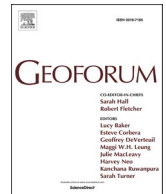




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The congested city and situated social inequality: Making sense of urban (im)mobilities in Lagos, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Lagos is often depicted as a city of immobility and inequality. Based on a micro-sociological study in the public transit system and an ethnographic study in an urban neighborhood, this article provides a nuanced analysis of situational inequality. Given the enduring traffic congestion and prevailing social inequality in the city, moments of aggressive cutting in line on roads and disputes over light collision accidents demonstrate a spontaneous unequal power relationship that is at odds with the existing social inequality structure. These moments can impose a sense of frustration on the private car drivers who are assumed to have a higher social status while bringing delight to minibus (*danfo*) drivers and passengers who have lower status. This emergent situational inequality, the paper argues, provides lower-class people with affective elements which can contribute to making sense of (im)mobilities, urban lifestyle, and conceptualization of Lagos. However, the effects of situational inequality are limited to the individual level, as it cannot largely transform the spatiality and temporality of traffic congestion, the socioeconomic class structure, and the traffic governance in Lagos. This dialectical situational inequality does not become a practical living strategy but reifies their individual philosophies of living in Lagos embodied through narratives. The sociological account of situational inequality in this paper showcases an approach to interpret the meaningfulness of micro mobility experiences with regard to macro urban conditions, thereby enriching our understandings of the relationship between mobility and inequality.

1. A Glimpse of Life in Lagos

When searching “Lagos” in Google Images, traffic congestion appears one of popular images of this largest metropolis in Africa, which is filled with different sizes of yellow buses, called “danfo” by inhabitants of Lagos (Lagosians). From a “Lagosian” perspective, it is a dead certainty that much of life in Lagos is spent in traffic or trying to avoid it. As a famous Nigerian-American writer put it, the bus stop in a tangle of traffic, mostly *danfos*, is “one of the densest spots of human activity in the city” (Cole 2015: 58).

Another type of popular images of Lagos is built on the salient contrast between the privileged and the marginalized. On the one hand, Lagos is labeled as a world-class megacity in Africa where a number of infrastructural projects are emerging with influx of global capital (Adama 2018). Most of the newly-created urban spaces are concentrated within splendid shopping complexes, gated communities, and commercial buildings in the developed Victoria Island and Lekki Peninsula. On the other hand, Lagos is also associated with severe poverty and large slums. Makoko, next to the spectacular Third Mainland Bridge, one of

the longest bridges in the world, is reported as the world’s biggest floating slum with approximately 100,000 residents (BBC 2018). In this sense, Lagos is deemed as “a city that is simultaneously growing, dividing, polarizing and decaying” (Gandy 2005: 52).

Regarding these popular representations of immobility and inequality in Lagos, a question from an observer at distance may arise: how do Lagosians make sense of living in an immobile and unequal city? For privileged people, traffic congestion is inescapable when they leave their houses for working, shopping, or relaxing, though comfortable private cars equipped with A/C and stereo systems make their journey less stressful. For the majority of Lagosians, to be mobile is not easy, not only due to being stuck in the compacted *danfo* during traffic congestion but also owing to constraints of transport expense. Compared to other cities, public transport is extraordinarily expensive in Lagos. For instance, while I was conducting research in Lagos in 2017, passengers have to spend 500 naira (\$1.40 US dollars) from Ajah (in the southern part of Lagos) to Iyana Ipaja (in the northern part). With the same price, people can travel across two Nigerian states from Ife to Ibadan. Therefore, spatial movements via the public transit produce significant

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economic burdens on Lagosian commuters. Olu, a trade company's driver I have known for years and living in Ikorodu and working in Ikeja, usually spends 800 naira for roundtrips per day, but he earns 50,000 naira a month, which means that one third of his income (16,000 naira) is spent on daily commuting, almost same as the rent of his family's apartment (15,000 naira/month). Despite the high cost, around eight million people use public transportation every day, and close to one million trips are made at peak periods in Lagos (Economic Intelligence Unit 2013). This leads back to the difficult question for Lagosians such as Olu: What does it mean to live in this "unequal" city? There might be many kinds of answers to the question but the one I found particularly significant is related to a spontaneous moment of daily (im)mobilities in which a situational inequality emerges.

2. Capturing situational inequality

When I was conducting participant observation as a passenger within *danfo* buses, I found a particular moment that made both drivers and passengers feel excited and even laugh aloud—the moment when the *danfo* bus managed to avoid a traffic jam by aggressively cutting in line or by tactically rerouting while many private cars were still stuck in the congestion. In this situation, the unequal relationship regarding their mobilities between "privileged" people in private cars and people in public transport vehicles was immediately reversed, which made me recall Olu's comment on driving in Lagos: "Not everyone can drive in Lagos, but *danfo* drivers can drive everywhere." Thus, there might be something overlooked by urbanist observers—something tiny and ephemeral, but significantly meaningful for people like *danfo* drivers and passengers, living in the "unequal" Lagos (Gandy 2005).

This paper is a micro-sociological study of that *kind of* situation that is at odds with structural social inequality regarding urban (im)mobilities. Drawing on Collins' (2000) theory of situational stratification, this paper examines situational inequality in the context of Lagosians' everyday mobilities. The term "situational inequality"¹ conceptualizes the emerging unequal power relationship between individuals in the micro-situation of daily movements "in sharp contrast to the ideal type of a macro-hierarchy" (Collins 2000: 17).

Instead of universally applying Collins' theory, this paper highlights three kinds of difference and change in the Lagos context. First, it teases out how situational inequality is manifested in the nuances of urban (im) mobilities which Lagosians, especially *danfo* drivers and private car drivers, engage with every day. Second, it explores the implications of situational inequality to a sense of place. Specifically, it argues that spontaneously emerging situational inequality provides lower-class people with affective elements which contribute to making sense of (im) mobilities, urban lifestyle, and conceptualization of the city. Third, it adds a dialectical interpretation of situational inequality, meaning that situational inequality can affect the power dynamics in that particular situation, though it does not largely transform societal structures.

The situatedness of mobilities and inequality in urban lived experiences deserves more academic attention and exploration. Much of existing research has focused on unequal access to transport services and unequal usage of transportation modes in various contexts (Kaufmann et al. 2004; Ohnmacht et al. 2009; Manderscheid 2009), which are all important contributions to understandings of interplays between mobilities and inequality, but the theories are not completely "situated" and some meaningful nuances might be overlooked on the ground. A

"situated" study is therefore built on "ethnographic imagination" (Willis 2000) which links micro evidence up to macro conditions.

