The Urban Majority and Provisional Recompositions in Yangon

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Abstract: Yangon is a city where the now predominant modalities of urban transformation arrived late, and after a prolonged period of political repression. As the urban system has been "set loose" to articulate itself to a broader range of inputs and dispositions, many residents attempt to remake long-honed yet fragile mechanisms of social interchange in provisional forms. This ethos and practice of provisionality emphasizes ensemble work aimed at recomposing the character of local district life in various locations across Yangon. Most importantly, it raises questions of how an urban majority—as a confluence of heterogeneous ways of life that has long been critical to making viable urban lives in the postcolony—have endured and can continue to endure in changing circumstances. The article draws from critical black thought as a means of generating heuristic concepts to explore the ways in which residents of several Yangon districts make productive use of the simultaneity of seemingly contradictory inclinations.

Keywords: urban majority, Yangon, collective life, critical black thought

Yangon is perhaps the last major city in Asia to "come into its own". Its majority of residents have rejoined the majority of Southeast Asian "elsewheres". Now what "coming into" looks like on the one hand seems obvious, given the trajectories along which all other major metropolitan areas in Asia seem to have developed. The city illustrates certain conundrum endemic to so-called "majority districts" in many regions of the so-called "Global South". These districts, intermixing various ways of life, class backgrounds, and functions, enabled many cities to endure through various forms of rule and economic orientations. Existing for several decades in a context of rigid military state control, underinvestment in urban infrastructure, and an intensive reliance upon local, self-organized provisioning systems that had to largely stay under the radar, the recent opening of the Yangon metropolitan system to the "larger world" impacts upon the coherence of such systems of localized care and provisioning. New dispositions render past practices anachronistic, yet at the same time these practices constitute an important form of compensation or protection when new, more individualistic and entrepreneurial initiatives go wrong (Scannell 2014).

 With highly inflated land prices, substantial inward investment on the part of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Singaporean developers, and the opening up of flows of all kinds across the region and the globe in light of Myanmar's political transformation, the city of some seven million inhabitants is set to replicate a

conventional fabric. This is a fabric of maximized ground rent, the servicing of the articulation of local elites with a growing multiplicity of external commercial actors, the vast territorial expansion of the metropolitan system, the peripheralization of poor and working class residents, and the redistribution of middle class residents into scores of high-rise sub-centers.

But what is this conjunction of "majorities", those of the past and the emerging future? How do Yangon residents enact a position of being a "majority" in both a regional and global context where being a majority is something more ambiguous, tenuous? In what ways is the notion of autoconstruction, so critical to majority practice, stretched into new forms or in what ways does it dissipate all together? Do the mostly understated collaborations among different ways of living and accumulating inherent to the heterogeneity of a majority inevitably breakdown in the folding in of Yangon into a more conventional Asian rush to the highly formatted modalities of becoming middle class?

As the primary city of a long-term, highly authoritarian regime that is now substantially but not completely democratized, residents were largely consigned to decades of poor urban services, infrastructure, and limited labor markets. Only in the past decade have amenities such as ATMs, cellphones, and open media appeared. Much of any additions to the built environment during the past 25 years are the result of autoconstruction. Residents mobilized different modalities of savings to actively participate or buy into the construction of apartment blocks built by local developers and commercial associations (United Nations Center for Human Settlements 1991). These have accommodated a "tenuous" middle class with access to steady but often-meager salaries supplemented through a variety of informal means, including the remittances from family members working abroad and a wide range of small to medium scale entrepreneurial activities aimed at circumventing the state's rigid economic controls.

This article does not so much seek to offer an account of the transformations underway in Yangon, but rather to explore how certain residents provisionally attempt to recompose their districts, working together as various ensembles to piece together a varying interweaving of built environment and social complexion. In this manner a provisional reconciliation of "majorities" is provisionally attained. Just as a "majority" of Southern residents have been riven with lines of all kinds—sometimes block by block, and in ways that both highlight and obscure traditional divides of class, religion, race, and ethnicity—how might lines be redrawn in ways that articulate, encircle diverse collective efforts so as to reassert the dynamic presence of the majority in the composition of urban space? In this article, I focus on how residents in various districts of Yangon attempt to "re-populate" their surrounds through their particular, usually contested efforts to cull affordances from the built environment. How do they look for different sensoria of the city; how do they maintain a sense of working together without making long-term commitments to particular dispositions? In doing so, how do they reposition themselves as collective actors of another kind— particularly when this other kind remains provisional, experimental.

Indeed, provisionality, as I will attempt to show, remains an important aspect of the capacity to bring this "other kind" to life. For, the provisioning of care takes place within a city of intensified provisionality (Stiegler 2010). Taking care

(of something) and taking care (of someone), here, are conjoined and exemplified through efforts to reposition self, family, household, social network, and community in practices seemingly indifferent to the sustenance of these conventional social identities.

