, and perceptions of people who have crossed international borders as they engage in transnational street business. For the world’s poor and marginalized populations, it is challenging to cross international borders, as they face a world where “access to safe and legal mobility” is unevenly distributed (Ferguson 2003; Kleist 2019: 73; Lucht 2012) and where millions are invested in human, material, and technological borders in order to stop what nation states describe as irregular movement (Olwig et al. 2020). Many migrants are at risk of imprisonment, deportation, or in the worst case, losing their lives, as they often travel and, upon arrival, stay without legal travel or work permits.

In contexts of increasing state control of mobile populations, transnational migrants try to carve out a space for themselves to earn a living and support their families at home. Marginalized and precarious mobile populations often end up working in low-paid jobs, in informal sectors and in various forms of street business. Images of street vendors of counterfeit goods, sex workers and pimps, migrant smugglers on maritime borders, beggars on street corners, and scrap collectors are examples of images of transnational migrants in cities worldwide (Adriaenssens and Hendrick 2011; Alford et al. 2019; Bastia 2015; Crossa 2016; Hall 2021; Hall, King and Finlay 2017; Schindler 2014; Tafti 2019; Turner and Schoenberger 2012).
Recognizing the harshness of migrating in a world that does not accommodate such movement, we suggest closer scrutiny be given to how migrants who are involved in informal economies build their businesses and continue to make use of their positions as transnationally situated, and all the insecurities this implies. We pose questions such as: Which transnational networks do street businesses consist of and make use of? How are they locally anchored in “global cities” and connected with other strategic networks within and across the city? What does it mean to frame street business as “transnational”?

In order to explore such questions, the contributions in this special issue build on key debates within migration studies, which call for a move beyond a focus on territorial borders alone when exploring the “transnational.” We build on the foundations of the Manchester school of thought, which framed migration studies in light of the migrants themselves and their mobility. Transnational scholars focusing mainly on migration toward the US have paved the way for migration researchers to focus on social fields rather than geographical boundaries when studying migration. Inspired by such studies, we explore migration across state borders as a type of transnational social space (Olwig and Sørensen 2002: 2; see also Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1995; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Portes 2001; Vertovec 2001; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002).

Besides approaching the transnational through an interest in how people, ideas, and materiality move across and beyond nation states (Vertovec 1994: 447), we add to our understanding of the transnational the important role of the urban in informal street businesses. Sassen has argued that “the globalization of economic activity entails a new type of organizational structure,” which she captures through the term “global cities” (Sassen 2005: 28). Sassen argues that global cities and the strategic networks of trade and finance they consist of are both place-centered (because they are embedded in particular locations) as well as transterritorial (because they link sites that are not geographically proximate, yet are intensely connected) (ibid. 2005: 39). In Sassen’s words, the global materializes by necessity in specific places (ibid. 2005: 32). Sassen focuses mainly on the formal global economy that is driven by transnational firms and corporations. Yet she argues that one of the constituting elements of the global city is precisely the informal economy, which is in high demand in the city, but which cannot compete with high-profit-making firms (ibid. 2005: 30). We build further from the work of Sassen and others, by placing at the center of attention the informal and more invisible aspects of the global city economy. We zoom in on the way strategic transnational networks among transnational migrants partake in the architectures of global cities.

The empirical contributions to this special issue show how street businesses arise in response to migrants’ needs and social networks and build upon transnational connections. At the same time, the contributions underline the differences between positions, practices, and perceptions that transnational migrants experience. For some migrants, street businesses are invented with the intent of advancing livelihood opportunities, whereas for other migrants, their immediate needs as (irregular) migrants is what forces them to create such transnational business niches. While business niches are sometimes created by the migrants themselves, it is necessary to understand how such niches feed into existing local and formal business (Sassen 2005) and thus how social relations in contexts of migration need to be studied as emerging within social fields that cut across borders, terrains, and sectors. In fact, we encourage a focus on the encounters between different sectors, people, and fields as zones of “awkward engagements,” which arise out of encounters and interactions, what Anna Tsing has framed as “friction” (Tsing 2005: xi). We explore how encounters between different and unequally placed actors, such as migrants, brokers, state officials, and national citizens, within the transnational street business may “lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (Tsing 2005: 5).
The Street: Exploring the Urban Landscape from the Perspective of Transnational Migrants