This paper advocates for a people-centered and experience-based approach based on two phases of fieldwork: a micro-sociological study in the public transit system and an ethnographic study in a neighborhood. Since urban mobilities are meaningful everyday practices (Jensen 2009), to understand the inherent meanings of everyday mobilities, we must move and be "thinking in transit" (Bissell 2018). To capture those subtle, dynamic, and mundane situations of urban (im)mobilities, the researcher not only becomes mobile but also keeps sensitive toward what people (interviewees) tell as well as their emotions, affects, and bodily movements. Moreover, written in field notes, my personal experience in the transit systems is indispensable to interviews, as it facilitates my interactions with drivers and passengers in context and my reflection on the encounters with them at the scene. In this way, I have discovered that structural dimensions of urban mobilities are complicated by the open-ended nature of both my informants' and my own (im) mobility experiences, "meaning that there is always some wiggle room, even in the most seemingly constrained situation" (Bissell 2018: xxxv).

From 2015 to 2017, I have spent three months each year taking public transportation to move around in Lagos. The regular routes include Ikeja-Egbeda, Iyana Ipaja-Yaba, Yaba-Obalende, Egbeda-Oshodi, all on *danfo*, and Ojota-CMS via Bus Rapid Transit. On roads, I have extensively interacted with passengers, conductors, and drivers. The participant observation and informal interviews enrich my experiential understanding of the commuting systems in Lagos. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews in Lagos Pidgin English with 30 *danfo* drivers along these routes, who all had worked as *danfo* drivers for five years or longer. The interviews primarily focused on their everyday driving experiences on roads, including time spent on routes, congested places, and emerging situations they see and/or get by. In the process, I kept an open mind to their feelings during their narration and further asked about specifics on those feelings.

Apart from this, doing ethnography in a neighborhood is crucial to understand how situational inequality works in everyday discourses and practices. The "mobile" study helps to observe power dynamics within specific situations—a situation that is subjectively interpreted by individual subjects rather than by external examiners who gauge inequality based on socioeconomic status. To further understand how this situation is meaningful to individual subjects, an ethnographer cannot merely stay "on roads" but also need to delve into lived experiences in which these nuances make sense. Therefore, doing ethnography of everyday life is a way to complement the first part.

The second part aims to shed light on life experiences of *danfo* passengers in Lagos. In this complex city, it is not sensible to let any passengers randomly tell me their life experiences when I meet them. So, a neighborhood is a manageable unit to narrow down the selection of interviewees. From 2018 to 2019, I completed a 12-month ethnography within a neighborhood² that is connected to three transit routes I focused on. Overall, equivalent to the number of driver interviewees, 30 informants were selected from 102 residents I have known through my one-year presence in the neighborhood. The selection relies on the consistency between their everyday transit routes and the routes I studied as an autoethnographer. In this sense, we could frequently discuss their daily experiences of (im)mobilities in Lagos after their movements and my observations on roads. Moreover, to understand their sense of place and conceptualization of Lagos life, I also conducted interviews on their life

¹ The word "stratification" more likely refers to hierarchical layers of social structure, whereas "inequality" tends to describe the relationship between individuals which this paper emphasizes. Given that stratified boundaries between the rich and the poor is not the focus in this research, "inequality" is a more proper choice. Also, in mobilities research, "inequality" is widely used and discussed. Aligning to this tradition, I adjust the term to "situational inequality".

² Another criterion to select this neighborhood as my study site is the housing prices. For instance, the rent of a two-bedroom apartment in a four-story building cost me 250,000 naira (688 US dollar) a year. Due to its location at the intersection of Egbeda and Ipaja areas, this price is a little higher than the same type of housing in other parts of the region, but cannot compare to those in more developed regions, such as Ikeja, Ikoyi, and Victoria Island. This evidence qualitatively signposts the economic class of residents in this neighborhood.

histories and why they choose to live in Lagos. All the ethnographic data collected through two phases of fieldwork are analyzed according to [Crang and Cook's \(2007: 131-149\)](#) approach that balances creative and structured processes, including a systematic but grounded way of coding.

In what follows, I will first review the literature on inequality and mobility, especially in the context of urban Africa, followed by an overview of how traffic congestion in Lagos comes into being by considering several structural factors. Then, I will employ [Collins' \(2000\)](#) approach to analyze situational inequality with urban (im)mobilities. Some necessary modifications are made to contextualize this Western-based theory in Lagos conditions. Furthermore, I will explore if situational inequality could affect societal structures. If not, what is the meaningfulness of situational inequality for urban residents? Accordingly, I will discuss implications of situational inequality in how individuals make sense of (im)mobilities and the city life.

3. Inequality, mobility and African cities

The classical conception of social inequality is not a situational one. Based on statistical data, it refers to differential distribution of wealth, income, educational attainment, and occupational status ([Sørensen 1996](#)). Until the 1970s, inequality studies primarily focused on vertical differentiation among individuals in terms of poverty and social class (e.g. [Peet 1975](#)). In recent decades, the increased availability of living choices in human societies has led to more complex patterns of inequality, notably including the increasing variability of lifestyles, attitudes, opinions, and values ([Sauder 2005](#)). Thus, [Collins \(2000: 39\)](#), a sociologist specializing in micro-sociology, calls for an alternative theoretical intervention: “in place of a hierarchical image, we need a horizontal-spatial imagery of today's situational experiences”.

To start with, [Collins \(2000\)](#) provides a vivid depiction of a situation that illuminates my observing and thinking of urban (im)mobilities in Lagos. He wrote:

“In public meetings, when women and ethnic minorities take the role of spokespersons and denounce social discrimination against their group, white men of the higher social classes sit in embarrassed silence or join in a chorus of support; in public opinion-expressing and policy-making settings, it is the voice of the underdog that carries moral authority” ([Collins 2000: 17](#)).

This situation parallels the moment when the *danfo* driver carried the authority of navigating traffic congestion over the private car drivers. As [Collins \(2000: 17\)](#) suggests, this situational interaction “over the issues of so-called political correctness” hinges upon the “unrecognized disjunction between micro and macro”. Indebted to this scholarship, I bring the conception of situatedness into studies of urban mobilities and, as I suggest, it helps us understand the disjunction between micro urban experiences and macro urban problems in an African megacity.

