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Radical unknowability: an essay on solidarities and multiform urban life

AbdouMaliq Simone ⓘ and Vanesa Castán Broto ⓘ

If urban life emerges within a multiplex space, what forms of change are afforded by urban environments? The urban entails a series of relations and detachments that contain popular economies and urban commons. Rather than a system, the urban becomes an amalgamation of multiple forms. Thus, urban change does not follow one-off dramatic interventions, but rather, it results from numerous micro shifts constantly occurring in the urban environment. This kind of change entails lateral movements and movement sideways that add up to structural transformations. A crucial question is what kind of solidarities can deal with the barriers to urban life that people encounter and experience as a sense of impossibility, a 'cannot' that prevents their initiatives. Transcending such 'cannot' discourse will require discarding the moral looking glass that often taints urban futures imaginations.

Introduction

*B*ehind the Beautiful Forevers, the non-fiction bestseller written by Katherine Boo, depicts life in the slum of Annawadi in Mumbai, behind a billboard that asks the viewer to be indeed 'beautiful forever'. The book received multiple awards and accolades, and, among the many notes of praise, it was said

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to be 'illuminating' to a mainly North American audience. In her speech at the reception of the National Book Award, Katherine Boo argued for a focus on the 'power of small stories' to illuminate human life. Yet, nothing depicted in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* is a small story: from police corruption to rags to riches stories around waste collection enterprises, the book is full of heroic characters in the search for success. For all its poetic power, the book fails to move beyond a character-led hero story that mirrors countless other stories before.

Urban life is not made of heroic stories. This critique would not matter if *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* was a work of fiction, of imagined characters in the middle of an adverse context. However, this book has been sold as a non-fiction book, as said above—revealing—that offers a window to observe slum life. It claims to represent not only the ordinary events of people's lives but also their feelings, affects, and motivations—aspects of their life that can only make their way into the book through Katherine Boo's invention.

Boo's book is important because it represents a particular way of thinking about urban life that motivates a great deal of work within urban studies engaged in voicing the justices and injustices that people are subjected to in their lives. This perspective has motivated plenty of work, for example, under the umbrella of delivering the Sustainable Development Goals, an army of scholars looking to understand the roots of inequality from the perspective of those who suffer it in their lives (Satterthwaite et al. 2020; Corburn and Sverdlik 2019; Castán Broto et al. 2022; Simone and Pieterse 2017). As authors, our own work has engaged this perspective despite the long-standing warning in development studies and other allied subjects against constituting people as 'other' subjects. In her famous essay, Spivak wrote

> The object of the group's investigation, in the case not even of people as such but of the floating buffer zone of the regional elite-subaltern, is a deviation from an ideal—the people or subaltern—which is itself defined as a difference from the elite. (Spivak 2010)

We share with Ong (2011) a concern about a focus on subaltern agency as a means of resistance, a focus that, because of its Marxist pedigree, naturalizes capitalism and privileges class struggle as the only possible response to urban challenges.

The collection of characters in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* represents multiple instances of deviation from the subaltern ideal, including how the characters relate towards Boo, which calls the reader to feel sympathetic (the withdrawn young waste entrepreneur) or unsympathetic (the cunning slum landlord). As symptomatic of a whole way of thinking in urban studies, the entire book is sustained in a complex artifice of differences mediated by a certain morality of failure and success that explains how to navigate a profoundly unjust urban landscape. This morality is imbued with familiar tropes of good and evil, of deserving heroes which inform dominant forms of storytelling (see also Ghosh 2018).

In this essay, we propose a different narrative of urban life that proposes the city as a multiform universe, built on multiple alternatives and subject to unexpected consequences, where space is not fixed but produced through social

life (Massey 1999). Raising ontological questions is a strategy to develop new solidarities in a world where urban inequities appear as insurmountable, where individuals adapt their coping strategies to a heightened sense of suspicion. We follow queer theory scholars in their attempt to embrace the world's horrors to apprehend new ways of thriving which are not grounded on externally imposed narratives of success and failure (Sedgwick 2003; Wiegman 2014). Queer theory is particularly important here because of the early realization on the need for practical social reflections that simply enable finding ways of being queer (Warner 1993). Failure is central to such practical relation, in the same way as failure is central to urban life. Failure is a means to reject the imposition of certain forms of normativity, such as gender, in the quest for a fulfilling life in one's own terms (Halberstam 2004). It also links to a commitment to avoid descending into the false promise of a renewed epistemology of the urban, one suited to new dynamics of urban life, and embrace instead forms of radical alterity not as external but intrinsically constitutive of efforts to theorize the urban (Oswin and Pratt 2021).

A theoretical strategy we find useful here is to move away from an urban political ecology reading of urban space as constituted by multiple flows of relational connections (see Heynen 2018), to examine instead the multiple ways in which spaces of relationality are also constituted in relation to instances of detachment. Detachment refers to the unintegrated aspects of urban life, but also to the range of strategies whereby citizens remain aloof and disinterested in hegemonic narratives of success within a given capitalist framework. Urban life results from instances of connection into existing flows, but also from instances of detachment in which citizens engage with multiple activities constantly adapting but also promoting urban change. In this context, urban change results from a compendium of lateral movements, small movements sideways that people may do consciously or unconsciously, freely or forced, but that inevitably leave an imprint on the built environment and urban culture. In the last part of this essay, we reflect upon the kind of solidarities that emerge around the spaces of detachment detailed in the essay.