Conceptually and ethnographically, we focus on urban streets as a gathering point for the intertwining of formal and informal business between transnational migrants and other local actors and as sites where the global materializes in a specific locality. We are interested in the kinds of urban streets that can encompass this range of business and sociality, linking places and people together (Hall 2012: 6). In a recent publication, Suzanne Hall sheds innovative light on street economies among migrants in Britain and how they reflect the limits and possibilities of migrant city-making (Hall 2021: 1–2). Hall shows how this city-making rests on a migrants’ paradox, in which they have to make their livelihood within a citizenship that is always called into question by the British state. In this approach, Hall defines the street as a world that connects migrants’ global displacements and urban emplacements (Hall 2021: 3). In our approach to city streets, we build on Hall’s pertinent work, but with a more specific focus on the business niches and practices of trade and exchange that emerge in response to migrants’ needs and uncertain positions in society (as defined below). Furthermore, we focus broadly on migrants who are irregular, or who, in other ways, lack residence and/or work permits in the nation states they work in. The analytical aim is to illuminate what business looks like in the street in widely different geographical and socioeconomic locations across the globe and to shed light on the role such business plays for migrants and the ways in which street business both enables and disrupts their aspirations.

Exploring the engagement of transnational migrants in the urban informal economy builds on key debates concerning migration infrastructures in transaction economies (Hall, King and Finlay 2017; Hall 2021; Kleinmain 2014; Landau 2021; Simone 2021). These infrastructures build on material and social forms of collaboration and interconnections where transnational migrants have to orient themselves in relation to various agents and structures of possibilities and limitations (see Mbatha and Koskimaki, as well as Korsby, this special issue). A perspective on migration infrastructures relates to key debates on migrants’ involvement in informal urban economies, including street vending, hawking, and begging, in cities such as Buenos Aires (Bastia 2015), Tehran (Tafti 2019), Mexico City (Crossa 2016), Hanoi (Turner and Schoenberger 2012), Delhi (Schindler 2014), and Brussels (Adriaenssens and Hendrickx 2011). These ethnographic studies show the multifaceted forms of involvement that migrants have in urban economies worldwide. This special issue adds to these important debates by providing a collection of ethnographic perspectives on transnational migrants’ engagement in urban economies and illuminating how business in the street becomes possible and is practiced by migrants. We combine attention to migration infrastructures with a closer scrutiny of the concrete economic practices that are crucial for the networks and social relations that facilitate human mobility. In doing so, we zoom in on the particular business niches that emerge in response to migrants’ needs and exigencies in urban destinations across the globe.

There are vast studies concerning urban planning and human geography, which focus on street centralities, business centers, and networks (e.g., Hall 2012; Hall 2021; Jiang and Claramunt 2004; Porta et al. 2012). The focus of many of these important studies is, however, on formal networks and businesses, as is also the focus in Sassen’s work on the global city (Sassen 1991, 2005). We add to these studies, with a focus on the informal economic practices and alliances that often interlink with the formal economic structures. These unfold in the urban street that we approach both as a concrete geographical space where people, goods, and money meet, and where transactions and relations unfold, and as an analytical field, which provides insights into the intersections between formal and informal economies, legalities, social structures, and
entrepreneurship. The street is not only the concrete space of such business, but as the ethnographic examples show, key social relations emerge in and are created through the street (see also the work of Hall 2012; 2021). In this way, the street is also an expression of the types and forms of trade that can exist in the informal economy. The street is a public space, but that does not mean that its actual workings are out in the open—in fact, several components of street business often operate in the shadows, with transactions unfolding in the intertwining between the visible and invisible, the public and the private, the legal and the illegal. We see the street as being particularly important in the lives of transnational migrants in the city, and the ethnographic contributions show why particular streets are more important compared to others. We therefore suggest the concept of transnational street business to illuminate this particular coming together of urban space, migrants’ needs, and business endeavors.

The ethnographic contributions in this collection deal with streets across the globe. When looking to obtain services or buy goods, migrants tend to veer toward urban environments where information, goods, and transactions are available in the public space and where these services can be easily achieved. As a migrant, one might even be able to find fellow country nationals in that space with specialized knowledge, access, or information linked to having the same ethnic, national, or cultural background (Hall 2021, see Vammen, this special issue). The city contains a concentration of flows of goods, information, means of transportation, and services, which are part of the infrastructure of most cities. When migrants are themselves creating a business in a destination or transit country, urban settings are attractive, since these contain large flows of people as potential clients or customers, whether these are fellow migrants or locals. However, as mentioned above, even though the business is played out in the public space, many of the street businesses described in this special issue have a “hidden” quality to them in that they unfold in small alleyways, away from the public eye and located in particular neighborhoods.