In an array of recent literature on urbanism, mobility has become an indispensable element of urban experiences ([Jensen 2009; Bissell 2018](#)). The perspective that cities are becoming “mobile” casts important light on ideas and practices of urbanism. However, this does not mean that “mobility is everything” which [Adey \(2006\)](#) has critiqued. In the urban fabric, mobilities are understood in a relational way, in a plural form and in a changing lens. Accordingly, this research specifically examines the situations in which some people become mobile while some become immobile. By introducing the conception of situational inequality, I will delve into “the contingent relations between movements” of differently-situated actors on roads ([Adey 2006](#)).

The nexus of mobilities and inequality has been theoretically and empirically studied ([Ohnmacht et al. 2009](#)). In the research field of urban mobilities, inequality is studied by examining different degrees of access to urban transportation, ranging from public transport systems to private transport services. The existing literature on the relationships between mobility and inequality focuses on social exclusion of

marginalized peoples to affordable means of transportation ([Richardson and Jensen 2008; Blanco and Apaolaza, 2018](#)) and fast-growing information and communication technologies ([Graham 2001](#)). Furthermore, scholars have explored ways of gaining access to mobilities and the city. [Kaufmann et al. \(2004: 750\)](#) propose a concept of *motility* as “the capacity of entities (e.g., goods, information or persons) to be mobile in social and geographic space, or as the way in which entities access and appropriate the capacity for socio-spatial mobility according to their circumstances”. The emphasis of “capacity” in this definition helps to index the inequality of mobilities. In this vein, scholars have discovered that the establishment and continuation of social relations, to a large extent, rest on mobilities allowing or denying access to the spatialities of resources, activities, and goods ([Manderscheid 2009](#)). These accounts of inequality in mobilities studies are conceptually based on vertical differentiation regarding individual capacities and capitals which are accumulated over the time. Studying structural inequality is of great significance in understanding urban societal patterns, but as [Collins \(2000\)](#) points out, it does not always convey a full picture of social realities that micro-situational grounding differently unfolds.

In the studies of urban mobilities in Africa, micro-level social dynamics among different types of actors on roads, such as transport workers ([Agbibo 2016; Rizzo 2017](#)) and hawkers ([Klaeger 2012; Stasik 2016](#)), have drawn much attention. These ethnographic works have shed great light on a variety of inequality and precariousness on African roads (See [Beck et al. 2017](#)). Inequality in this vein, however, still refers to the socioeconomic status of research subjects. Similarly, survey research in Douala, Cameroon has indicated that the cost of public transport is a major item of expenditure in household budgets ([Olvera et al. 2015](#))—a reality also found in Olu's case in Lagos. Furthermore, surveys across five West African cities demonstrate that the shortcomings of transport systems restrict the capacity of urban dwellers, particularly the poor, to travel out of their neighborhoods and play a part in maintaining social inequality ([Olvera et al. 2013](#)). Although scholars have shed light on various unequal realities of immobilities in African cities, it is still unclear how lower-class African urban dwellers make sense of unequally immobile lives and how their sense-making may be related to sense of place. Considering the situation that I encountered in the *danfo* bus, I speculate if situational inequality is related to individuals' sense of place and conceptualization of Lagos life.

This hypothetical question implies potential significance of studying situational inequality in terms of sense of place and urban identity in Africa. The earlier literature, relying on statistical representation of the “rate” of urbanization and rural–urban migration, treats urban identities as byproducts of rural migrants' adaption to urban life ([Mabogunje, 1968; Barnes 1974](#)). Their interpretation of inequality refers to uneven distribution of resources and wealth between the rural and the urban ([La Fontaine 1970](#)) and between migrants and residents in the cities ([Lloyd 1974](#)). The later literature focuses more on micro experiences, such as neighborhood spaces and street cultures, to explain the ideological dimension of urban life that keeps people in the cities. They argue, despite various urban problems, African cities have become a venue of cosmopolitan imaginaries and futuristic global fantasies ([Weiss 2009; Newell 2012; Smith and Mwadime 2014](#)). This paper will not go that far to interpret a spontaneous situation of daily mobilities in terms of cosmopolitan urban identities or “global sense of place” ([Massey 1994](#)). Sense of place is a humanistic geography term that refers to the subjective and emotional attachment people have to a place ([Tuan 1974; Agnew 1987; Cresswell 2014](#)). Indebted to those ethnographic studies which draw attention to the subtle, dynamic, and mundane experiences in African cities, this paper will explore the possibility of how particular situations during traffic congestions in Lagos may lead to Lagosians' sense of place.

4. The congested city

Traffic congestion can result from many factors, and in Lagos, lack of effective planning is seen as a primary one. As [Gandy \(2006: 389\)](#)

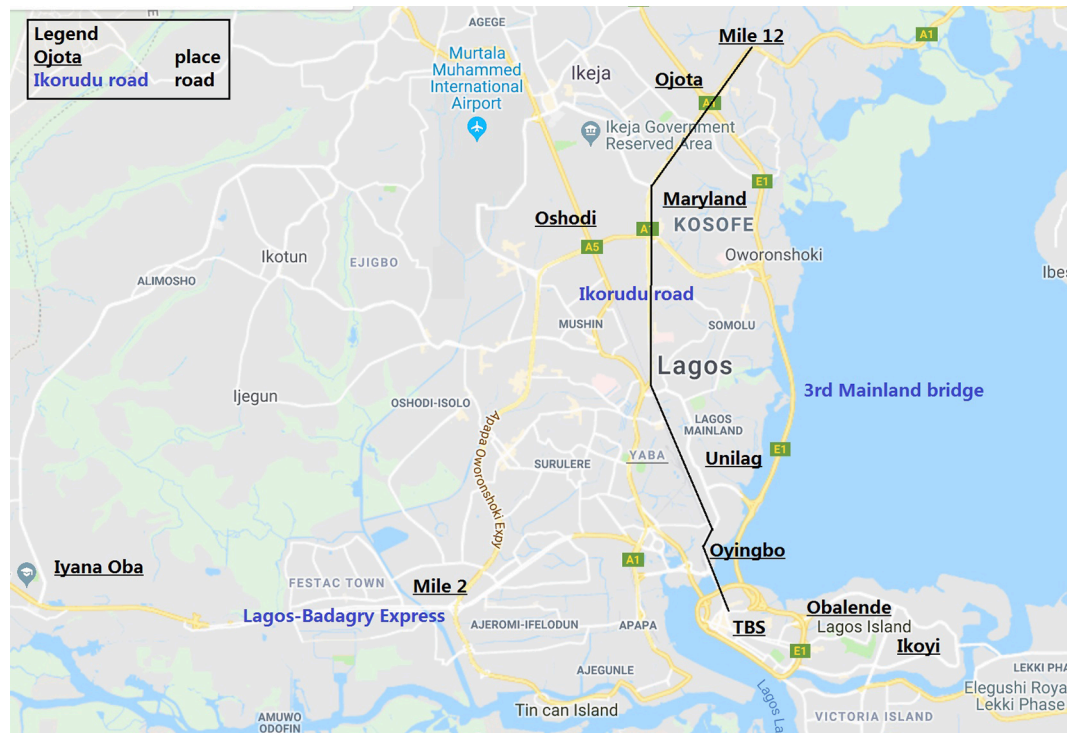


Fig. 1. The Map of Metropolitan Lagos.

