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Rewilding the City: Urban Life and Resistance across and beyond Visibility

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Introduction: The conundrums of visibility

Urban theory has been replete with efforts to grasp how relations among bodies, forces, materials, institutions and things compose the structural conditions of urban everyday life and are, at the same time, constituted by them (Adams 2019; Brenner 2019; Fariás 2011; Gandy 2017; McFarlane 2016). The conundrum here concerns whether the urban is something machine-like that brings particular collectivities and their relations to life or whether the urban is an expression of these relations. The conundrum also assumes that somehow all relations are operationalized – that they come into existence as either the concrete manifestation of forces or are a force in their own right. This is a matter of what can be seen, by whom, under what circumstances and for what effects. It is a matter of how specific narratives of urbanization come to be naturalized, seen as the purview of particular categories of forces in shifting hierarchies of valuation and impact. But is there something between these two positions? Need all relations that we might sense or feel necessarily be made operational? And if not, what do inoperable relations actually do? Might they enable us to inhabit the urban in a different, more judicious way?

There is presently a sense of urgency in these conundrums regarding visibility and invisibility, particularly in terms of the governance of urban spaces (Stepputat and van Voorst 2016; Tomlinson and Harrison 2018). Throughout much of the urban South, an implicit social compact has prevailed whereby an amalgam of working poor, working class and barely middle-class residents were allowed to largely govern themselves through a circumvention of legalities and an ambiguation of regulatory frameworks as long as they posed no significant

political threat to the ruling regimes. We deem this amalgam ‘the urban majority’ (Simone and Rao 2012).

This ‘urban majority’ is not so much presented as an empirical construct or figure of imagination but rather as encompassing a way of operating in concert – all of the practices and configurations that made the multitude of individual and collective lives of the poor, the working class and lower middle class intersect with each other and form intricate webs of interdependency and reciprocity (pace Amin and Thrift 2017). In an intense density of economic games, historical backgrounds and diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds, practices of livelihood and social production interacted with each other in ways that were difficult to sort out to work out specific proportions of the characteristics associated with them. While not shrouded in opacity, the operations of these districts nevertheless retained an atmosphere of invisibility even as much of their economic and social lives were conducted in plain sight (Simone and Nielsen 2020). Residents might see an intricate choreography of coordinated action among disparate residents that the lenses of institutional scrutiny just did not see (Bayat 2013; De Boeck and Baloji 2016; Gandolfo 2018; Zeiderman 2016).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has been grafted onto a situation where this compact was largely being dissolved in favour of an intensified formalization of urban space, as it has been converted into an extended logistical nexus of interlinked platforms of production, administration, transport, consumption and service provision, and where these platforms themselves are converted into domains of extraction and financialization (Hu et al. 2021). Massive infrastructural developments, often exceeding any apparent use, become demonstrations of the making visible of articulations between seeming discrete place and functions. These developments do not exist so much to accommodate a particular use but to signal the availability of urban spaces to be appropriated or articulated to a wide range of external agendas (Upadhy 2020). These might include links to specific globalized development aspirations or imperial designs. Nothing should exist on its own; it demands ever thickening webs of relationality. As such, these majority districts, never really separate or autonomous, nevertheless, seemed to ‘stand apart’ and stand outside this imperative for intercalibration and interoperability (Bear 2014; Furlong et al. 2017; Sammadar and Mitra 2016; Schindler 2015; Easterling 2016; Murray 2017).

This has prompted the ‘retreat’ of many residents of these districts to the peripheries of extended urban regions in residential situations that on the one hand, because of their design, would render them highly visible and countable but because of both their peripheral location and new social circumstances assume large measures of opacity. In other words, residents build on long-honed capacities to rearrange themselves – their households and economic activities – that

fall outside the capacities of state or municipal institutions to clearly recognize what is taking place (Alexander 2015). The programmatic unsettling of populations that were never ‘settled in their ways’ to begin with has prompted various responses, particularly on the part of the poorest residents, which tend to retreat further into the shadows of illegality and informal work, already overstretched. Districts such as Tambora in Jakarta, Seelampur in Delhi or Bashteel in Cairo are emblematic of the ‘depths of retreat’ to which the poor attempt to remain present in the city under obscurity (Furniss 2016; Gordillo 2019; Harms 2013; Keil 2018; Lindell 2019).