What Is the Majority, What Does It Do?

The majority functions here as a composite term, not limited or even contingent upon establishing a demographic predominance. The urban majority is not simply a count of inhabitants who occupy a relatively stabilized format of residency called "the urban". Rather, it refers to how an urban demographic is not simply a quantitative measure of individual bodies, but how a particular "count" can be constituted through the ways in which bodies forge a plurality of collective aggregates, transactions, and intersections. Thus, people, places, materials, and values come together in various ways that create specific machine-like entities, drawing upon the densities of different everyday practices, perspectives, infrastructures, and interpersonal relationships to constitute specific economies of urban inhabitation. As such, the majority is also a multiplying of points of transaction with variously scaled forces of territorial consolidation and capitalist penetration whose dispositions may generate systematic conversions of space into homogeneous mechanisms of accumulation *and* more singular, uncertain ways of living and producing livelihood (Amin 2015; Robinson 2013).

Now, of course, regardless of whether people work formally, contractually or not, regardless of how their everyday routines and aspirations exert a particular force on the material substrate and forms of cities and regions, urban operational systems are indeed affected by the character and intensity of human actions. But is the efficacy of this majority's both explicit and implicit choreographies of quotidian cooperation, sympathy and inter-calibrated collective efforts contingent upon a deferral of consolidation into an entity or class "for itself"? Or, can an "urban proletariat" emerge that is capable of putting its stamp on the city in ways that transform spatial production from being the nearly exclusive purview of capitalist accumulation, but which itself might be contingent on the multiple ensembles of the majority (Lazzarato 2014)? In other words, if radical urban work is to get anywhere, does it require a collective actor conscious of its coherence or does the relative unintelligibility of the majority constitute a platform from which situated coherences would emerge, not necessarily in any consistent form? More importantly, is it possible to "duck" this dilemma altogether, for the time being, and think about energizing provisional formations, where an uncertain interface exists between the diffuse ensembles of the majority and the coming together of a new collective force?

Instantiations of the urban appear increasingly indifferent to specific definitional criteria. They embody a highly uncertain mix of standardized, transmutable imaginaries, obdurate institutional and governance arrangements, volatile political contestation, and global connectivities (Brenner and Schmid 2014; Keil and Addie 2015). While the specific intersections of divergent locational advantages, demographic histories, settlement patterns, modalities of accumulation and regulation would seem to constitute occasions for problem-

solving and world-making that rely upon the inclinations and practices of majority residents, policies and development trajectories seem increasingly indifferent to them. The incremental give-and-take of making urban lives is subsumed into a process of consolidation. Here, urbanization as capital accumulation becomes a process of amassing a volume capable of converting the nature of land use, employment, and sensibility "all at once". It is a process of mobilizing the power to instigate eventualities—i.e. capacities to take form—for which there is yet concept or vernacular (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Administrations will attempt to create environments of specification creating parameters through which effective, healthy, sustainable performances are "brought to life". But greater specification also means a greater number of variables that have to be made inter-operable (translatable) through computation processes that by definition introduce larger amounts of the *incomputable* (Parisi forthcoming). Yet to render more and more space, things, and people subject to the eventuality of being enfolded as an all-encompassing fabric of capitalist-practiced urbanization will itself require increasingly complex constellations of actors and processes that instigate the possibilities of other eventualities (Guironnet and Halbert 2014). The subsumption of life itself to urbanizing processes is diffracted across various modalities, portals and instantiations that become axes for uncertain accumulation (Marazzi 2010). Yet, as Tadiar (2012:799) points out, there are remainders of life—neither strictly virtuous nor toxic—that cannot be subsumed within the totalizing logic of capital. This is:

> a lifeworld replete with propitious meaning and ambient power or potential, the capture, accumulation, preservation and privation of which both determine and are reflected in social relations of obligation and patronage that are never completely fixed or static, but rather are always dynamic and relative.

In the postcolony, "majority" districts largely served as *interstices* between the modern city of cadasters, grids, contractual employment, zoning and sectorally demarcated institutions and the zones of temporary, makeshift, and largely impoverished residence. They existed to deal with the urban as something dispersed across various modalities. While folding in aspects of each kind of territory, such majority districts were not simply hybrids, but staging areas for a multiplicity of agendas, operations, social compositions, and aspirations (Caldeira 2017; Davis 1998; Gidwani and Maringanti 2016; Holston 1991, 2008; McFarlane 2011; Minuchin 2016; Perlman 2010; Vasudevan 2015).