argues, the periodic aspirations of successive colonial and post-colonial administrations in Lagos to improve the morphology and structure of urban space have had minimal impact on the metropolitan region. Specifically, the massive government land use in the city's central areas, such as the Murtala Muhammed International Airport and several military barracks which were all planned and built during military regimes, now block traffic flows, because vehicles are forced to bypass these areas to reach somewhere not far by going straight (Oduwaye 2007). Interviewed drivers particularly complained about “bad planning” causing severe traffic congestion every day at the airport junction that links to Ikeja bridge and Mobolaji Bank Anthony Way, one of the busiest commercial areas in Lagos. Also, the process of consolidation of rapidly expanded, unplanned neighborhoods result in the “piecemeal urbanization” (Sawyer 2014) that is built on tons of dead-end roads and hidden lanes linked up to a few number of main roads or boulevards in the city. This, however, makes *danfo* drivers develop their skills of navigating the complex geography of road networks.

In recent years, the Lagos state government made great efforts to renew urban infrastructure. For instance, primary roads interconnecting highly populated areas was only 4921 km in 2001 and most are small with two to three lanes (Atubi 2010). Between 2007 and 2015, totally 222,417 km of roads was constructed (Lagos State Government, 2016). The major road network in Lagos runs through the central section of the Lagos Mainland on a North-South axis. The gradual termination of North-South roads in the Oyingbo area directly links Lagos Island through Eko and New Carter bridges and continues further Southwest to serve the Apapa and Tin Can ports. The Third Mainland Bridge shortens the time needed to travel between Lagos islands and Mainland (Fig. 1).

On Lagos roads, the presence of vehicles is diverse, including *danfo*, *keke*, *okada*, taxi cabs, and private cars, and very few bicycles.³ Modified

³ Bicycle is a rare form of transportation in Lagos because of the lack of designated bicycle lanes and therefore the potential for accidents. In the studied neighborhood, bicycles are sometimes spotted, while *okada* riding and walking are primary modes of movement (walking has been a key part of rural mobility, see Porter 2002).

from old, imported Volkswagen buses, *danfo* buses—the most popular public transport vehicle—can carry between fourteen and eighteen passengers. The two-wheeled motorcycles, referred to by Lagosians as *okada*, usually take only one or two persons. A three-wheeled motorcycle, introduced in the late 1990 s by the military administrator of Lagos State, Muhammed Buba Marwa, is also called *keke Marwa* (Olu-koju 2004: 230), carrying a maximum of four passengers. Apart from a large proportion of these informal transport vehicles (58.08%), private cars account for 40.67% of total number of 11.7 million registered vehicles (NBS 2018).

In addition to the massive informal transport systems, the Lagos State Government initiated Africa's first BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) system in March 2008. Operated by Lagos Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (LAMATA), BRT buses run from Ikorodu through Ikorodu Road down to Lagos Island. The physically segregated BRT lanes from main roads make BRT buses move faster in the corridor especially during traffic congestion. It is regarded as “one of the several options available for tackling the huge public transport predicaments of Lagos” (LAMATA 2014). Thus, the second BRT route is being constructed along Lagos-Abeokuta Express.

Given the existing infrastructural shortage and ongoing urban renewal projects, informalities of transport service and governance aggravate traffic congestion. In a survey of commuters' opinions on transport systems in Lagos, among eight causes of traffic congestion frequently mentioned by respondents, five are related to the absence of rules and regulations or the lack of implementation of existing rules (Ibitayo 2012: 145). The top one, “randomly stopping along roads”, actually refers to *danfo* buses whose drivers I interviewed, however, believed that this is the way to enlarge their profits by serving passengers more flexibly. The government thus attempted to reform the *danfo* system by introducing alternative larger buses and restructuring routes which *danfo* drivers can flexibly change. However, this reform received substantial resistance from the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) who in fact governs *danfo* drivers and collect fees from *danfo* drivers and conductors on the daily basis (Cheeseman and de Gramont 2017).

All these factors contribute to traffic congestion that is temporally

and spatially structured in everyday life of Lagos. According to my long-term on-road observations and interviews with *danfo* drivers and passengers, road spaces usually become extremely congested on from 7 to 10 A.M. on the routes from North to South and from 4 to 8 P.M. in the opposite direction. The congested places are concentrated to specific locales with poorly maintained road infrastructure, including roundabouts, bridges and junctions at which traffic lights are lacking or not regularly working. One of frequently mentioned congested roads by the interviewees is the Lagos-Badagry expressway that is only a dual double-lane facility connecting the largest Apapa Port, the junction of Mile 2, and two key wholesale markets, Trade Fair and Alaba International Market. Another congested route which is widely narrated is the Agege Motor Way linking Ikeja and the Airport area and extending south to Surulere and the National Theatre.

The structured life on congested roads is also related to another factor: residential inequality. Based on uneven distribution of wealth—the vertical dimension of social inequality mentioned above, the city of Lagos is built on the distinct contrast between neighborhoods in terms of their infrastructure and locality. Well-established gated communities in Victoria Island and Ikoyi attract many high-income Nigerian citizens and foreign expatriates. People living there are rarely frustrated by shortage of electricity supply—a lived reality for many low-income Lagosians. Ikeja is the administrative center of Lagos State and the commercial center of trading goods such as electronic products. Due to its close distance to the airport and convenient access to various restaurants, banks and shops, the living costs in this area is also very high. In contrast, low-income people who work in these areas usually choose to live in the farther districts accessible via *danfo* buses, such as Ajah, Berger, Ikoroudu where Olu is living and Iyana Ipaja where I choose my study site. Although these places are not regarded by the interviewees as “low-end” as Makoko and Ajegunle, the housing rent can be 30 times cheaper (comparing Olu’s rent to an interviewed foreign expatriate’s rent in Ikoyi). Lower classes in these suburban neighborhoods spend less on housing but an unpredictable amount of time on everyday commuting, while those wealthier people in gated communities just need to drive a short distance to work. Nevertheless, both still have to cope with traffic jam during peak hours and can encounter with each other on the roads.