For households with greater means, homes or flats in the periphery are acquired but usually with as minimum expenditure as possible since a larger proportion of disposable income is devoted towards investments in circulation (cf. Holston 1991). Here, the arrival in the periphery is not deemed a definitive destination but simply a way station, a provisional arrangement to support more detailed investigations of the urban region, a hunt for opportunity, experiments with various part-time jobs. The conviction on the part of these residents is that the present circumstance must be oriented towards ‘curating’ life practices in such a way as to be better prepared to deal with a wide range of eventualities. They cite the difficulty in putting together coherent stories of where things are headed and, as such, are wary of making bad choices and investments. They may ‘park’ their belongings and select family members at nominal and provisional ‘homes’ but spend the bulk of their time circulating across temporary rooming houses, even when they may retain a steady job that they have had for years (Mabin et al. 2013; Melo 2016).

Both of these trajectories of ‘digging in’ and ‘spreading out’ render certain segments of the majority population more invisible, out of both necessity and by nature of the practices assumed. As epidemiological approaches to the recent pandemic prioritize the enhanced visibility of populations and their behaviours – as the basis for testing, contact tracing and provisioning in times of crisis – the already existent moves towards formalization and the ‘domestication’ of majority districts will be accelerated and deepened. In part this process entails enforcing the performance of particular discourses, sensibilities and compliance as the very conditions for receiving concrete economic support, as well as extensions of surveillant gazes into the very intimacies of everyday social life. This trend, too, is part of ongoing aspirations to ‘tie down the future’, or perhaps to stop it, to deter the deleterious implications of urbanization that proceeds unimpeded. To target the variegated practices and locations of majority populations enables regimes to feel as if they are ‘taking care of things’, enforcing more regimented spatial practices and use, bringing in the unsettled into the calculative logics that increasingly structure relationships of all kinds (Das and Walton 2015; Scott 1999).

Calculative relations

But to what extent do these political technologies of settling really work? As residents intensify their circulation across urban spaces, what kinds of relations ensue, and how might they differ from the kinds of relationships they might have as neighbours, friends or extended kin? If we walk across a large market, or take a busy commuter train, there are certainly models, both in our heads and in various institutional settings, that indicate all of the ways in which those persons that populate these settings have both something and nothing to do with each other. So in everyday calculations about what we should pay attention to and how we assess the validity of our actions, we must decide how relevant all of those others are to us. How detached can we be; how related? This is a matter of proportionality. Yet, this assessment of more or less is always at least potentially troubling, as we work out the right categories along a basic gradation of ‘friend or enemy’, ‘known or unknown’. Each proportion, each version of more or less has its particular value.

Of course part of the ‘persuasiveness’ of capitalist axiomatics is that they seem to work through these conundrum by offering a generalized mathematics for the recalibration of the value of anything in terms of its relationship with others – in what Tsing (2000) calls the operations of scalability. Here, capital subsumes the particularities of an action that takes place in the present to the ‘promise’ of expansion. Whatever exists can potentially make money, be part of a general equivalence, be part of an endless circuit of exchange where nothing that exists has any inherent worth and does in the end have to be what it appears to be at this given moment. Rather, it potentially acquires other values simply on the basis of how it is marketed or sold, or what speculative use it might have in either the near or distant future (Weszkalnys 2015). It is as if a message is being issued: ‘Go ahead, act now, do something, anything now, because it won’t mean what you think it will mean, as it gets carried away into other calculations.’ Risk and hesitation are thus conflated as if orchestrated by a partially hidden or unknown algorithmic rationality, which redirects the grounds of visibility to the multiplication of operational procedures rather than to any unfolding historical process (Beller 2017; Brighenti 2017; Pasquale 2016).

If we are to work from the everyday calculations of circulating residents, what might this mean for the larger questions of urban scale, of what affects and is affected or how we might reimagine a different way of inhabiting the urban? Despite the ambition of scaling the urban in terms of the calculations of economy, attempts to determine what gets constituted from what, while seeking to create a *nomos* that establishes a relationship between what the city does and what is done to it, opens up a space of uncertainty that available symbolic and semiotic manoeuvres cannot suture (Braun 2014; Ruddick et al. 2018; Parisi 2016).