These staging areas can be considered the products of autoconstruction. Autoconstruction depended upon intricate ways of allocating land and opportunities, working out divisions of labor and complementary efforts, and enabling individuals to experiment with their own singular ways of doing things but in concert with others. Thus governance institutions were built as distributed across differential relationships and spaces, rather than located in specific offices, bureaus, sectors, territories or functions. In other words, "institutions" existed, but in a dispersed rather than centralized form; institutional functions existed within and across a landscape of relationships of residents as they actively parceled and settled land, elaborated provisioning systems, and attempted to insert themselves in the flows of materials,

food, skills, and money (Amin and Thrift 2016; Anwar 2014; Bayat 2010; Benjamin 2015; Lindell 2008; Perera 2015).

Such distributed agency did not obviate the consolidation of metropolitan and national institutions endeavoring to exert administrative and political control over these districts. Yet as largely interstitial territories—between divergent logics of accumulation and consolidation—they became a critical arena through which states attempted to configure particular practices of governing (McQuarrie et al. 2013). Rather than the state developing as an abstract, clearly delineated entity separate from the realities experienced by the majority of residents, states had to "find their feet" operating through engagements with various ways of doing things that did not fall squarely within their purview or within legal frameworks (Boudreau and Davis 2017; Ghertner 2014; Hansen and Verkaaik 2009; Roy 2011; Singerman 2009; Telles and Hirata 2007).

As such, majority districts were not immune from the crossfires of articulating and disarticulating forces. As interstitial places they exuded a wide range of countervailing tendencies. Different trajectories of agglomeration and parceling, reinvestment and accommodation to decline, constant incremental improvements and acts of doing nothing, trends toward accumulation and consolidation, as well as letting things disperse and dissipate, locally induced conversions of land and buildings and external appropriation of them—all of these inclinations existed next to each other, and where it was not always clear what differences were at stake (see the essays in Graham and McFarlane 2014; McFarlane 2016; see also Lepawsky et al. 2015).

As the compositions of their built and social environments made them difficult to read according to the techniques of engagement proffered by official government regulations, they often seemed overly opaque (Sundaram 2010, 2015; Vigar 2014; Weinstein 2008, 2013, 2014). In such conditions, "real governance" was often subcontracted out to various types of extra-judicial authority or a local political class was cultivated by availing various favors and money-making opportunities (Elyachar 2005; Fawaz 2008; Jaglin 2014). Perhaps more importantly a long-honed capacity of such districts to live in close proximity to the poor and evolve forms of reciprocity and patronage became increasingly the target of political elites so as to drive a wedge between these relationships (Datta 2012; Dill 2009; Gago 2015).

The containment and devaluing of majority urbanities often assumed a racialized form (Chakravartty and Ferreira da Silva 2012; Guimarães 2013; Lowe 2015; Stoler 2010). For example, Bombay, Jakarta, Colombo, Rio de Janeiro, to name a few, all had their "black cities". For black cities were not just the place of residents racially designated as "black". Rather, they were considered places of fundamental darkness where the inability of those surveying the city to make clear distinctions as to the constitutive identities and practices of inhabitants rendered them "black"—made them in need of subjugation or consigned to a nothingness. Additionally, it was presumed what took place there and thus obviated any need to look further, to look at the details of everyday life.

As such, residents might seize the interstices between the exertion of control through limiting the spatial extensionality of the black city and disattention to its everyday details to experiment with ways of living. Not all residents or districts

attributed as "black" understood their conditions in these terms. Nor did they necessarily assert demands and rights within the tropes of racial identity (Prakash 2010; Perera 2009). Still, in my experience working in a wide range of majority districts around the world, residents do tend to understand variegated ascriptions of blackness as efforts to level a definitive and debilitating blow to their capacities as citizens or producers of valuable urban experience. Self-conscious mobilizations of critical investigations about blackness specifically might then contribute particular ways of experiencing the process of how majority districts attempt to endure.

For endurance is increasingly problematic. States have preyed on the majority district's fear of impoverishment, particularly as industrial and public sector jobs started disappearing and various types of informal entrepreneurship were increasingly overcrowded (Tadiar 2012). In some cities ruling political machines stoked various forms of ethnic and religious conflict upending long traditions of mutual accommodation (Weinstein 2013). In some cities the proliferation of violence or environmental danger generated mistrust and fears that local assets would be devalued. In various constellations of decline in which various combinations of rent-seeking, maximized ground rent, local insecurities, weakening social ties were at work, residents of majority districts, both volitionally and involuntarily, sought to reestablish themselves in new areas of the city or in the apartment blocks proliferating across most Southern cities (Harms 2013; Zeiderman 2016).

Majority districts not only have to deal with their erasures through mega-development and gentrification but also reduction to a ghostly status. As metropolitan systems become increasingly articulated to a wide range of production networks, commodity chains, and circuits of investment and consumption those systems then come to exist for and through an oscillating matrix of relations that revalue existent processes of livelihood formation, laboring, and production (Mezzadra and Neilson 2015). As these relationships are characterized by competition, increasing standardization and the exigency of distinctiveness, modes of provisioning are transformed, as well as the particular ways specific lives and practices are valued. Enhanced articulation of metropolitan systems to a larger world entails the disarticulation of specific places, bodies and ways of doing things that are increasingly devalued or reified as the embodiments of that which needs to be rectified or is beyond redemption. But rather than being simply cast off, the anachronistic or transgressive is maintained as a form of incarceration or, more significantly, as the occasion to generate new enclosures, privileges and constitute new urban identities, while, at the same time, creating a shadow world where primitive accumulations can accrue unimpeded or to which inefficacies can be attributed (Bair and Werner 2011; Bear 2014; Berndt 2013).