Urban scholars highlight the importance of avoiding formal/informal dualisms when studying urban settings (e.g., Acuto, Dinardi, and Marx 2019). The contributions to this special issue indeed show that there is a constant intertwining between the formal and the informal coming together in the street, an intertwining that the migrants have to master and navigate, and which thus transcends the dualism. For example, when migrants seek news about the destiny of their family members who have crossed the Mediterranean Sea, they rely on formal information from legal organizations obtained through informal channels (see Simonsen, this special issue). Another example are migrants in the flea market in Durban, South Africa, who inherently rely on an informal economy of friendship to make a profit in the formal economy (see Mbatha and Koskimaki, this special issue).

Economy and Business: Exploring Business Niches from a Perspective on Transnational Migration

Economic anthropology comprises an immense body of literature that ties into other fields of study concerning politics, globalization, inequalities, markets, poverty, and social hierarchies. Economy as a concept is frequently used to encompass other social relations and contexts, such as the moral economy (Thompson 1971), which over time has been used more to explore issues related to morality. Some scholars are critical of the broadening of the term, including Didier Fassin, who underlines the importance of revitalizing a focus on economics in social studies (Fassin 2009). We take this critique seriously and support a revitalized focus on economics as it influences social relations and networks in contexts of migration, including notions of class, social hierarchies, and power (e.g., Hann 2015; James 2014b; Maurer and Mainwarin 2012).
therefore introduce a focus on the economic structures that shape the contexts in which the migrants move and the practices and social relations they form.

Studies of capitalism and neoliberalism are essential for understanding the broader social, political, and legal structures within which local economies unfold (see, e.g., Bourgeois 1995; Scott 1985; Slobodian 2018; Tsing 2005; Wacquant 2012), and economic theorists have proposed alternative approaches toward the financial inclusion of poor communities in a world that is driven by market forces and social inequalities (Sen 1999; Piketty 2020). Sassen also highlights in her work how the global economy feeds on cheap and disposable migrant labor (Sassen 1994; 2005; 2014). Anthropologists have contributed ethnographically to this field, with empirical studies that shed light on the social hierarchies that emerge in contemporary neoliberal regimes (Wacquant 2012; see also Bourgeois 1995). For many poor and marginalized communities worldwide, money and economic management become a matter of managing financial debt and debt relations, since the survival of many poor households relies on expensive loans with local usurers in the informal financial economy (Gregory 2012; James 2014a and 2014b; Peebles 2010; Ravnbøl 2019 and 2023). The economic activities in focus in this special issue play out in this broader global context of markets and social hierarchies of labor. They unfold in what Hall terms “edge economies,” defined as street economies that do not fall under the control of corporations and that are organized and socialized in the urban streets (Hall 2021:5-6). We are inspired by Hall’s terminology of edge economies, but specifically narrow our analytical focus to business, rather than economics. This is because a focus on business brings to the fore trading and trade relations that emerge within contemporary economic structures in society including the skills, relations, and networks that unfold in relation to such trading contexts. It allows us to explore not only how migrants engage with economies on the edge of society but also how specific business niches are created in response to their uncertain positions.

Inspired by Brian Moeran and Christina Garsten's focus on business as trade (Moeran and Garsten 2012), we explore the relations and structures that facilitate certain trading relations, which shape the business niches with which transnational migrants engage. As we previously suggested, business is also an emic term in the various contexts that the articles in this special issue describe. By taking the emic terminology seriously and examining local perspectives on transactions and exchange, we engage in an “anthropology of business as trading relations,” as Moeran and Garsten have eloquently framed it (Moeran and Garsten 2012: 4). We zoom in on business niches that emerge in response to the needs and practices of transnational migrants and the local actors and structures they engage with in the street. By doing so, we also stress that there are many actors involved with informal economies in local contexts who are not transnational migrants, but who nonetheless meet and interact with the migrants in various ways as part of the trading relations as business partners, clients, customers, competitors, or managers. These complex and strategic business networks that transcend formal/informal and local/global dualisms are integral to the global city (Sassen 2005: 39).