5. The situated (im)mobilities

In this section, I will apply Collins’ (2000) theory to analysis of situational inequality in the context of urban (im)mobilities in Lagos but with some adjustments, because his approach was primarily “to sketch what the contemporary situation of societies like the U.S.A. appears to be” (Collins 2000: 20). He provided an alternative interpretation of the Weberian dimensions of class, status, deference, and power. I will retain “class” in the next section that focuses on the limits of situational inequality and elaborate on the other three which contribute to the micro analysis of situated (im)mobilities in the congested city—Lagos.

First, to understand situational inequality between the individuals on roads, the priority is to clarify the “status” at both sides. Instead of defining status group as a community, Collins (2000: 26) suggests a kind of situational status existing in the absence of recognized status group boundaries. In terms of mobile actors on Lagos roads, private car drivers are not bounded with any distinctive status group,⁴ while *danfo* drivers hold a status attached to their work.

⁴ Although having and driving a car means a relatively high status in Nigeria, the social status of private car drivers is not fixed and universally recognized as elite groups, because the quality of private cars varies and signposts a variety of socioeconomic status of their owners. Moreover, many of Nigerian cars are imported second-hand cars from Europe, North America, and Japan (Beuving, 2006). Thus, vehicle ownership is not a criterion to judge the social status (See Peter’s case in section 7).

Transport work in the *danfo* system provides drivers and conductors with not only reasonable income but also a particular social status. Generally speaking, drivers (15 drivers out of 21 interviewed pairs in this case) have more years of experiences working in the system than conductors who often start as apprentice, therefore drivers usually take the larger proportion of the gross earning. In the rest six paired partnerships, drivers and conductors have the same level of experience, so that the two roles are interchangeable and they split the income. On the shortest (e.g. Yaba to Unilag) and the longest (e.g. Ajah to Iyana Ipaja) routes, however, there are not any conductors on the buses, and nine drivers in this research pool directly collect fees from passengers prior to setting off or along the way. One third of the researched drivers are the owners of *danfo* buses, while the majority rent the *danfo* vehicles to run on the routes, from which the vehicles’ owners will collect certain commission fees.

Working as *danfo* drivers and conductors is at risk of being stigmatized. Consider that if this kind of informal transport work can provide sustainable livelihood, why do all the unemployed youth in the city not engage? Okafor (2011) indicates that 40% of the unemployment rate in Nigeria is among urban youth aged 20–24. When I conversed with young passengers encountered on the buses, they would not consider doing such “tough” job and complained about inappropriate bodily touch by conductors during touting. At popular bus stations, conductors usually competed with each other by touting passengers—an aggressive bodily practice that has been “infamous” in Lagos street space (Okpara 1988). Speaking of her impression on Lagos, Bola, a 34-year-old woman having lived in the city for ten years, was disappointed by the hustling lifestyle: “I don’t like taking *danfo* in Lagos. Everyone is running and shouting.” Not only do conductors shout for touting, aggressive *agbero* boys working for transport unions at roadside also often shout and are stigmatized as “area boys” who collect different kinds of fees and levies to provide security or forestall insecurity in Lagos (Ismail 2009).

However, working as a *danfo* practitioner does not mean a firmly bounded status. The hustling style of *danfo* work presses transport workers into a dilemma: earning to be mobile or losing decent reputation among people who stigmatize the occupation. Dayo is one of the young conductors I followed for a month in 2017 told me his strategy to cope with the dilemma: He worked as a *danfo* conductor for only half the day and the rest of time he worked as a phone repair technician in a small shop which is mostly known to his acquaintances. “I can be very harsh at (*danfo*) work; I can also be a fine boy.” The slang of “fine boy” is embodied in a photograph he showed me, in which he dressed in fashionable attire and hung out with his girlfriend in a shopping mall.

Second, according to Collins (2000: 29–33), deference, which is supposed to maintain status order in a structured community, does not work out in relatively unstructured social situations, such as a situation when a middle-class white professional walks into a black ghetto. Although his interpretation might be a little biased as the black ghetto may also have their structured rules, this approach is beneficial to understand how the supposed deferential code of driving does not work out in the situation of traffic congestion in Lagos.

As briefly described earlier, *danfo* drivers usually have more advantages of coping with traffic congestion than private car drivers. According to interviews with both types of drivers, two skills are crucial to driving through traffic. One is the geographical knowledge of shortcuts. In a survey conducted in the Ikeja area, Ogunkunle and Adesola (2011) identified 12 alternative routes that Nigerian drivers choose during traffic congestion. In the same area, I talked to 10 *danfo* drivers and 11 private car drivers on the shortcut routes. All the *danfo* drivers were able to articulate those routes and updated the identified routes with more details, such as at which time period to take which routes, whereas private car drivers were used to following several routes with less flexibility. Although five private car drivers are also very experienced in taking shortcuts during traffic congestion, they all indicated that they learned shortcuts from commuting on the *danfo* buses before.

The other skill, which the interviewed drivers thought more important, is the aggressive driving behavior. During traffic congestion, it is

widely observed that traffic police and LASTMA⁵ staff issue random and flexible instructions to the vehicles passing by, and every *danfo* driver I talked and observed in this scenario attempts to cut in line without any intention to yield and wait. The code of deference on roads in the Western context seems never applicable to this situation. I was told many times by all kinds of drivers about a Lagos code: the more aggressive you drive, the earlier you may get out of “hold-up”. A Nigerian survey showed that *danfo* drivers demonstrated significantly higher aggressive driving behavior (Balogun et al., 2012): “Lagos is a place where ‘being on the fast lane’ is encouraged and being ‘patient or a gentleman/lady’ is ridiculed or laughed at”, the survey participants maintained. Although those private car drivers complained about *danfo* drivers’ aggressive driving, they sometimes behaved similarly to cut in line when I observed them on roads. On the other side, *danfo* drivers related this skill to their status in the transport work. “We must move fast. No move, no money!” A *danfo* driver said, who had worked on the Egbeda-Oshodi route for more than ten years.