So the constant challenge was and is how such majority districts—interstitial, compensatory, intensely heterogeneous yet sometimes univocally racialized—could hang together. How is care provided when long-term exchanges break down, and where the terms of winning and losing are not clear but yet exert a huge price? How do residents anticipate the breakdowns of their future dispositions, how do they dissociate things from places and convictions that seem to be going nowhere but at the same time cannot anchor a specific ethos or practice in a near-future?

Recomposition and Provisionality

A partial answer to these questions can be formulated drawing upon the reflections of critical black thought on the operations of the musical ensemble. The intent here is not to make claims for Yangon as an exemplar of blackness or to necessarily connect variegated situations of blackness to Yangon. Much more modest efforts are entailed: by paying attention to particular facets of black thought it is possible to identify particular "senses of participation" (as opposed to "concepts" per se) that might have some applicability to the transformation of this city and thus provide a heuristic of exploring possible connections among surfacely discrepant situations among different majority districts. In other words, blackness serves as a method of investigation beyond the confines of its own self-reflections. But again, no overarching claims are made for blackness as either a definitive way or the only way into approaching the multifaceted remaking of Yangon itself.

First, Fred Moten (2004, 2008) has summoned the improvisational ensemble of the new black music of the 1960s as a way of thinking through the founding of a collective beyond reason, a collective always in a process of *recomposition*. He talks about ensembles that work beyond any explication of their parts, but which implicitly know what to do in order to act in concert. Such acting in concert points to the importance of the *non-contractual*, not subject to the relationships between already constituted, autonomous entities that contractual forms assume.

Such a non-contractual economy reflects an implicit consent not to operate as a single being, not as acts of consent on the part of citizens, residents, or denizens but consent as a field constituted by the urban itself as it continuously is pieced together by demonstrations of mutual care, of people paying attention to each other and trying to do new things with each other. It shifts the emphasis of social life from constellations of predetermined formats and interactions among cohered entities—such as individuals, households—to particular processes of sensing, paying attention, feeling, engaging, and circumventing—which may take place within the context of individuals but which enjoin them in particular forms of inhabiting space and performing within it which are functions of varying composites of bodies, things and places (Joseph 2009, 2010; Williams 2005). It shifts the attention to how people, things and materials sense each other's presence, how they are inclined to each other, and the practices that are put to work to maintain people within each others' orbits and establish the conditions that enable them to intensify their exchanges with each other.

Recomposition also entails the sensorium. McKittrick (2016) points to the importance of generating rhythms and waveforms that emanate from the densities of heterogeneous activities and forces elaborating multiple registers of sound impacting upon neurophysiological circuits that modulate affect, sympathy, and a preparedness to act. Such sonic atmospheres act as infrastructures for the enunciation of the exaltation required for collaborative practices—the sense of wonderment and ease required to live-with the ebbs and flows, the constraints and traumas of everyday life.

Just as the ensembles of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor—each focusing on different modes of improvisational experimentation—knew how to "set off from home", they never knew exactly how to return to it. In

Coleman's *harmolodics* each player can deliver the melody in its own configuration of rhythm, chord changes. Brar (2016) explores how *footwork*, collective dance gatherings on the Southside of Chicago that meld together intensely intricate physical maneuvers and soundscapes, constitute an architectural impulse to create intricate ecologies in the midst of substantial external constraints. Thus the ensemble points to the exigency of not finding home in any one particular version of it; it requires a process of continual invention (McKittrick 2014).

Finally, in Michelle Wright's (2015) work on the physics of blackness and Alexander Weheliye's (2014) work on the hieroglyphics of the flesh there is an incessant provisionality in the act of *living-with*: a continuous working out of attention and indifference, of reciprocity and individuation, of proximity and distance, as a matter of the apportionment of affordances and responsibilities. The black subject also always had to live-with the impossibility of aspiring to realizing a sense of community or attainment in terms of being part of a humanity that was based on a mode of reflection that required his or her subjugation. Pragmatically, the practical organization of everyday life—the melding of different personal dispositions and ways of doing things—does require a sense of interiority that is composed and communicated. This interiority elaborates a common atmosphere, a sense of something to be shared. This is not homogenization of sentiment—for all kinds of differences remain—but an occasioning of new measures, new ways of administering the relations of individuals and collectives. Boundaries need to be drawn between what counts and doesn't count, what is relevant or not, what is necessary to pay attention to and what is not.