Narrowing in on relations and notions of trade underlines just as much the need to move analytically beyond a focus only on migrants’ abilities and skills (Babcock 1979; Di Nunzio 2012; Thieme 2018; Wacquant 2008). While these important contributions each shed light on important aspects of agency within contexts of social inequality, we see a need for closer attention to the broader social, legal, and political structures that inform and emerge from the business contexts in which the migrants engage. In this way, we wish to grasp conceptually the ways in which migrants enact agency and how they play a significant role in the business niches that emerge in the street as actors who both shape and are shaped by the contexts in which they take part. In other words, the transnational street business concept allows for a closer focus on social relations and structures in a specific local business context, such as the sociality among newly
arrived Senegalese migrants who are guided into the street economy by more experienced migrants in Argentina (see Vammen, this special issue). Another example is the social dynamics that arise between pimps and sex workers in their preparations for moving their business from one EU country to another (see Korsby, this special issue). In many ways, these business niches would not have emerged or would have looked entirely different had it not been for the transnational migrants. We approach these emerging markets as “pop-up business niches,” since they emerge and disappear rapidly depending on the availability and demand of the market (Ravnbøl 2019; Yu et al. 2018). Pop-up business niches all begin as a reaction to something, whether that be legislative change, new policies, new social opportunities, or the arrival of new actors in the economic context. The list of reasons is as extensive and dynamic as the pop-up businesses are, and they emerge as a way to test ideas and potentialities with uncertain outcomes.

A pop-up business can lead to success and even become established over time, and it can dissolve if there is no demand or if costs are too high. Examples are multiple, including when a “transnational business of death” emerges in response to the many migrants who die while crossing the Mediterranean (see Simonsen, this special issue). The desperate need to cross the ocean develops into many business niches selling life jackets, rubber boats, or documents on the sending side. However, in other locations they result in business niches for buying and selling information about the bodies that never made it across the unsafe waters, and ways to continue moving, both socially and physically. The phrase “pop-up” frames the temporality of such markets, since they mushroom and disappear only if there is fertile ground for doing so (Ravnbøl 2019; Yu et al 2018). This complex intertwining of the local and transnational, the formal and informal, the regular and irregular in response to migrants’ needs to make a livelihood is integral to how we frame and approach the concept of transnational street business that we introduce in this special issue.

**Ethnographies of Transnational Street Business**

Having established transnational street business as a concept, by highlighting transnational migration, the urban space and business niches, the next step is to explore empirically what transnational street businesses can be composed of as they emerge across the globe. Our curiosity concerns the social practices, networks, and financial transactions potentially at stake in everyday economic engagements in an urban street setting.

In presenting unique global case studies, the contributions in this special issue are all based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork. They present empirical studies of the border crossings of people, knowledge, skills, and things. The ethnographic cases presented here illuminate how transnational social alliances and hierarchies are entangled with local social contexts and economies. Together, they present novel insights into the various ways in which transnational migrants create livelihoods in economies where local and transnational alliances and networks are intertwined and often interdependent. This involves the mobility of persons and materialities and results in new business niches, as well as transnational alliances that all feed on the needs and interests of the transnational migrants for making a livelihood in new urban destinations. The contributions build an empirical foundation for exploring the new concept of “transnational street business” across a range of empirical realities from Latin America, southern Africa, and Europe, capturing the multitude of formal and informal activities and businesses that are played out in a buzzing, urban street.

The contributions illuminate the importance of migrants knowing the law and its boundaries and loopholes, as well as mastering the skills to compete in the street and forge vital alliances.
and networks. Competition in the street is as much about revenue as it is about positioning within transnational social structures. Hence, the ethnographic contributions particularly center on two thematic discussions: 1) the structures of possibilities and limitations within the market arenas and legal and political frameworks; and 2) the social alliances, friendships, and hierarchies within the transnational street businesses.

First, the contributions illustrate the importance of legal structures, market knowledge, and competition within transnational street businesses. The articles provide detailed insights into different market arenas and show the everyday practicalities and challenges of operating in an informal business space. They show how specific material goods are transacted and valued in the relations of trade that unfold within the market arenas that the migrants become part of or create. Through the articles, we learn that achieving a position within the market not only relies on economic value, but also relies on reading and accessing the complex legal and social landscape. By engaging with established market arenas, the migrants create new business niches where they draw on formal and informal structures. At the same time, other business niches emerge in direct response to the presence and needs of the migrants in the new urban context. Importantly, in the particular contexts of transnational street business niches, market knowledge is tied deeply to the laws, regulations, and policies that shape how migrants access and move within local destinations. All the contributions to this special issue show empirically how legislation fundamentally affects migrants’ economic possibilities and limitations. In response, different types of business niches emerge in the street that feed on the migrants’ needs, for example, for legal documents and regularized status. In such contexts of control and limited mobility, migrants rely on mastering particular skills in the fierce competition in the street businesses they enter into.