Third, in the micro situation, power is distinguished between deference-power, “the power to make other people give way in the immediate situation,” and efficacy-power, “the power to make results happen” (Collins 2000: 33-36). This conceptualization of power is quite useful to examine the encounters and interactions between *danfo* drivers and private car drivers during traffic congestion.

On Lagos roads, *danfo* drivers usually have power to make private cars give way when they drive aggressively. The primary reason why private car drivers “defer” to *danfo* buses is because they do not want a collision or friction. A self-employed Uber driver complained that *danfo* buses are so “beaten-up” that *danfo* drivers can “hit anywhere without caring [about harming the vehicle].” None of the *danfo* drivers interviewed have admitted the intention to “hit” other vehicles, but my observational notes demonstrate that they tend to show the deference-power to cut in line by gesticulating dramatically to other vehicle drivers. Aggressive driving in this sense becomes a way of conveying an effect in this “intense situational dramatization” (Collins 2000: 27) of traffic congestion.

Aggressive driving sometimes does give rise to collision accidents, in which efficacy-power is embodied. In 2016, I witnessed six light collision accidents between *danfo* buses and private cars. All the drivers in these situations were initially furious at the others involved in the crash, but private car drivers quickly left the scene grumbling to themselves about the accidents. Some private car drivers explained that those drivers decided to leave because they had known *danfo* drivers would not pay anything for collision whoever is at fault. “No bother yourself. You can’t argue. Let it go.” A driver who owned a second-handed Toyota car said. The fact that the insurance sector in Nigeria is underdeveloped does not help to ease such tensions (Usman 2009). Also, in the situations, passengers on the *danfo* bus and those vehicles waiting behind the collision site put pressure on the drivers involved. Therefore, “let it go” might be the best solution, which benefits *danfo* drivers regarding the results they “collectively” make happen.

It seems that in the encounters between drivers, both deference-power and efficacy-power are only maintained by *danfo* drivers, but in fact, a number of stakeholders, including *danfo* passengers, the police and traffic coordinators, facilitate to construct such power held by *danfo* drivers on roads, in the way of discursively constructing a status group of *danfo* practitioners. Despite various negative comments on *danfo* buses, *danfo* passengers appreciate their drivers who can skillfully avoid traffic congestion when they are on board. This attitude is vividly illustrated in the cases of Ade and Peter later. In the on-road research, I saw passengers on the front seats discussing the possible shortcuts with *danfo* drivers. During the six collision accidents I observed, a few active passengers came out to persuade private car drivers to “let it go.” In these

situations, the police and traffic coordinators also mediated the dispute by suggesting private car drivers leave immediately in case traffic congestion became more serious.

In sum, I have employed Collins’ (2000) approach to analyze the situational inequality between more mobile *danfo* bus drivers and less mobile private car drivers during traffic congestion in Lagos. Holding a roughly defined but highly stigmatized status, *danfo* drivers are supposed to have two advantageous capacities of coping with traffic—knowing shortcuts and driving aggressively. The general deferential code (e.g. yield) does not apply to this situation, while *danfo* drivers have deference-power to make private car drivers give way. On the special situation of light collision, the power of social efficacy, involving other stakeholders like passengers and the police, pushes *danfo* drivers and more forcefully private car drivers to collectively settle the dispute at once.

6. The limits of situational inequality

After interpreting key terms of situational stratification, Collins (2000: 36-39) further discusses how the micro-situations today in America are stratified by different conditions in history. Instead of thinking broadly back to earlier human societies, I choose to think deeply about societal effects or the ineffectiveness of situational inequality in local contexts. The above detailed analysis of the situation in which aggressive *danfo* drivers are able to take shortcuts and make private car drivers give way, or even have disputes with them on the accidents, provides a focused interpretation of mobilities and inequality in Lagos. In addition, on Lagos roads, many private car drivers and other kinds of drivers also drive aggressively. In some situations, aggressive private car drivers even have deference-power towards individual *danfo* drivers. This interaction however does not just happen between two kinds of drivers. Among *danfo* drivers, cutting in line and quarrels with each other are also common. These supplementary statements are made to avoid romanticizing the case of situational inequality and to further probe its limits regarding urban (im)mobilities.

The spontaneity is a key feature of situational inequality. In the situation of traffic congestion when all the vehicles rush to change the lane and move forward, unequal power relationships between *danfo* drivers and private car drivers may exist all through but will be explicitly embodied in a very short moment when *danfo* buses cut in line, which could be just a few seconds. This moment, however, can impose sense of frustration on the private car drivers who are assumed to have a higher social status while bringing delight to *danfo* drivers who probably have much lower income. This sense of contradictory situation of structural inequality is largely based on individual perceptions and feelings. Although individual interviewees have made various accounts of how *danfo* buses are more efficient in navigating traffic, it is not sensible to argue that the existing structure of social inequality is completely overturned at the spontaneous moment of cutting in line or other situational encounters between *danfo* buses and private cars. Below, I will discuss three structural factors that situational inequality cannot transform.

Although the structured spatiality and temporality of traffic congestion, as stated above, are indiscriminately imposed on all the drivers and passengers on roads, situational inequality cannot be extended to the aspects of urban life off roads, especially in terms of the residential difference between upper and lower classes. Since wealthier people can afford the residence in central areas where their working places are usually located, they can drive at a shorter distance though traffic is inevitable. In contrast, both *danfo* drivers and passengers spend more time on roads. The Lagos State Government has been trying to improve traffic conditions by widening roads, constructing the BRT system, and regulating informal transport such as *okada*, the congested places and time periods cannot be easily restructured. Therefore, the most common narratives I collected from *danfo* drivers and passengers are endless complaints on where and how long they are stuck in the congested city, rather than cases of situational inequality which are not often encountered.