Yet the capacity of black people to get by, cooperate, and sometime act in concert required them to live as if they were always, at the same time, living somewhere else. Ironically, it is this dispersal that is a hedge against residents and denizens of a particular place being played off each other, picked off one at a time. The interface between the empirical realities of their identifiable location, their modes and practices of dwelling and their movements across other transversals, where their lives cut across territories and recognitions of all kinds—the *what might be taking place*—is the provisional.

The provisional has various durations. It can be something short-lived or last for a long time. As such, the provisional is a sensibility, a way of living through and with time, and a relationship to one's circumstances and one's self that aims for the capacity to act quickly and decisively when a situation reveals itself as unequivocal or most opportune. It is like the lyric, "people get ready there's a train a comin', don't need no ticket, you just get on board". The "right" train may neither run on time nor be scheduled at all, so the challenge becomes how to wait things out but at the same time not simply be a victim of circumstances. People need to continuously make moves that attempt to edge events along but without showing all of their cards, without the concretizations of their maneuvers and living situations definitively indicating what they are capable of, what they believe in, or what they are prepared to consider.

Provisional Maneuvers, Yangon

The following observations have been taken from an initial period of fieldwork in Yangon during May–June 2016. They are also based on discussions with officials in the Yangon Ministry of Development, the city planning department (Yangon City Development Committee), members of the Yangon regional parliament (Pyithu Hluttaw), NGO staff and academic researchers, and perhaps most importantly, a wide range of small, almost exclusively informal groupings across different quarters of the city. An association that manages the vast automobile and truck parts sector in the Insein district provided an important opportunity to talk to many different residents from across the city. Mine are provisional formulations, drawing broad strokes across an intricate architecture of contested urban transformation.

A laborious process of political transition has been underway over the past decade that has culminated in a power sharing arrangement between the military and a democratically elected government. The military retains de facto control over large swathes of land in the center of the city. A spatial development plan which reserves significant portions of the metropolitan center as green belts also functionally obscures the extent to which control over the disposition of land remains legally ambiguous. Although the Land Law of 2012 appears to solidify the rights of private land ownership, the country's constitution remains vague as to the prerogative of the state as the final arbiter of land status (Boutry et al. 2015). While residents of Yangon have been functionally buying and selling property, under a plurality of legislations, some dating to the late 19th century, the Yangon municipality has only just now implemented official zoning and land use regulations, and the concomitant authorities to manage these regulations.

In the interim, residents in different parts of the city have engaged in a wide range of provisional arrangements to best position themselves for substantial changes in how the city operates, what it will look like, where significant developments will take place, and the many different levels of contestation related to these issues.

A sense of provisionality shows up in many different gestures and arrangements. Every Sunday afternoon youth from different parts of the city dress up in fashions striking an almost uncanny equilibrium among Korean, Japanese and European trends and visit the "old time" cinemas near the center of the city. Contemporary films are seldom on offer. Instead each cinema digs deep into an archive of classics from decades past. While these showings actually manage to captivate the attention of many in attendance, watching films is not the main point. Rather kids assemble in the lobby and stairwells, in all available corridors, spilling out to the surrounding streets. Friends meet friends, but they hardly pay attention to each other. Rather the point is to circulate, pick up snatches of conversation and styles of speaking, catch up on the latest slang, but also to glean simply just who is around, and from this, as several teenage girls put it, "see what we have to work with". They say that no long-term alliances are forged, that they are not looking to get involved in anyone else's business; not yet anyway. Rather, "it is important to see who is around looking to see who is around". And coming to the cinema is a way to "go back home a different way than you came from".

Tamwe is a crowded, largely Muslim district that abuts the old central city. Stretched widely across a wide band of situations, the district is largely middle class, most full of 10–15-story apartment buildings constructed primarily by local developers over the past several decades. It is widely viewed as the most "urbanized" area of the country, in large part because of a growing density of inhabitants who value the locational advantages the district affords and the wide array of services available.

The district's atmosphere does rest uneasily within the larger context of Yangon— a city that seems to experience a certain post-traumatic stress disorder of how to enact itself in the only partial aftermath of military repression. Muslims bear the brunt of contestations about how citizenship is to be framed and understood, and how a majority population, long curtailed from pursuing various forms of associational and entrepreneurial life, attempt to survive in a metropolitan region full of new actors and money. It is then within this context that Ismail, a member of the committee of a local Tamwe mosque points out that:

> we are faced with the problem now of proving that we (Muslims) belong here, even though our families have been here for generations, we are thoroughly Burmese and deeply planted in how this city operates ... yet, we have to be cautious about this "game" of belonging, and whatever it is that we have to prove.
> We are blamed for dominating and conspiring, and it is true, in many respects we have largely kept to ourselves all of these years, but everyone in some ways kept to themselves, and we (Muslims) largely provided the "backdoor" where people from different parts of the city who tried to go around the army could discover each other.
> We must be careful ... this game of belonging.