Relational logics of urban life

In the context of rapid urbanization, contemporary cities escape containment because of the scale of change and the character of their definition. Analyses of suburbanization and multi-centered growth have tried to grapple with this definition. Still, they cannot fully encompass current processes of change nor consolidate specific prescriptions for it (Keil 2018). Much of the discussion has settled around the idea that urbanization is not a phenomenon to be contained but one that raises the imperative of making space for it (Angel, Parent, and Civco 2012). The notion of extended urbanization, for example, exceeds a roll-out of overarching logics, rather entailing the creation of spaciousness through intersections of diverse, even seemingly contradictory, histories, practices, accumulations, and bodies (Keil 2018; Schmid et al. 2018).

While cities rushed to stake their future economic viability on maximizing their relatability to a larger world, operationalized by availing all kinds of

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opportunities to enable that larger world to 'show up' within city jurisdictions—and in ways in which such jurisdiction was inevitably diminished by that very availing—their capacity to shape anything like a common municipal identity has increasingly become impossible (Balducci, Fedeli, and Curci 2017; Levy et al. 2017). Identifying the metropolitan scale as a realm of intervention requires its active construction as the locus of place-based alternative in globalized space (D'Albergo and Lefèvre 2018).

Of course, cities were never spaces of overarching cohesion and have always produced inequities and spatial fission thus differentiating opportunities across space. However, the assumption of urbanity as a territorialization of relationality, as an arena of a circulation of materiality condensed within a city-form, has accelerated the dissolution of 'municipality' as the primary referent of dwelling. Residents' worlds both narrow into individuated itineraries and expand into an increasingly nebulous space of financial flows, speculations, and global growth machines. Even seemingly marginal and remote locations, subject to an enforced remoteness but never empirically remote (Kuklina and Holland 2018), demand attention in fundamental decisions at the heart of urban power—for example, the emerging centers of extraction whose rare earth materials are the fuels for the smart city (Arboleda 2020).

How such dissolution is changing life in urban areas, we do not know. Differently situated actors navigate the urban through continuous readjustments, yet visible transformations are ambiguous because it is not clear whether they reiterate old stories or bring about new ones. Still, the new speed of change at the urban level generates many uncertainties for inhabitants (Datta and Shaban 2016). For every possession—of property, home, sector, function, self-identity—may seem to indicate some stability and coherence. But the work it takes to maintain the boundaries of these possessions seems to increase as they are situated in increasingly larger networks of relations. One can secure, define and distinguish, but every possession must in some ways be *available* to each other to ward off entropy, to have access to new ways of doing things, and to continuously update their capacities to keep up with changes underway.

Urban territories spell out identities and functions. However, urban territories also constitute pluriverses in which 'everybody designs' (Escobar 2018). The urban territory results from the common occupation of space that makes that territory operational as an ecology of self and mind whose components are mutually attuned and implicated with and through each other. People engage with routine tasks of work, livelihood, and social exchange whose repetitions also enable a constant re-imagination of economies and social lives to come. For every exertion of effort, every attempt to reproduce the conditions of a viable existence, intricate feedback loops require new adjustments for people to stay in place, that is, to mobilize the emotional and material investments made in one location. Gaining mobility from those investments—thus exceeding place—is even farther within reach for most urban inhabitants and may require deeper adjustments. Those recalibrated economies and social lives become embedded in new arrangements of the built environment and the city's resources, in layered structures in which explaining one layer obscures another (Raffestin 2012). Far from providing idyllic conditions for living, urban areas are replete with turbulence, catastrophe, and sacrifice alongside occasional opportunities

to restore functional balances. Territories are thus endowed with capacities, missions, and responsibilities; they offer a basis for being in this world; what was to be is already present. There is no specific destination to be reached as some linear outgrowth of everything done in the present.

Despite territories being a platform on which many things get done—all of the routines deployed by individuals and households to get what they need—often the more that is attained or secured, the more anxiety accumulates. This is an anxiety both about what these attainments mean but also how they might be prolonged into futures that seem increasingly uncertain as time itself is progressively urbanized. The terms of measuring continuity, of continuing attainment, are subject to a plurality of rhythms—quantum leaps, stops, and starts, seeming endless durations, sudden losses, and gains. Increasingly forced to fend for themselves, households seek institutionalized vehicles for holding on, for momentarily stabilizing their positions within the accelerated circulations of influences, performances, and consumables. Shafique (2021, 1023) for example provides an example of the encounter of territory and everyday life in Karail, the largest informal settlement in Dhaka:

> One such case is the 3 m high wall that separates Karail from the city outside, constructed by the State agency (BTCL) with offices adjacent to Karail. Built perhaps to protect the land and to avoid the public gaze veering into 'slum' from the street, the antagonistic effect of the wall is the amputation of the laneways inside Karail from the city outside. The residents have negotiated by making holes through the wall, setting up markets along with it, building over it and in some cases, bribing the contractor hired by the State to leave gaps at strategic locations.

Safique's example demonstrates how antagonism becomes constitutive of everyday life, through the reimagination of circulations within externally imposed spatial constraints in urban markets and the reconfiguration of labor.

Much attention has been paid to reworking notions of the commons, emphasizing the interrelationships among wage and reproductive labor, the production of material sustenance, and the elaboration of collective responsibilities (popular economy) (Gago 2017), as well as the social ecology of human-machinic relations (Iaione and Foster Forthcoming). These figurations of imagination are efforts to derive workable territories of recognition and governance. Here territory is less a demarcation of physical or volumetric space than pragmatic collections of ethical practices and technical instruments that might be intersected to bring new capacities to each. As a collection of people residing and working together with their environments to provide the basics of a life worth living, territory configures porous boundaries that—far from being markers of definition or defense—establish the means for accessing a larger world while curating an experience of coherence for those who live within them.