What we are suggesting here is that urbanization itself is both a working out and an upheaval of any capacity to work out just how space, people, materials, language, exchange and forces are brought together and in what proportion. This extra layer, this surfeit of organization, is not so much a mysterious force or the invisible hand of some god-like market or divine intervention but *relation* itself, a tremulous, provisional attentiveness, witnessing and holding, as if in a superposition. If capital makes itself visible in relations of exchange, there is a more generic urban relationality that remains untranslatable, where the component terms do not line up in any consistent way and that is unmeasurable in any form of comparison or proportion.

Returning to the popular districts of the majority. In many in which we have worked, residents express their faith in the generativity of encounter or what could be seen as a kind of urban alchemy (Katz 2010). While enduring in overcrowded conditions where lives are incessantly colliding with each other, the willingness to abide with these conditions is largely based on the density of economic games, rambunctious personal styles, the wheeling and dealing, and improvisations that take place and that encounter each other without discernible rules or protocols. It is not that codes of the street and personal conduct do not exist; these are not places without norms or institutions.

Rather there is a density of vernaculars and ways of doing things that encounter each other but are not locked into specific representations, outcomes or power arrangements. Each does exert force, but the relationships that ensue are simply the range of multiple potentialities that exist at the encounter itself, which may go nowhere and everywhere simultaneously depending on the angle on which it is observed (De Boeck 2015). And it is the fact that the design of the built environment of most of these districts, pieced together incrementally by many different actors and materials over the years, generates so many different angles that what the encounter does is indeed multiple, a shape-shifting relationship measurable only in the eventualities that it produces.

In these districts residents hedge their bets on eventualities; that the density of encounters will change their lives and, as such, conditions otherwise apparently difficult and precarious are sufficient for now. This is a way of seeing forward and backward. Forward not only in terms of the ways in which the present increments can lead to the next logistical steps but also of the possibilities of leaps and bounds that propel imaginations forward into completely unanticipated dispositions. At the same time, what is imagined out there, beyond the apparent, works its way backward into present ways of seeing and doing things as a moment of suspending judgement in the present, of not closing down activities and events through normative assessments so as to keep open the possibilities of these unanticipated leaps forward (Caldeira 2017; Chari 2013; Clare 2019; Stavrides 2019; Thieme 2018).

Relations are that surfeit of charge, of a rearranged atmospherics, that render, in this case, a district something different than it was before. This is the case even though it may not leave a trace outside of resident reports that even if not much in their own lives has changed, they know it has for someone just down the road. As residents pursue their daily routine, often in complete drudgery and repetition, they nevertheless do it together, as the movements from here to there, the furtive conversations and ritualistic greetings, the sidestepping of passing vehicles, the quick illicit sale or kiss in the shadows, the routinized gatherings in religious spaces and the bustle of the market – all combine in an ever-shifting choreography of bodies and things (Crang 2001). This is the sensuousness of the street in which a collectivity tacitly and affectively recognizes itself in the ways in which the performance of life works its way around others, where distancing and intimacy are tied together (Marotta and Cummings 2018).

In part, the technologies of division required for the reflexive consideration of relations – that is, the ability to trace the individuality of components and their interactions with each other – derive from a calculated blindness. If the urban is not so much a particular kind of space or time, but rather a field through which both space and time can be *differentiated* simultaneously in all kinds of ways, then the urban is *indifferent* to any particular formation or content at any given moment (Nielsen 2016).

If this is the case, our ability to consider specific spaces, persons and events within the urban as having stable identities in their own right depends on being blind to this indifference. In other words, if we experience relations on a daily level as the interactions between self-contained entities – such as things and bodies – these entities are themselves the by-products of a process where those entities, those differences that are familiar to us are not the ‘difference that makes “a” difference’. All kinds of other differences could have and perhaps are being made, and they emanate from a field where everything is already *in relation* but not as a product or synthesis of parts (Thrift 2012; Gad 2013; Jensen 2015; Strathern 2011).