As the last time I was in Yangon was during the holy month of Ramadan, I was often invited into people's homes, again crowded with extended families and seemingly endless piles of unopened boxes. New residents pay a premium price to relocate to Tamwe, as there is a shortage of apartments, and block after block new developers attempt to squeeze in new buildings. There are new officials in the metropolitan government responsible for this region—almost all non-Muslims —that take an increasingly critical look at the way space is used; for there is often a frequent inter-mixture of residence, storage, services, and commercial activities dispersed within buildings with little rhyme or reason.

All of these discrepant activities push and pull against each other, especially as some businesses on a tenth floor, for example, stay open throughout the night, different people coming and going. Improvised eating places bump into prayer rooms bump into shipping agencies bump into daycare centers bump into artisanal workshops. In and of itself, there is nothing particularly unusual in this arrangement in the complexion of many majority districts across the world. The wears and tears exerted by heterogeneous uses raise questions about methods and responsibilities of incessant repair and management. Conflicts frequently ensue concerning who has responsibility for doing what, for ensuring that electricity bills are paid, that elevators function, and that the hallways are kept clean.

But what is interesting in the case of Tamwe is the way in which some of the residents I visited, although constantly irritated by the messiness of their

surroundings, profess the importance of keeping the atmosphere "unsettled". "We have to be prepared for many different things, so if things are constantly not going according to our expectations, well then we must be prepared for something else" reflects an owner of a chain of bathroom fixture stores. While the imam of another local mosque talks about how certain residents talk about the urgency of "digging in", of promoting local solidarity as much as they can through reiterating the ties of business and religion, he also points out the efficacy of "spreading out", of using the intricate and often turbulent articulations among different uses of the district to "find ways into things that we couldn't before". While the burden of carrying such an excessive volume of bodies, things, and activities may "stretch things to a breaking point", the imam emphasizes that the survival of Muslims in the city is contingent upon being able to "go beyond all of the ways in which they have been known", to go beyond "belonging to a particular business" and become "unrecognizable" from anyone else. Life in Tamwe then is "our preparation" and a "profession of our faith in this city".

Practicing Recomposition

In 1988, some 800,000 residents of the inner city of Yangon were forcibly evicted across the river to the paddy fields of Hlaingtharyar. This followed the 8888 uprising of that year and was used by the military regime to break webs of neighborhood relationships. Evictees were assigned a generally designated area, which the residents themselves had to demarcate and organize. As there was yet a connecting bridge to the rest of the city, many, largely male, residents were forced to re-secure temporary shelter in the center order to maintain some kind of economic activity, as many of the evictees were also removed from jobs and commerce (Philip and Mercer 2002; Seekins 2005). A famous story about this incident considers how women lined the shore on weekends awaiting the arrival of their husbands in order to guide them to their new "homes".

Throughout periods of oscillating neglect and repression, residents simply "dug in", retaining a sense of an implicit commonality, an unspoken agreement to not veer off too markedly in different directions (Forbes 2016). This social fabric now acts through a purported indifference to major changes swirling around them. Residents do their best to try and see where the cards land. This sense of the provisional aims to keep open various possibilities, but it also takes its toll in more apparent household and extended family conflict. Family members conduct their own "divisions of labor" in an attempt to orient themselves to different aspects of these changes—different family members participate in different labor and land markets, deal with different authorities and institutions, different rules for getting things done. The subsequent tensions in managing these differences sometimes put enormous strain on families already crowded into small homes, apartments, and single rooms.

While Hlaingtharyar is now one of the largest populated areas of Yangon, with gridded layouts, defined plots, markets and commercial areas, there has been very little change over the past 27 years since the initial settlement took place. In analogous situations across the world, it is common to witness a

steady trajectory of incremental development, where residents add on to their homes and a heterogeneous fabric of economic activities and built environments ensue.

But in Hlaingtharyar residents have either not had the means or the desire to participate in such incrementalism. Some have faced debilitating levels of indebtedness and have been forced to divide or sell-off their land. The area has been the focus of inward migration from other parts of the country, especially as industrial zones have been created offering large volumes of cheaply paid employment. Infrastructural deficits that contribute to flooding and insalubrious conditions also make it difficult for residents to undertake initiatives, as has the prevailing politics.

The residents of the district also indicate that their reluctance has been based on their anticipation of what is indeed taking place now, and therefore did not want to invest substantially in consolidating a particular location or asset in light of the fact that they see themselves caught in the middle of countervailing forces. On the one hand, the collapse of rural economies has driven hundreds of thousands to Yangon, also drawn by the prospects of work in factories and construction. Most of these migrants settle in makeshift conditions on the far periphery of the city. They are referred to in local vernacular as "the invaders". Their presence is presently the issue of greatest concern to the Yangon regional government and its Yangon City Development Committee. For there is a volatile boundary between the evictees, still seemingly scarred by their displacements, and the invaders, the object for exigent settlement.