At one level of empirical analysis, territories entail particular arrangements among differences—properties, functions, zones, regulations—separated from each other. However, at another level of analysis, territories entail the different substrates of ways of doing and organizing things, mutually implicated and constitutive of each other. This latter perspective demands attention to the simultaneous constitution of different registers. These pluriverses foreground

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the essential relationality of all things, of how the very materiality of distinct entities constitutes a force that incessantly shapes each's capacities and how apparent differences operate as guarantors for an overarching commonality (cf. Escobar 2018).

Instead of placing the human inhabitant in some overarching 'driver's seat', the specificities of force fields, metabolisms, intellection, crystallization, photosynthesis, infection, leeching decay, carbonization, atmospheric pressure, and affect—to name a few critical processes—reciprocally shape the operational capacities of material and immaterial entities. At the same time, racialization, expansive reproduction through systematic theft, and apparatuses of intensive individualization act to segment, divide, keep things apart and engender interactions of mutual suspicion and parallelism. Instead of amplifying and availing the resourcefulness of things, the tendency is towards reproducing vulnerabilities and extracting from the vulnerable. Indeed, the very concept of relations, relations between the segmentary and pluriversal, relations among that which is separated and made available, is increasingly problematic. On the one hand, urban areas are constituted by relations, whether these are social and kinship relations, cultural connections, forms of exchange, and mutual recognition—among humans and non-humans. On the other hand, urban life is also constituted through detachments.

A current conundrum in urban work is the seemingly irreconcilable incompatibility and applicability of relationality and detachment. Each notion simultaneously confirms and abnegates the other. As concepts, each is in an obvious relationship with the other, as they are simultaneously opposed. However, the idea of being together and separated at the same time appears as a fundamental contradiction in our understanding of contemporary ways of living. Far from being a 'both-and' situation, with the convenience that such a formulation might provide, there is something that refuses to be worked out, where the terms might be conjoined as a simultaneity. For each posits implications that would 'wipe out' the other, undermine dialectical possibilities, and instead points to a vast interstitial space for which there is no ready vernacular to provide a positive identification of any kind. Thinking about urban infrastructure landscapes, the vagaries of relationality and detachment speak of landscapes as formless connective tissue (Castán Broto 2019) where connections emerge from precarious arrangements.

Relationality also operates as a demand, an urgent call to recognize the salience of long-suppressed knowledges that valorize how humans, plants, animals, soils, and minerals—'processed' in various forms—co-inhabit the earth. They require the curation of forms of mutual care, how each 'tends' to each other, both in the sense of bearing witness to precarity and in practices of affecting and being affected (Tsing 2015). Sustainable urban development requires recognizing these fundamental interdependencies and attending to recalibrating the purported needs of urban human inhabitants to actions capable of sustaining nurturing intersections of various forms of life and non-life. Much attention goes into rendering dwelling as something 'optimally resilient', captured through machine learning, big data, interoperabilities, and other urban operating systems (Luque-Ayala and Marvin 2020). Such gizmos distract attention from the fundamental operation of living urban life sustainably.

Sustainability aspirations connect the conceptual awareness of the interrelatedness of things to the operative conditions of urban livability. While a substrate of interconnections does become increasingly visible through new technical capacities and ecological sensibilities, it would seem to have little traction in urban worlds characterized by manipulations, parasitical behaviors, and violence. Implosive attempts to extract as much as possible from those supposedly sharing that territory empty out territories, dismembering them. What happens when people see very little that connects them to those who live different lives in close proximity?

Relations among specific sectors of urban residents also are made to depreciate. Administrators have become increasingly adept at mitigating the dangerous atmospheres that hang over large metropolitan areas and which are seen as impeding more profitable engagements with the larger world. The popular classes have become more skilled at urban politics, using media and technologies to bolster systems that sustain individual appropriations and popular economies, both licit and illicit. Despite these skills, the popular classes remain easy and available targets for self-aggrandizing maneuvers of aspirant political assemblages, for example, in the restatement of old stories about cleaning up that under the guise of risk management justify slum clearance.

What could develop a common urban condition moving beyond individual particularities or even a sense of collective self that shapes an urban community? To what extent was urbanity ever a general condition, as opposed to specific aggregations of particularities, where situations and actors were constantly rearranged and further particularized? Urban collective life can only be grasped in motion through a series of relays. For example, households are made out of journeys and circuits of movement, choreographies that recognize their inherent instability as the vectors of affiliation, affect, and care. Households sustain liveable spaces only as long as there is recognition of the household's prospective dissolution, of its members moving on, extending themselves into an outside world. Households then become distributed across multiple locations and compositions exceeding administrative and cultural boundaries. They extend outward to include churches and gangs; horizons narrow and extend in oscillating fashion in relations that remain fundamentally unsettled. For example, in Jakarta, family and household operate as a kind of accordion: first, it stretches across the region to engage with new economic opportunities, then, it narrows in on specific core members to reduce responsibilities and obligations, and then, once again, spreads out to tap into new sources of information and opportunity.

The continuity of detachment

A focus on the negative can address the key factor missing in the relational logics of urban life: detachment. Detachment within urban space relates to the negative in our practices of habitation but follows on from multiple engagements with the oppositional as it is expressed in conventional, shared narratives. Building on a Hegelian understanding of contradiction, philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1980) examined the oppositional process as productive and generative of further insight, moving history forward. Yet, there are voices that move beyond

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a utilitarian view on negation, looking instead for the means to subvert any impulse to normalize experiences in articulations of success (Halberstam 2011).