Class, one of four dimensions of Collins’ (2000) theory, is not

⁵ Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA) was established in 2000 to transform the state transport system to ensure free flow of traffic in the state and also reduce road accidents.

fundamentally negated in situational inequality. In African contexts, class does not just refer to economic power but also hinges upon political status that involves ethnicity and clan (Joseph 1983; Adebani 2014). In other words, the upper classes in Nigeria are defined by a mix of economic, political and ethnic indexes. In some situations of congested traffic, economically and politically powerful individuals, such as senior government officials, assigned military or police vehicles to clear the traffic for them. With soaring siren sounds in the air, armed personnel violently commanded all the vehicles in front of them to give way. *Danfo* buses are of course not an exception. My interviewees who all lack such privilege thought they are either political or military leaders or millionaires who can afford such an escort service. "This is their lifestyle. They beat traffic." A man in his 30s talked to me in a calm tone on a *danfo* bus going to Iyana Ipaja. Collins (2000: 22-24) suggests looking at individuals' experiences of economic relations rather than being restricted to hierarchical economic inequality. Accordingly, in the particular situation of traffic congestion in Lagos, upper-class people can utilize their economic and political power to ensure the quality of their mobile experiences. The situational inequality in this scenario appears identical to structural inequality. *Danfo* drivers and passengers who have deference-power towards private car drivers reacted calmly and had to admit the "class" issues.

Transport governance has become more structured and formalized in recent years, though ambiguity of traffic regulation pervades with petty corruption in Nigeria (Xiao 2018; also see Smith 2007). Earlier on, I indicated that the police tended to persuade private car drivers to leave the scene of small collision accidents, and in some cases of traffic rule violation, the police also tended to turn a blind eye to *danfo* drivers. However, this seeming inequality does not mean that the current governance mode is especially beneficial to *danfo* drivers compared to other drivers. For instance, regulations on BRT lanes became stricter than before. A majority of interviewed private car drivers indicated that entering BRT lanes would cause a large penalty (or bribe) nowadays so they avoided doing so, whereas 12 out of 30 interviewed *danfo* drivers admitted that they used to enter BRT lane to avoid traffic congestion and three of them paid for it. Mrs. Margaret Ekpe, the head of the traffic police section of Nigerian Police Force in Lagos, told me that most violation cases on her records were related to *danfo* buses.

In sum, situational inequality in traffic congestion is spontaneous and ephemeral. It does not transform societal structures, such as the spatiality and temporality of traffic congestion, the socioeconomic classes, and the transport governance in Lagos. Nevertheless, from the individual perspective, situational inequality is meaningful.

7. "Suffering but Smiling": Making Sense of the City Life

To further understand the meaningfulness of situational inequality, let us return to the affective moment when the *danfo* bus managed to avoid traffic congestion. I was on that enduring journey from Yaba to Iyana Ipaja around 6P.M., and I witnessed frustration and excitement when the bus moved intermittently. Only did I realize the significance of that ephemeral moment of excitement after interviewing *danfo* drivers as well as many city residents in the neighborhood where I did my ethnography. In an interview on her life trajectories, Titi, a woman in late 40s, reflected on her migration to Lagos from Ogun state in the past decade, "Lagos is tough. We are suffering but smiling."⁶ I pondered,

⁶ "Suffering and smiling" is song by Fela Kuti, a famous late Nigerian musician, who has huge impacts on Nigerian popular cultures. The lyrics contains critical references to traffic in Lagos: "Everyday my people inside the bus; they go pack themselves in like sardine; they go reach road go-slow go come". Titi's expression, by using "but" rather than "and", was related to Fela's song, but in the context of our conversation, she emphasized an optimistic viewpoint in the narrative of lived hardship she experienced. This cued me to explore the affective moment of situational inequality.

what does "smiling" mean here? Is it the smile I saw at *that* moment during traffic congestion? How does it relate to their conception of urban life and the city of Lagos?

Like Titi's, various narratives of life stories from my ethnographic research have demonstrated that a sense of place is developed over the time when individual residents gradually generalize their own ways of living and the reason why they live the lives in those ways, including residential lives and daily mobilities. For these residents, everyday transit life in Lagos is expensive but inevitable. In the suburban areas such as Egbeda and Ipaja where they lived, a stable employment around the neighborhood is not easily found. Although commuting via public transportation may account for a significant portion of income, as shown in Olu's case, and will always be time-consuming, it is essential to urban livelihood. Therefore, residents have to seek for job opportunities in more central areas, such as Victoria Island, Lagos Island and Ikeja. When talking about this kind of hustling lifestyle, respondents usually gave me a comment: "This is Lagos."

"This is Lagos," a popular saying that is also captured by other writers and researchers (Agbibo 2016: 942-943), demonstrates an exceptionalist conceptualization of the city. Although this can be a reminder for newcomers to Lagos that you must sharpen your eyes to get by (ibid), this saying can also be contextualized in terms of urban (im) mobilities. In the conversations with 30 residents in the neighborhood, who are *danfo* commuters and three of whom are drivers, "this is Lagos" was often the phrase after they narrated how they suffered from traffic congestion on the particular day. This expression stands for what they think characterize Lagos, which are largely ironic in their tones, and what they want to convey to me as a foreign ethnographer living in Lagos.

Drawing from vast everyday narratives, I present and analyze two typical examples of their commuting experiences here. Ade is a 34-year-old unmarried man working for a milk powder company. His sales job was to promote trial products to customers in a market on Lagos Island. To avoid peak hours in the morning, he usually gets up by 5 A.M. and leaves home by 5:30 A.M. He first takes *keke* to Iyana Ipaja and transit to a *danfo* bus to Idumota on Lagos Island. In this way, he could arrive at the market by 6:30 or 7 A.M. at the latest. He would rest somewhere and start working by 8:30 A.M. "Coming back from there is really suffering." He commented after returning to chat with me on September 13, 2018. He then came up with a strategy: if he is not needed at home, he usually chooses to stay around in Lagos Island until 8-9P.M. and could get home within an hour. If he does not take this strategy but takes a *danfo* bus immediately after work that usually ends around 4-5 P.M., he may spend 3-4 h on roads.

In another case, the commuter, Peter, actually owns a second-hand car. He works for a technology company in Victoria Island. Like Ade, he adopted the same strategy of avoiding early rush hours. The difference is that he usually embarks on a grueling return trip immediately after work because of two young daughters he misses at home. On November 17, 2018 when I asked why he was not driving to work, he replied, "I want to save my fuel, and also save my car from being scratched on roads. You know, this is Lagos!" Like Peter, many other car owners in the neighborhood more likely see themselves as commuters rather than regular private car drivers. Cars are usually used for special events in their lives. In other words, structural inequality still exists between these commuter residents and those who drive their cars every day.