In part the exigency is informed by the extent to which the political party associated with the former State Law and Order Restoration Council (Union Development and Solidarity Party) has instantiated themselves in these makeshift settlements, functionally becoming the predominant authorities and using this base to make incursions into the "formal" areas of Hlaingtharyar. These incursions seek to consolidate land and take-over construction activities as a parallel force to official structures. At the same time, some long-term residents of the district are staking claims at the further makeshift periphery in anticipation that these residents will be availed greater access to new housing. Additionally, Hlaingtharyar is the site of an increasing number of developments at different scales, from the construction of so-called "affordable housing" complexes aimed at middle class residents to more high-end "city within a city" mega-complexes.

Land speculation takes place then on many different levels with an historic core of Hlaingtharyar residents making their own protracted calculations as to the potential dispositions of these multiple levels of speculation. An additional factor in this process is the way in which farmers have entered into property markets. While the Land Law of 2012 formalizes land rights to farmers for exclusively agricultural purposes, many are involved in diversifying their holdings, thus accommodating a greater mixture of activities, from land given over to higher density residential settings, fishponds, horticulture and brickmaking, while intersecting a population of land-owning farmers, landless laborers, industrial workers, and lower middle class residents. This is a situation that has long been familiar across Southeast Asia (McGee 1991).

But what I am particularly interested in here is how the shaping of these mixtures of land use and population involve an intricate constellation of players, intersecting various scales of brokerage, from motorbike taxi drivers to large local developers. Although the transfer of agricultural land legally can only take place for agricultural purposes, the conversion of land outside this framework is usually not blocked. Even as a complex assemblage of regulatory agencies are brought to bear in scrutinizing and acting on all applications of sale, even when such conversions are ruled against, as they almost always are, when counteracting suits are then brought to the courts, the disapprovals are almost always overturned (Boutry et al. 2015).

Thus, all of the relevant institutional actors can be viewed as doing their jobs appropriately. But behind this façade a parallel system operates, one that does not necessarily entail graft and kickbacks. Instead an informal collective institutional effort attempts to impact and shape the growth and land economies of their respective districts. As there is a lack of organized mechanisms to work out functional balances between urban expansion and the sustenance and diversification of agricultural production contiguous to the metropolitan system, village committees, settlement and land records departments, and village tract administrators, working through various complicities, attempt to work out provisional scenarios that take advantage of the accumulation possibilities afforded by land conversion. At the same time, they attempt to impose particular rhythms and spacing of such conversion in order to mitigate potentials for landlessness, overcrowding in makeshift settlements, or the blanketing of random speculative projects.

A Tremulous Archive

Much closer to the center, across the river on the eastern side, Thaketa was not a dumping ground for evictions. Rather it situated the progressive growth of the inner city, linked by two bridges, and is primarily composed of a working and lower middle class population. In many areas it doesn't look all that different from Hlaingtharyar, but it does reflect a wider range of incremental changes over time. As its residents were not construed as threats to the prevailing order, Thaketa is more diverse in composition, outlook and affiliation. Currently it is a hodge-podge of paved and unpaved roads, in part reflecting different political sentiments block-by-block and different orientations to the remaking of the city.

Parts of the district reflect what has become a common practice in many working class districts of the city—from Ahlone, Bahon, Okkalapa, and Insein. Small-scale developers will approach a landowner and offer to construct a slender apartment block, usually four to eight stories, often with one unit on each story. The owner will be offered half of the units as compensation, and the developer will sell the rest. Most usually what is constructed is simply the basic structure of the building with the finished interiors being the responsibility of the subsequent owners. Even in the larger apartment blocks that have been built over the past decade, interior connections to water, electricity and sanitation are the purview of individual units. When a house is not occupied by the owner, and is rented out to a tenant,

developers have the responsibility of providing some form of accommodation to that tenant within the new construction.

Historically this has been a situation where no cash changes hands and agreements are not subject to formal contract. In some rarer cases where a large volume of land is owned by a single individual or family, then subdivided into properties where the residential buildings are individually owned, these tenants may be forced to pay the land owner a substantial fee if they want to construct vertical extensions on their existent houses or construct new ones. As many ambiguities around land status and prerogatives continue to persist, much of the remaking of the built fabric of the city has been conducted through informal arrangements that add greater density to most areas of the city, prevent existent residents from being priced out by new developments, yet opt for modes of affordability that generate a wide range of construction types. The patchwork construction of many small apartment blocks results in a lack of infrastructural coherence and diffusion of responsibility for maintenance and repair.