The configuration of urban spaces appears increasingly as serialized detachments. Even as residents of all backgrounds appear to intensify and extend where and how they move, as urban transport options increase in terms of modalities, settlements themselves seem increasingly separate. Standard suites of built environment configurations and services have led to the homogenization of metropolitan zones. Homogenization, however, emerges as an illusion in urban life characterized by individuation and separateness. Its symptoms include the valorization of individual attainment and consumption, the focus on managing the time demands of income generation, and the desire to attenuate the labor-intensive demands of social integration and neighborhood life. The tendency toward detachment emanates from the very expansiveness of relationality, which intensifies attention to reterritorialization and to the capacity to exert some kind of control over one's surroundings. For many residents of Jakarta, for example, they often ask what it means to be part of the larger urban region, feeling that it is not something they can get a handle on, and all of the available vernaculars of citizenship and civic belonging don't provide anything really useful to grasp what this region is and how to navigate it.

The genealogies of detachments, however, are varied. Some emanate from the singularities of location—how infrastructural layouts, toxicities, natural elements configure specific spaces and boundaries. Others result from collective decisions to maintain distance, make internal motivations invisible, and protect economies and ways of life from encroachment pressures. Others proceed from the specific designs of new residential situations in a panoply of developments, new towns, housing projects, gated communities, and development zones. Others are simply a collective expression reflecting a desire to be left alone, to pursue other means of making life sensible and valuable to them. As urban spaces extend outwards away from urban cores, and inwards from towns in the hinterlands, the implantation of built environments is produced by a wide array of finance, speculative projects, autoconstructed settlements, and industrial developments that work their way around and through each other often without any overarching spatial development planning or clear jurisdictional frameworks. So, while all of these spatial products may sit next to each other, there is no apparent basis for them to necessarily relate, even by tracking any backward and forward linkages. Even in settings that seem consolidated, such as an area of thousands of migrant dormitories on Jakarta's outskirts, residents on one 'row' may have little to do with those on the next. Hong Kong's residents in subdivided flats tend to have increasingly reduced social circles and resist integration into collective—'community'—alternatives (Lau 2020). Detachment is a metaphor for 'keeping one's head down' or 'keeping indebtedness at bay'. It is also sometimes expressive of a desire to be in charge of defining how their lives and practices are to count.

Detachment is also contradictory because, at times, it becomes an implicit form of neighborhood solidarity. Co-residents do not necessarily abide by overarching norms and reciprocal responsibilities to each other. Co-residents do not manage local affairs through consensus or defer control to agreed-upon authority individuals or institutions. Instead, co-residents let go to pursue

individual ways of doing things along their conduits through the larger city so that they can resource new inputs, sources of income, and political power.

Individual ways of doing things exceed any notion of community, but also, resource it and, hence, reproduce it. Detachment becomes a modus operandi not only for individuals and households but also for larger aggregates of residents who stake their long-term prospects on attaining proximity to an intensified heterogeneity of how their neighborhoods are networked to something out there. This is not a collective process of curation of the commons. Instead, detachment becomes a process of leveraging disconnected details, itineraries, personal projects whose implications always remain difficult to pinpoint but remain objects of vague hopefulness. Even under conditions of high residential and commercial density, where people are running into each other all of the time, where streets may be intensely jammed with all kinds of activities, and where multiple vectors of servicing across disparate occupations and trades exist, an atmosphere of detachment prevails lane by lane with their increasingly singular compositions. While this diversity may indeed have been there all along, it becomes visible where singularities matter more than convergences, as these singularities operate as specific ways of interpreting what is going on, managing the small differences as a matter of capturing value, as indeed small particularities—in the ways things are made, consumed, distributed (even relationships)—come to matter more in urban economies.

Detachment can also become a means of resistance. Here, residents may refuse all normalization and development procedures, where particularly marginalized youth embrace the very negative images attributed to them. Regardless of the necessity to make a living, there is substantive detachment from anchoring one's life in a specific place or territory. Circulation and movement become the practices of everyday inhabitation. While residents may not move very far, they must keep moving—as a means of deflecting being the target of police, familiar judgments, restrictions, or obligations—creating a kind of detachment from a discernible relationship with a place or occupation. It can be argued that such practice of movement maintains a relationship with the larger city or urban setting to keep from being immobilized. Investment means maintaining mobilities, being just out of reach of the constraints of a past life even if the nature of such transitions is small and seemingly insignificant. Detachment aims to avoid being readily identifiable but, at the same time, to go beyond the possibilities implied by a specific background. This is often seen in the wide popularity of *tik tok* videos among 'subaltern' populations, who use the media to present all kinds of imagined identities; speaking to the world as if they are something completely detached from their work and social background.

There are instances where relationality and detachment operate in tandem. Logistics is perhaps the most powerful instance of this, where places are disembedded from an 'organic' or historical relationship with their surroundings, in a string of relations that facilitate the circulation and transshipment of specific commodities, information, and services. Here places are detached and re-sutured in ways that lock them into servicing an overarching infrastructure of connectivity that may have little relevance or benefit to the specific territory they are now only nominally a part of. Circulation priorities dominate, with all its violence to existing, immobile forms of living. In contrast to the tropes of

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settler colonialism, logistics prolongs the colonial apparatus by settling specific resources, infrastructures, land, labor within circuits of exchange, rather than fixing it in specific places. Places, themselves, can be detached, not to find new modalities of belonging, but to remain detached, available to shifting circuits of throughflows, whose futures may be short-lived. Yet, the impetus here remains the cultivation of relationality, of the ability to concretize specific relationships between land, plantations, shipping, production, financialization, local development, political control, and capital accumulation. The logistical relationship aims to skip over history, overcome the blockages of distance, culture, and nature to forge connections abstracted from local sentiment or practice (Chua et al. 2018; Chua 2017).