Second, the ethnographic contributions show how the migrants who arrive in new destinations depend on friendships, alliances, and networks with other migrants or local actors within a given industry, in order to make it in their business niche. The intertwinement of local and transnational alliances creates complex social hierarchies that the migrants have to navigate in—and meticulously prepare for—in order to succeed with their business. Here, success is not only financial, but it also comes in the form of the potential for climbing a social ladder in the new destination country. By approaching the complexities of these social relations from a perspective on transnational street business, it becomes visible how migrants’ experiences of success or failure not only rely on the individual’s talent for being “street smart” (Di Nunzio 2012) or a “hustler” (Thieme 2018), but largely depend on the roles and actions of a much broader social landscape of interconnected agents, as well as on the political and economic possibilities offered within the given local context.

Building on fieldwork among Somali migrants in Athens, Greece, Anja Simonsen shows how the lack of regular residence permits limits the migrants’ abilities to access information from official channels about the destiny of family members “en route” to Europe. Instead, a “transnational business of death” emerges where migrants without regular documents navigate between formal and informal structures and networks in order to obtain vital information. The migrants need to identify the price and value of accessing information. Along the way, pieces of information about valuable contexts are exchanged and transacted so they can reach the ultimate goal—to ensure a burial in accordance with Islamic traditions in Athens.

In another European context related to Romanian migrants’ involvement in transnational street-based sex work, Trine Mygind Korsby illustrates the social building blocks of the global sex industry and the transnational production of desire and its street economization. She illuminates how transnational migrants enter and engage in street-based sex work as pimps, and how they work to create solid social relationships with sex workers, thus providing insights into
the creation of an illegal transnational business niche, since third-party facilitation of sex work is criminalized. Korsby’s ethnography shows how the success of the Romanian pimps in this particular street business depends on their skills for “reading” other people’s desires, such as the hopes and dreams of prospective sex workers, the economic interests of potential business partners, and the sexual preferences of the clients.

In an urban street setting in Argentina, Ida Marie Vammen highlights how migrant networks shape Senegalese migrants’ navigation and access to opportunities when they arrive in Buenos Aires. This process happens via the sign of a new trader, *el maletín*, a black suitcase with red velvet lining, which, when opened, displays different types of jewelry and copies of designer watches. Through the exchange and transactions around the *maletín*, certain roles are ascribed to both new and old migrants to help reproduce the life and trajectory of the “successful migrant” who fulfills social expectations back home. Vammen shows how the undocumented Senegalese street hawkers have limited access to social services and are exposed to discrimination and harsh security policies and police interventions. This absence of access to formal support structures compels them to rely on social networks and contacts to create an economic livelihood in the city.

In a workshop flea market in Durban, South Africa, Nhomkosi Mbatha and Leah Koskimaki show how West African migrants have to navigate in a trading market where they occupy uncertain positions in the social hierarchy. In order to compete with other, more dominant traders, migrants have to invest significantly in the urban collective, since friendships become a currency in itself as a means to gain a higher position in social hierarchies and forge new business opportunities. Mbatha and Koskimaki describe how the West African migrant street vendors must navigate policies regulating the informal economy and various forms of trading permissions while also facing xenophobic attacks, lack of support from the police, and constant insecurity, an increasing problem facing irregular migrants in South Africa.

As this outline of the ethnographic contributions has shown, the concept of transnational street business analytically captures how migrants generate a livelihood by engaging with the informal urban economy in the streets. The concept serves to conceptually encapsulate a multitude of transnational alliances, hierarchies, friendships, and networks that are entangled and often interdependent. This encompasses the materiality of the street and the goods that are exchanged and transacted in trade relations in urban market arenas. The concept also highlights the skills for competition that are needed for orientation in legal and political landscapes that shape and cut across the formal and informal divides that migrants are faced with when setting out to create a livelihood abroad.

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