In Thaketa, there is also a quiet contestation as to how residents can best orient themselves to the future. Some blocks are completely inundated with these new slender apartment blocks, while others retain their original structures barely modified over many years. Many of those that have pursued new construction indicate that these are temporary "maneuvers", affordable instruments to place facts on the ground that improve their position in terms of future dispositions of land use, zoning, infrastructural and housing investment. They often believe that these new structures will be short-lived and give way over the next 5–10 years to large-scale residential development. So these maneuvers are instruments to add value now, as well as attract new residents to the area that might swing existing contestations in their favor.

For many other residents of Thaketa, it is important to retain a clear "signature" to their holdings. To hold on means to show exactly what has been held on to as if a plot is an archive that makes materially visible the conditions of residency over the years. In some respects it is remarkable how much the district retains a dense village atmosphere in such proximity to the commercial center, and the ways in which this atmosphere is considered a form of protection against what many residents believe will be an immanent and massive disruption of their lives. In part, this resistance to development is the digging in of entrenched relations of authority based on long-hone personal and neighborly relationships. But it also partly reflects the worry over the loss of memory.

In a society that required so much laborious work to get by, to deal with the repressive strictures of leaden bureaucracies, the small accomplishments were greatly valued even if it was not clear exactly what they brought about. This is why many plots in Thaketa seem filled with junk, with all of the odds and ends, discrepant materials not really accumulated or discarded over the years but displayed publically as in some suspended state of animation. These are things that households clearly cannot do without but it is also not clear what they do with them. Are these possessions of the household, or is the household somehow "possessed" by this amalgam of old machines, boat oars, wood planks, mattresses, and piles of documents?

Or are they dispossessed of each other; some kind of simultaneous detachment that marks a boundary within the plot itself—a dissociated state where the

household is "neither here nor there". If these accumulations are an archive, it is not clear how residents read it, but yet are afraid to forget it or, as with some others, rush in to do so. As such Thaketa marks a boundary between modalities of the provisional, or, more precisely, renders the district as a provisional formation, both in terms of the ability to read its past and expected future, but also in terms of probable spatial dispositions to come. No one in Thaketa seems to expect things to remain as they are. For what things are now are themselves anchored in a sense of lives viewed as elsewhere. This is not a passive position of awaiting outcomes beyond people's control. Rather, it is a matter of deferring definitive outcomes, while actively maintaining something now—new buildings or dispossessed (or possessive) archives—to work with.

The Terms of Endurance

The Yangon districts described here seem to be going in different directions all at once. But the "all at once" is deceptive, for taking these directions as some kind of simultaneity obscures the intricate interplay of efforts and reciprocal responses. In other words, it obscures the ensemble work. Lettyar, an activist and writer, imprisoned for many years, told me that the sentiment of many neighborhoods went beyond any simple embrace of joining the rest of the world in some project of normalization. While certainly the advent of a version of democracy and full speed ahead urbanization was welcome by most of the city's residents there was also a sense that all of the tactical wisdoms materialized in the years of repression had to find some form of endurance as things moved ahead; that the struggles for a different life would not simply be versed in the tropes that seemed to represent Asian modernity elsewhere. While, for example, Hlaingtharyar certainly experiences its share of internal conflicts concerning the different directions residents take to orient themselves to rapidly unfolding and uncertain events, for the most part, residents do not stand in each other's way nor undermine each other, as a sense of give and take, playing the angles, covering the possible dispositions prevail.

For these experiences in Yangon raise the question: what are the boundaries that constitute recognition of commonality, of things being in the same place together, of administrative jurisdictions, regulatory apparatuses applicable to a coherent territory, even as territories overlap, veer off, intersect and dissipate? Of course this is the very conundrum that black people constantly faced in terms of constituting a world that could be inhabited on their own terms, in the context of a world constituted on terms that were never theirs to begin with, in the disruption of the "contract" between form and sense, or what Glissant (1997) called the "right to opacity".

Inscription in its most basic maneuver remains the marking of something through its corresponding nothingness, of the civilized against the uncivilized, and so forth. Inscription is the tool of cutting. Once something is defined against what it is not, that "what it is not" is then "cut loose" from that which has been differentiated, no matter how tied it may be to a conceptual, economic or political dependency (Colebrook 2015). It assumes the position of utter contingency, the being of anything whatsoever, despite the proliferations of narratives, interpellations, and spatial controls through which that which is differentiated is subject to.

So are these districts in Yangon enacting their own "cut"–their own detachment, momentary as it might be, from the scripted probabilities of the city that is coming? For the cut does not so much prefigure divided identities but establishes interfaces, oscillating frictions (Galloway 2012) that propel continuous transactions, call-responses. In Yangon, residents are taking "their cut", their share, by figuring a "cut" in the action, in the "movie" of urban restructuration. The enactments of the ensembles of collective action I have described in Yangon, in their efforts to recompose their surrounds, attempt to give rise to conditions through which the possibility of enduring as a "majority" remain in sight.

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