The tension between relation and detachment leaves the question, on what basis do things necessarily relate? Much of urban experience today demonstrates that the proximity of different ways of life and environments does not guarantee that they will have anything to do with each other. In a world where relationality entails an ever-prolific expansion of connections, aspirations to enhance our ability to tend to things, to be attentive to the operations of the earth we inhabit, are undermined by the sheer excess of things to pay attention to. If our capacity to alter our behaviors is motivated by paying attention to our surroundings and our actions in new ways, the challenge is how to decide what is most relevant to pay attention to.

Relationality, detachment and urban change

On the one hand, as we have emphasized, urbanization is changing any sense of reality at a rapid pace. On the other hand, climate change and the pandemic raise new global imperatives to bring about a change—of global dimensions, no less—in a desirable direction to sustain human life as we know it (with all the caveats about development and improvement that come associated with that equation). Thinking of climate change as an existential challenge has reconfigured our ideas of time and urgency. As action increasingly concentrates in urban environments, the urban becomes an experimentation laboratory for such a transition (Bulkeley, Castán Broto, and Edwards 2014).

Time no longer marks some kind of common passage towards some specific destination among people or things. Instead, time constantly shifts the terms of proximity—the further away one gets from something, the closer one is, to close in on something makes it vanish, and biding one's time means to cover all the angles. Nothing remains the same in the obdurate working-class districts of Sao Paolo, Hong Kong, Jakarta, and Delhi. New words appear daily, and fortuitous events alter the course of everyday neighborhood life. People come and go, and daily adjustments determine who is really in charge of what. To register concrete manifestations of such changes verges on the impossible. Most houses and stores look the same way they did decades ago. Children have, of course, grown up and moved on, many passed away. Yet all these lives aggregate in wholes and provide a sense of collective identity to these places that has not changed that much even when life is changing all the time in small, barely detectable, increments.

Yet, many places in urban regions are unrecognizable in terms of the massive transitions that have taken place, at speeds never imagined before. Suddenly there are huge vertical towers where rice was harvested the year before. Suddenly a district full of thousands of migrant dorms disappears in a matter of weeks. For large majorities these changes remain external to the places of their lives.

The urban is transversed by divergent notions of time that result in a play of things moving on and not at all. The continuous remaking of spaces where nothing changes and the persistence of static places of radical change renders time as a series of relays to transmit city imaginations that provide some coherence to peoples' places. These relays compel residents to establish spatial comparisons—to look for something 'out there'—while also reimagining and making strange their own surroundings—seeing their own neighborhood as something 'out there'—specially embodying potentials yet to be experienced.

At one time governments attempted to negotiate favorable relationships with the poor, repeating the tried and true strategies of vote banks and provisioning gestures. While this remains the case in many contexts, it is a practice also situated within expanding models of financialization, where the lives of the poor are securitized and managed as an aggregate mass to demonstrate the creditworthiness of the nation, of displaying its capacities to move bodies around, extract from them specific energies and flexibilities outside of their familiar contexts. (Tadiar 2022). Here the specific relationalities of the popular classes are rendered expendable, as the very intimacies of household and neighborhood connections become the targets of police intervention, and as a result make them distrust each other and their ability to operate in concert. The poor are detached from the specifics of the everyday social relationships and managed either as small enterprises worthy of conditional cash transfers, eliminated or incarcerated for their criminality, left alone in highly volatile situations engineered by the state through threats of eviction or service cuts to implode, or relocated in highly managed relations of dependency in part-time, provisional jobs and residences whose prices almost immediately place them in interminable debt.

There is a sense that radical change is needed, that change is almost imminent, that change is within touch in urban areas. As a local district leader in Jakarta said recently, 'We simply cannot live like this anymore.' Dispensing again with any precision about who is the 'we' or the 'this', this invocation does indicate the need to put to the ways in which the Anthropocene's claims about extinction seem to render every other condition somehow insignificant. For, no matter how many empirics and moral invocations are mobilized to instill the urgency to do something about climate change, it is not only the structural gridlocks and dependencies that make this difficult—all of the reliance upon the fuels, production practices, modes of accumulation, and consumption preferences that contribute to global warming.

There is something also about the invocation itself, the imperative of the 'cannot' that does not carry the affective charge needed to really get people to do something differently. For much of the manifestation of urban modernity has been premised on this 'cannot'. It is a modernity that propped itself up on the basis of judgments that were made about forms of liveliness where

transformations were not necessarily based on the critique of the then present ways of living, but rather on continuous abiding and movement with things and surroundings.

Considering temporality requires that we do not look into transformation as a singular event but as a multiplex, varied, irregular process. Salient temporalities result from the oscillations of seasons, renewals, unfolding, prophecy, returns, and advents. They are hardly transformative events. Every moment is both familiar and remarkable, uncovering new manifestations of cherished values or the possibilities of inversion and reversal, where everything in one's surroundings becomes more-or-less instantiations of others where shared needs and sentiments exert a semblance of rule. Pure imperfection, pure life.