If one considers an informal settlement, a green field that has been spontaneously or incrementally invaded or settled over time, the way in which it appears, its manifestation of organization, was already inherent in the ways in which prospective residents envisioned their positions within it. Who would be close to the road, the borders of the settlement, who would take more central positions or those in between; who would prioritize locations that might facilitate the acquisition of authority, or better servicing, or places more immune from unwanted incursions; and how much space would one take, in terms of the ability to defend particular places or to divide or consolidate later on. Through a process of social intervisibility, and without ever being subject to words or to overt negotiations, the entire complexion of such settlements could be worked out in advance. The process of settlement was a complicated

choreography of many different potentialities, challenges, countervailing tendencies and competing trajectories, all in relation to each other but without any definitive calculation of proportion. Yet it entails a way of envisioning different trajectories of how things might turn out all at the same time. These settlements are rarely settled anyway, not just because of their structural precarity or usual lack of stable tenure but because these relationalities are continuously producing different kinds of differences, any one potentially substitutable for the other (Morton 2018).

So, cities are full of territories, sectors and dividing lines that bring differences to the light of day and keep differences in ‘their place’. But the application of the line, that which marks differences – in not being itself beholden to any particular will or agenda – marks a process of contingency as much as definitiveness. What I can do is contingent upon what you do, which is in turn contingent upon what another does and so on. It is a process of inoperable visibility, where lines always ramify and nothing can be held in any overarching coherence.

The city operates on itself in and through these spaces of contingency. It is in the interstices between emerging constructs and whatever is withheld from realization that the city works out its rhythms, narrative tendencies and relational dynamics (Brighenti 2013). Indeed, while the accelerated circulation of persons, things and ideas may unsettle any desire for location on the part of a certain segment of the urban majority, an experimental space is being wedged into the urban fabric where provisional relational aesthetics (Rancière 2004) and material imageries can be tested and tried out for size. What kinds of urban theories might the city make of itself in these contingent spaces? How does the city subtract from its own structures and scaffolds those inoperable relations? How does one think about modalities of visibility that exceed the conventional methodologies of linking reality to particular kinds of thought, that disrupt notions of exchange and translation and that continuously recompose how things, persons, forces and events ‘show up’ and make themselves known through the application of different questions asked and angles applied to any location? How, then, are the limited and only partially functioning universalisms that allow new relational configurations to assert themselves with force and direction set aside (Nielsen and Simone 2016)? In order to productively respond to such crucial questions, we need to fully allow the city to theoretically operate on itself. In a nutshell, we need to rewild the city.

The twists and turns of urban relationalities

So what does such a rewilding look like? First, we have to consider how the implantation of the axioms of capital within specific contexts requires their translation into the local vernaculars of how things are done. Faced with the problematic

disjunctions precipitated in the confrontation with capital, these local vernaculars must find ways of ‘announcing’ or performing themselves within these axioms. This process of announcing goes beyond the tropes of resistance to include ironic simulations, repurposing or exaggeration. If this is the case, the generalizability and singularity of urban formations can be narrated but not without causing a particular spatio-temporal collapse (Tadiar 2016).

We can talk all we want about the urban being a constantly recalibrated rescaling of how places, materials, productions, transportations and bodies are connected to each other. We can talk about how new operational territories are formed through finding ways to integrate spaces, actors, resources and labour. But the resultant relations of urbanization are not just those of integration, subsuming or fragmentation. Something else happens through a complex mirroring process, a series of parallax recursions and gazes that suffuse ambiguity into the differentiating inscription.

For example, in some of the popular neighbourhoods of Jakarta various constellations of residents operate as ‘holding companies’, develop local forms of ‘securitization’ with varying statuses and ambiguities of land, design ‘ownership’ and ‘tenancy’ systems that are concretized laterally over a patchwork of ‘properties’ and ‘residencies’. Rooms, apartments and workshops for rent are sometimes bundled into packages in which different small-time entrepreneurs invest as a portfolio, and the components of different portfolios are then constantly traded so that each might have balanced advantages in terms of location, availability, length of stay, square footage and so forth. What would seem to be the vernaculars and purview of financial capital actually operate as home-grown economic arrangements, raising the question of who mirrors what, or who is doing what to whom. Many of the long-honed processes of auto-construction could viably be seen as precursors of the intricate architectures of derivatives and other financial products. And while these homologies may indeed be those of a fanciful imagination, there are plenty of instances where the social productions of urban majorities have shaped what are valorized as critical market relations (Gago 2017; Mezzadra and Nielsen 2019).