In the daily conversations with Ade and Peter as well as other residents, situational inequality is one of things they can "smile" at. When I met them after they returned from work, traffic was always the foremost topic we talked about. After complaining about serious congestion at specific locations, they sometimes added a few narratives of special situations they encountered. For instance, on September 13, 2018, Ade narrated a collision accident on the returning trip from Lagos Island, in which the *danfo* bus he took collided with a private car while cutting in line. When I asked if the car driver and *danfo* driver quarreled, Ade

responded with a proud smile, “No, he (the car driver) wanted to argue, but we left. He can’t beat *danfo*.”

Since being a *danfo* driver hinges on his experiences in the Lagos transport systems, passengers would appreciate those experienced drivers who can navigate the traffic and avoid the accidents. On June 6, 2018, Peter came home at 5 P.M., much earlier than usual. I heard that this was because the *danfo* bus he took from Obalende to Iyana Ipaja ran very fast and efficiently, involving many shortcuts. In the end of our conversation on this journey, he happily gave the drivers a compliment, “he drives crazily!”

Both Ade’s and Peter’s narratives demonstrate that the affective elements of situational inequality matter because they are sources of sense-making in individual urban experiences. Ade complained about Lagos traffic, but he expressed a sense of satisfaction when narrating the efficacy-power of *danfo*, which were observed more than once in our everyday conversations. Peter, who is a car owner though, explained why he does not usually drive to work: “In Lagos, the fast way is to take *danfo*. No one beats *danfo* drivers”.⁷ Despite the enduring journeys, he liked telling me his experience of situational inequality—how *danfo* drivers “beat” other drivers—and believed that this is a Lagos style of transport mobilities. By narrating situational inequality, both Ade and Peter make sense of their lived experiences in the unequal city. Sense-making is therefore very individual and can be implicated in a situation where structural equality reversely appears as situational inequality.

Situational inequality is embedded in a trivial sentiment that enacts individual sense-making, such as Ade’s and Peter’s comments on taking *danfo* buses. These comments, though built on their personal perspectives, draw our attention to the meaningfulness of micro experiences in personal conceptualization of the city life. Like the saying “suffering but smiling”, everyday narratives of traffic and transport demonstrate Lagosians’ attitudes, which may be understood as a sense of optimism or persistence. But for them, this is one of the ways in which they justify the meanings of life, explain Lagos to others, and make sense of their mobilities and immobilities.

This kind of sense-making from micro urban experience can contribute to Lagosians’ sense of place and identification with Lagos, but it does not necessarily mean that the lower-class people firmly attach themselves to the city. Except Ade who is the second generation of a migrant family from Ondo state, Bola, Titi and Peter were not born in Lagos and migrated to Lagos in different periods of their lifetimes. Although they became familiar with how immobility characterizes Lagos, adapted to the Lagos lifestyle, and identified themselves as Lagosians, they were not so determined to live their lives in Lagos. As Titi said, “we come for living and settled (down). If not, we leave for living.” With this pragmatic thinking, they capture the situational inequality to live in the unequal city but do not exaggerate it.

8. Conclusion

The analysis of situational inequality between individuals who differentially engage with urban (im)mobilities during traffic congestion in Lagos has shown a dialectical perspective to understand urban dynamics. Given the enduring traffic congestion and prevailing social inequality in the city, the moments of aggressive cutting in line and getting by disputes over accidents unfold a spontaneous unequal power relationship that is at odds with the existing social inequality. This emergent situational inequality provides lower-class people who usually take *danfo* buses with affective elements which contribute to making sense of (im)mobilities and urban lifestyle in the city of Lagos. However,

⁷ This assertive statement implies that the individual conception of situational inequality and *danfo* mobilities may affect their traveling behaviors to some degree. The collective effects on structural dimensions of urban mobilities in Lagos necessitate further research.

the effects of situational inequality are limited to the individual level, as it cannot largely affect the spatiality and temporality of traffic congestion, the socioeconomic class structure, and traffic governance in Lagos.

Lagos is filled with micro-situational dialectics conceived by Lagosians. Given structural circumstances such as traffic conditions and social inequality, urban residents not only come up with coping strategies but also self-produce meanings of life by paying attention to spontaneous situations that emotionally empower them. Moreover, this dialectical situational inequality does not become a practical living strategy to retain them in Lagos but reifies their individual philosophies of living in Lagos that are embodied through everyday narratives. That said, the situational inequality is meaningful in the nuanced way but not romanticized beyond individual sense-making.

Responding to the studies of interplay between inequality and (im)mobilities (Ohnmacht et al. 2009), this research emphasizes a methodological intervention that prioritizes micro-situational data. Indebted to Collins’ (2000) conception, the nuances of situational inequality are captured in the micro-sociological study within the public transit system and are further understood in the ethnography in an urban neighborhood. This methodology complements the existing research that focuses on structural inequality by adjusting Collins’ framework of situational stratification to the situated (im)mobilities in Lagos, including the concepts of status, deference, and power.

This approach to situational inequality can also be applied to other contexts of urban mobilities in which the formality and informality of transport systems coexist. The coexistence of limited formal BRT service and extensive informal transport services (*danfo*, *keke* and *okada*) in Lagos provides a scenario in which traffic congestion is spatially and temporally structured in everyday rhythms. Also, the unformalized traffic rules that do not regulate aggressive driving behaviors incubate the dramatic encounters between *danfo* drivers and private car drivers in this case. Thus, cities with blurred boundaries between formal and informal transportation are probably potential sites to apply this approach. Moreover, these cities are also filled with structural inequality (e.g. Johannesburg, See Murray 2011). Traffic congestion in this circumstance can make a situational encounter between unequal mobile actors intensely power-laden⁸.

To sum up, this study of the situatedness of mobility and inequality in Lagos contributes to mobilities research in three ways. First, (im)mobilities are not just relational (Adey 2006) but relationally situated in the interaction between more mobile and less mobile peoples during traffic congestion. Second, unequal mobilities are not only about accessibility to means of transportation (Ohnmacht et al. 2009) but also embedded in the situations of different mobile actors competing and negotiating with each other. Third, besides indexing capacities of being mobile (in terms of *motility*, see Kaufmann et al. 2004) to examine the interplay between mobilities and inequality, a modified approach from Collins (2000) to situational inequality helps to articulate the micro dynamic of the situated (im)mobilities and its meaningful implications to individual sense of place in the city.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Allen Hai Xiao: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

⁸ Other than the situation of road traffic, church is probably another venue to explore situational inequality, because Pentecostal churches in Nigeria involves politics at various societal levels (Marshall 2009).

the work reported in this paper.

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