If we reframe our ideas of change, then it may be possible to break some of those barriers: A present 'cannot live' stands in stark contrast with the past conviction of 'could be'—all those deleterious, incorrect experiences that recast the present as a precursor, an entry point, or a pragmatic veil for something else that had been there all along. Rather than seeking radical change, the present is an opportunity to shift sideways. It invites citizens to engage with the complementary, the supplemental, the overlooked. Present urban conditions are unsustainable and unjust: urbanity undermines life itself. Yet, a 'cannot' is a refusal from which there is no escape. What is needed is not so much a refusal as a recognition of what has been given up to accede to the demands of modernity. The acquisition of status and access routes to consumption without ever offering anything really to believe in—the end of any future promises—reveals modernity to have been a trick all along, and that its adherents had been tricked. Still, behind the often faint invocations of a common humanity, amplified during times of crisis, cities have been sites for a continuous experimentation with ways of being together, of stitching provisional notions of 'we'—sometimes to fold into different kinds of actors and experiences, sometimes to challenge and provoke people into declining any such inclusion, and still at other times to provide cover with intense contestations about who can do what with whom.

So, the 'cannot live' is not a general condition but a set of multiple and distinct problems that require self-evaluation in comparison with other schemes and situations. The 'we' then is less entity than rhythm, a series of 'back and forths' and 'round and abouts' that enfold all kinds of bodies and sentiments at different times.

In the Anthropocene, the exigencies of collective action do not require the commitment to and by a common humanity—a collective urban citizen—but of a loosening of the criteria of efficacy and judgment, of the costs of failure, of the proliferation of nodes of operation and interlocution. For the 'we' is less a matter of common cause than a pronoun that multiplies the fields of action that can feed into each other, an appreciation and mapping of the interlocking configurations of residence, sense, and experience that coalesce in particular settings. In large urban regions, such as Delhi and Jakarta, the elaboration of itineraries becomes more important than an anchorage in place. Of course, home and stability remain essential values and aspirations. But increasingly, the modus operandi of residence becomes circulation. In environments characterized by gridlock, chokepoints, barriers, gates, and security regimes,

circulation has to work around the obstacles. As the intensity of traffic varies according to an assortment of strategic maneuvers, itineraries are not static. They, too, are constantly being readapted, moving bodies simultaneously across different scenarios, anonymous to each other, but yet visible and potentially engageable. A certain romance of the peasantry down on the farm, one with the earth, prevails in Anthropocene thinking about how sustainability might be managed through a proliferation of small projects across small communities.

In contrast, this urban 'we' posited here has only provisional anchorage. Investments do not consolidate any given place like a home or public space, as much as they enable future mobilities. Past obsessions with having a house as a fundamental asset may continue but only as an asset that remains incomplete, poorly located, and a burden of debt.

Shifts are aimed less in terms of transformative events, and more in terms of small maneuvers sideways, recognizing how lateral moves can quickly recompose the terms of one's sociality, open up new horizons with minimal investments. Rather than 'we cannot live like this' most people in the Anthropocene get by with 'it is possible to live something else now as long as we don't waste too much time, money, and effort to do so and that we don't get bogged too with excessive expectations'. Maintaining the ability to move sideways becomes paramount, regardless of whether it pays off with more money or status. The confirmation of a capacity to simply move suffices. What is important is to demonstrate the capacity to relay, to go from one version of self to another, to turn the self into a kind of 'we', distributed across different places and terms, by being able to pay attention and engage others with whom one may never have considered oneself eligible for or interested in. Where one is located now becomes the margins to access still other margins, places on the verge of being something else, which is something that all places inherently are in their capacity for redescription, for bringing the 'out there' 'in here'.

What kind of solidarities are possible in urban environments?

Vulnerabilities are visible in particular kinds of social trajectories. To what extent then is it possible to think of a 'we' that 'cannot live like this' anymore, where both the 'we' and the 'this' within the immediate circumstances of everyday life vary even under more generalized and shared conditions of precarity at different scales. For example, housing embeds different intensities of exposure to vulnerability and governing and market processes such as the imposition of spatial development plans, land value capture, gentrification, and private development. At the same time, housing conditions vulnerabilities to disasters and the possibility to recover in their aftermath. Mobilizations of solidarity around housing may be directed to address some of these vulnerabilities, sometimes changing the nature of a given housing project. For housing projects to address these demands, social movements must be willing and able to render the interiority of their operations visible to larger audiences and translate more tacit internal accommodations of resident differences into more formal vernaculars of representation. In other words, people within social movements must act like good citizens or activists.

This particular understanding of the 'we' is salient for the dilemmas entailed in thinking about urbanization processes today. Urban footprints far exceed the capacity to manage them under conventional forms of governmentality and calls for new conceptualizations of territory and strategic approaches beyond the municipal, metropolitan or regional. More important, however, it is to leap out from both the familiar notions of collective life and the conventional categorizations of individual distinction. Too much emphasis on the disposition of space—the extent to which it is conducive to facilitating social cooperation or providing for a sense of self or household sufficiency—denies the fundamental need of the 'we' to stay mobile. Too much emphasis on identifying virtuous and synergistic relationalities—despite the obvious agglomerations, multiplier effects, logistical efficiencies, and cosmopolitan sensibilities shaping urban relationalities—reduces urban life to a simplistic collection of nodes and connections.