While we can be sure that relations both compose and are composed, depending on the scale of observation, we can never be certain about which of these dimensions we are observing at any given moment. This uncertainty goes beyond the cybernetic architecture of multiple causation or the vagaries of quantum physics. Rather, it indicates the complexity of relations themselves. It indicates the ways in which the components may constantly be exchanging their positions as ‘figure’ and ‘ground’ (Wagner 1987). It indicates the ways in which the intersection of things simultaneously prompts the ‘impersonation’ of the features of relating objects, while at the same time adding dimensions and details to each object that are not ‘properly’ their properties.

This is a relational economy informed by specific idioms of kinship and subject-making. But these idioms also recursively twist, turn and invert as possibilities inherent in the *technical* character of the idiom itself. As such, they are not necessarily descriptive of what relations ‘actually are’. Wagner (2001) talks about how people are always ‘artifactualizing’ themselves. They find particular devices through which the complexities of social relations always operate on themselves in a flow of analogies to turn themselves into other relations so that certain aspects are figured as obvious and certain. These obvious realities are simply the reworking of others and will be subsequently reworked. For example, households, long anchored to particular tropes or structures of kinship, can be alternately experienced as ‘companies’, battle zones, regimes, ‘musical’ ensembles, social factories and so forth.

Relationships are always moving across other relationships, turning themselves inside out and outside in, opening up possibilities and closing other possibilities down. Each must be ‘lured’ into particular appearances in a changing landscape of visibility. At the same time, relations are twisting each other in particular kinds of knots. Sometimes they act as analogies or necessary contradictions for each other so as to prefigure particular kinds of relations as essential to the exclusion of others. Again, for example, there is no inevitable or necessary reason why kinship relations should be the predominant locus around which households are formed. But they become critical metaphors for each other (Sahlins 2011a, b). Kinship is turned into household that continues to ‘turn’ to kinship as its moral, expressive underpinning. Similarly, neighbourhoods adapt ‘familial’ feelings and obligations. This prefiguring of the social field by particular distributions of analogy and their visibilities acts as a mirror image of a place’s sociality, even as the substrates of this coherent image require intricate, horizontal connections that cut across the norms of kinship behaviour (Wagner 2001).¹

One of the important discoveries – something that operated as almost a kind of public secret – from the recent pandemic is that households are not what we assumed them to be. Far from being characterized by clearly delineated kinship relations, in many popular neighbourhoods of Cairo, Karachi and Mumbai, households, often ranging up to 30–40 persons, are intricate and extensive relations stemming from multiple marriages and liaisons, different work and occupational relationships, affiliations of convenience.

Nevertheless, residents must also find ways to pay attention to or concretize the ensuing relationships themselves. In Strathern’s ethnographies (e.g. 2014, 2020), relations can unfold without overarching reasons for doing so. They can seemingly expand to encompass all kinds of actors and situations, from those among neighbours, clans and distant locales. But if relations are to be activated and recognized as operative in the day-to-day lives of given individuals and societies, there must be some means for them to be recognized. This occurs only if they assume a

particular *form*, a particular aesthetic that enables them to properly appear and to be properly recognized.

While Western economies may make the terms explicit for recognizing the specific characters of objects, for the Melanesians Strathern (2011) worked with, objects exuded their own animate powers, their own means for personifying relations. Engagements had to be crafted, elicited and designed so that people could see who they were; so that there could be something to be exchanged – perspectives about things – that were products of the relationship itself. People have to be able to see, rather than simply be within, relationships, and visibility requires particular forms.

In cities, residents often initiate particular activities, such as making markets, improving the built environment, managing festivals or undertaking small entrepreneurial activities as a way of signalling, of making visible a willingness to explore collaborations that go beyond the function of these activities themselves. These activities become devices for finding a proper form capable of eliciting an exchange of perspectives. Someone might start selling loose cigarettes in front of their house, ostensibly to earn extra income. But in some instances that we have observed, the primary function of this act is to signal to neighbours a willingness to collaborate on other local economic projects without the need to make a definitive discursive commitment to such an objective or to frame such willingness as a request.