Thinking relationally also entails first questioning whether things relate. To what extent is relationality at the heart of an emerging sustainable economy of care, and to what extent is it the ruse of containment, where every aspect of life is subsumed within an implicit calculus of how each is implicated by the other. Do the quantum physics of locality, where intimate encounters can operate at a distance, which upend our conventional notions of how things impact each other and rework the spatialization of intimacy and cause and effect actually translate into workable apparatuses of administration and provisions of basic needs? If what operates at a distance is more salient to the terms of an individual's life than what they find right next to them, what do they do with their proximity to others? What is near moves further away, and what is out there assumes a position of greater intimacy, so there is room for all kinds of inversions not bound to linear conventions. But in this crossfire, relationality spreads out, almost virally, assumes images of concentration, where a person has the experiential sense of convening their life with numerous distant others, right here, right now.

Here precarity operates as a kind of design, pushing residents into new residence arrangements, income generation, and interdependency, but with the tacit presumption that all is temporary. Institutions are not being built: they are temporary, precarious arrangements whose experimental nature is driven more by the inability to assume normal life than by a progressive social imagination. The ability to jump scale, to suture together innovative connections among media, materials, cultural norms, physical settings and money is not a means for the curation of a new collective sensibility as much as a series of tactical improvisations in the midst of sociality falling apart, being dissolved into an expanding archive of details strewn across vast distances not distant in the reach of social media.

At the same time, it may be necessary to work with these movements toward detachment. Subsidiary, localized branding, extensive residential mobility, restructuring, land value capture, gentrification, re-densification, and urban renewal have conspired to atomize urban space. Additionally, cross-district solidarities have diminished in the face of more intricate targeting of resource allocations and capital investments. The portrayal of urban regions as a constellation of centers or settlements repeats, in some way, the

American model of individualized municipalities within single urban region that fits real estate covenants, racial segregation, differential tax preferences, and development coalitions. Such detachments are costly in terms of spatial planning, infrastructure development, and fiscal viability.

But the reality is that an off-the-grid existence may be the only medium-term viable disposition in terms of encouraging and even mandating greater resident participation in the care of environments and the management of low carbon technologies applied to urban services. Experiments in dwelling may need to be sufficiently detached from overarching metropolitan exigencies and development agendas in order to accrue the space necessary in order to go through what will likely be many renditions of experiments, many instances of failure. Across many regions of the South, it is precisely the peripheries of large urban areas where experiments in residing and producing are taking place. While the impetus to draw them in under overarching regional development authorities and development commissions is legitimated in terms of economic viability and administrative efficacy, the relative detachment of projects and settlements, their combined incongruities and contradictions are also incentives to find ways of articulation that are 'off the grid' in terms of the conventional designs of zoning and so forth. What kinds of planning mechanisms could be generated from finding ways to systematize provisionally the kinds of articulations engineered by different actors in these spaces? Again, how do we form bands of investigators, relaying amongst ourselves to engage the relays of always emerging urban 'we's?

There is something compelling about how the structure of urban life organizes itself to manage collectively urban commons and address collective needs—whether this is supported or hindered by governance structures. This is a long way from the political sentiments of a particularly Latin American strand of collective becoming that emphasizes the importance of working out new values of living life in place and configuring territory as a means of operationalizing awareness and practices of mutual tending, of sensing and living with the essential relationships of earth, things, critters, waterways, atmospheres, forests, and humans (Stavrides 2019). In a recent piece, Arturo Escobar (2019) calls for the experimental design of urban space so that long-honed knowledges of 'non-urbans' might find applicability on new terrain. While these pluriversal notions remain important, there is also something to be gleaned from logistics as well, in its particular and peculiar conflations of relationality and detachment. There is something about how many young people, particularly from the popular classes, live their lives as logistics that may prove as generative as the now conventional decolonial designs.

While it is true that in their self-displacements they become objects of extraction—their efforts to keep in motion rendering them temporary and cheapened labor of all kinds outside of any long-term investment—their sometimes capacity to harvest their surrounds for bits and pieces of opportunity, hacking, and information, become the resources that enable them to prolong circulations across urban space. Even if they profess that their provisionality can only be a temporary thing, they aim to work around apparent stabilities, often perceiving them as a dead-end or overly costly. This does not obviate the fact that social control too has shifted from efforts to keep people in place, to

restrict mobility, to concede that even the most dangerous elements will move and move widely. As such, policing is aimed at targeting threats in motion and of discerning the advantages and concrete opportunities entailed in bodies being shifted around, without long-term attachments to any given space. As political recalcitrance also shifts from mobilizations in place to hit and run and hack, tracking these operations on the move becomes more proficient, which prompts even greater levels of dissimulation, and attachment to specific identities, on the part of the targeted.

So if in these conundrums between aspirations for stronger manifestations of a commons as a way to interrelating the proliferating differences of urban life with an enhanced sense of equity and the tactical albeit morally complicated advantages available by operating through all the detachments of those same differences, the objective is not to reconcile these divergent trajectories but to continuously trace out all of the small instances and projects of going back and forth among them initiated by differentially situated urban actors. How do inhabitants reach each other across the detachments, and what do they do when they turn away? How do all detach from the conventional heteronormative household, in a plethora of multiple often makeshift domestic arrangements that stretch the home both beyond recognition while still incorporating critical practical elements from it? How does the factory show up in the house, the church in the office, the street in the ministries and so forth, while maintaining their own singular identities? How do things that are attached accompany each other without necessarily bearing any responsibility for each other, or participating in some kind of synthesis? It is a matter of how these domains or sectors become *perspectives* for each other. Reflecting Viveiros de Castro's (2012) notions of many different natures within a single cultural construct, such perspectives are ways of living the urban in such a way that the church, for example, is the household for some, the household is the church for others, the market the city hall, and the city hall, the market and so forth. Where commonality is not framed in terms of a set of specific definitional criteria and common participation in clearly defined contexts, but rather the simultaneity of multiple, seemingly inverted, perspectives, which both maintain both separateness and inseparability. For if anything can be anything else for some, yet always different for others, it is understanding in-between positions that might enable residents and researchers to better grasp all of those minor shifts that propel transformation. Here, starting in the middle of things—between here and there, in the midst of all kinds of flow and efforts—may be the only viable orientation.

Conclusion

We started this essay out of concern with an increasingly detached view on informal settlements that claim to understand not only the ordinary events in people's lives, but also their affects and motivations. Having posed questions about the provisionality of those, Katherine Boo's book and the kind of academic work it resonates with becomes a voyeuristic exercise. It does not matter how concerned the observer is with improving people's lives because the

will to improve will always be deployed with their own rationalities, beyond technocratic characterizations of those rationalities. Katherine Boo' book is a type of poverty porn that also misrepresents people's accounts of themselves, rendering them one-dimensional. Narrative thrives in sacrificing nuance in favor of the story. However, when we present that story as a true account of urban life, we defeat its original intent. We can acknowledge the powerful narratives in fiction and their characterization of a powerful time without acknowledging that they provide an account of true characters. This is the trap of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*: its attempt to reduce a multiplex universe to a single story mediated by ostensible neoliberal concepts of success and failure and a visible morality that determines what lives are worth living. A form of narrative that is ill-suited to address the challenges of the Anthropocene (Ghosh 2018).

The need for a different perspective on urban life is urgent and there have been multiple attempts at it, most notably in the theory of assemblages. As Ong (2011) has argued, established theories and generalizations generate normative codes that can hardly account for the multiple, situated expression of urban aspirations. Any attempts to move from situated, temporary forms of theory (what geographer Cindy Katz (1996) called 'minor theory') may constitute a form of epistemological violence (Oswin 2018). However, this commitment to minor theory, present in key theoretical statements such as the recently published collection on the Grammas of the Urban Ground (Amin and Lancione 2022) has not yet impacted the realm of practice. How will we read such forms of urban theory in an alternative urban landscape that engages both with the connections and disconnections that people live through? This is an account that cannot possibly offer ready-made responses to the complex challenges of addressing people's well-being and vulnerabilities. It is also an account that does not resonate with the demands of urban development programs that seek to mobilize resources and obtain results in unrealistic timelines. Interventions follow fads whose timings are not attuned to the everyday rhythms of urban life. Part of this is prompted by the way in which we as researchers and commentators find it increasingly challenging to understand the pushes and pulls being exerted on the diverse urban localities in which we have long worked. Sporadic bursts of activism can indeed secure more rights and dignities, but also pose unanticipated challenges to what people do with each other once these attainments are concretized. Additionally, our sense of the intensity of apparent divergences in places that seemingly at many levels are close to each other, geographically, historically, and socially lead us to think about ways in which such differences are not that separate after all; that they may reflect tacit divisions of labor, forms of complementarity for which we are yet to have an appropriate language, but where work is done to cover the angles, to engage more fully the complexities of urban life within a cognitive economy that, nonetheless, is limited in terms of how much any single person, household or community can 'take it' at any one time. So what ensues is a landscape of multiple perspectives—ways of seeing, sensing, representing, and indeed, living, which reflects one of many possibilities of producing knowledge about the urban.

Susan Sontag explains in her essay On Photography that the photographer is always a voyeur. She then goes on to explain the life of New York photographer Diane Arbus, who, after a successful career working as an assistant to her

photographer husband, left it all to capture the everyday lives of struggling New Yorkers. There is no denial that Arbus' photographs are both beautiful and powerful, inviting—as Sontag wrote—to engage with what from a middle-class perspective could only be seen as life's horrors: poverty, dispossession, bad taste. However, the photographs are also intensely polemic because of the engagement with a dispossessed subject from a position of power (Arbus came from a well-to-do family in New York). Critics in love with Arbus have sought to explain the voyeuristic impulse contained in the photographs by arguing the radical empathy contained within them. The fundamental idea is that her photos are important because they give a voice and a look to those whose lives are not visible. Arbus was friends with her subjects, she spent time with them, she came back. A similar ethical argument follows not only Boo's BBFs book but also the bulk of work on urban development planning, which often is perceived as a labor of recognition. Such perspective erodes concerns with epistemological injustice—that is, who has the right to give a voice to anyone or anything—and paints a veneer of moral legitimacy over the work (Fricker 2007). It ignores Spivak's important insight about the need to recognize the construction of the subaltern subject as something observable: as something that Arbus could capture in a photograph.

What we propose here is to invert that perspective and recognize the radical unknowability of urban life, let alone the possibility of capturing it in a photograph. By accepting this fundamental tenet, we are dismantling the structures of epistemological power that prioritize some perspectives over others. This does not mean that we cannot know something. It does not mean that there is no place for Boo's poetic imaginations or Arbus' disrupting photographs. It requires, however, recognizing the knowledge making subject alongside their subjects of observation. It is not about removing the subject but putting ourselves as subjects that learn and grow from those observations. In this generous reading, Arbus' engagement with urban life is a gift to everyone else, one that is made possible through social contracts in which she explained to people exactly how she felt. In the same way, urban researchers must be open not only about the motivations of the research but also about their status as observers and their relationship with the knowledge they produce. By rejecting solutionism we can open spaces for ideas that can emerge within the multiplex spaces and solidarities already manifest in cities everywhere.

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