Residents then often explore ways of being together that rely upon making the relationships visible in the moment. But they also can serve as a platform for residents to feel out the possibilities of collaboration that are not yet and perhaps never will be visible. As such, what they have in common is an interplay of the visible and invisible. For it is not just vision that is at work but also atmospheres of feeling and intuitive experimentation with relational devices and interfaces that will often lack permanence and solidity.

As such, commonality reflects particular relationships between knowing and affect and between intersubjective and material conditions. The experience of residing or inhabiting depends on the elaboration of a sense of knowing things and others and of particular ways of being known. Reflective of specific practices of witnessing, inquiring and caring for, knowing is not simply an epistemological protocol but an interwoven series of cultural practices. These practices not only attain confirmations of recognition and mutual understanding but put together an experiential milieu through which people feel confident about how they are or may be connected to a world (Degnen 2013).

Relations as inhabitants

So the possibilities of rewilding rest with what happens when we consider the dynamics of such relationships as themselves key inhabitants of the urban, for

inhabitation reflects a constant process of creating and shifting boundaries and interfaces of all kinds. Interstices are also created in this process. These interstices – between inside and outside, before and after, them and us, here and there, formal and informal – become a critical feature of urban space. In perhaps what could be construed as a movement of reflexive visibilization, they prompt the city to theorize on itself in ways that may become momentary stepping stones for new and pulsating modalities of urban life.

Significantly, the working out of the city's interweaving relationalities also involves actions untaken. To illustrate this, consider that individuals have to establish a sense of proportionality: What is it about themselves and their capacities which are to be extended to particular others, and what do these acts of self-extending indicate about what is being withheld, in part, as a lure to incite the engagement of others? Relationships are 'pitches', glimpses, seductions, barriers. And so this working out of proportionality is not merely the calculations of self-interest. It is also the sculpting of a field of affordances that shape the connections, interdependencies and autonomies persons conceive and operationalize with each other. So any notion of the 'social' is always 'out of joint', never assumed as a stabilized whole. Rather, it is an ongoing 'wide-lens' deformation of systemic entities, as individuals are the carriers of social affordances and memories, and societies are the parts of ongoing transformations of personhood (Corsín-Jiménez 2008, 2013).

This notion of affordances and working out of proportionality is particularly evident in cities where the operations of formal governance institutions are sometimes constrained by limited consolidations of authority or by laws and policies largely inapplicable to the characteristics of the populations and urban dynamics at work – places where residents largely have to build residences, livelihoods, transportation and administration on their own. These processes of auto-construction depend upon intricate ways of allocating land and opportunities, working out divisions of labour and complementary effort (Corsin Jiménez 2017; see also Smart 2001). It is a matter of enabling individuals to experiment with their own singular ways of doing things but in concert with others. At times, in an intricate management of social visibilities, residents would autoconstruct their neighbourhoods in the ways they anticipated official planners and state ministries would want them to, diligently measuring plots and allocating public space. What looked like the manifestations of individuated private property was then really the concretization of a very different kind of collective process.

Thus, governance institutions are built not only as ministries, bureaus or town halls but these do indeed exist and exert a substantial force with their documents, deliberations and decrees. But 'institutions' are also distributed across differential relationships and spaces. In other words, 'institutions' exist in a dispersed rather

than centralized form. Institutional functions exist within and across a landscape of relationships of residents as they actively parcel and settle land, elaborate provisioning systems and attempt to insert themselves in the flows of materials, food, skills and money (Calişksan and Callon 2009; Jacobs 2012). As more formal institutions continue to exist, at least in name, how these are related to such distributed institutions is a key challenge for residents, a matter of navigating the ‘interstices’. Governance is therefore not to be considered as a detached agency that ‘works’ or steers the social in a given direction. It is more like a repetitive waveform that the social under certain favourable conditions might assume (Andersen et al. 2015; Nielsen 2011).

The conundrums of orientation

If rewilding the urban – finding new possibilities of inhabitation – depends upon relational economies whose definition may never be fully known, what is it possible to imagine? How do these economies play out in conditions where the dispossession of belonging, identity and assets are very concrete? How do the inhabitants of the urban mediate between the compulsion to turn bodies and lives into logistical instruments – being at the ‘right place at the right time’ unimpeded by history – and slow circulation down sufficiently to be able to reflect on their own actions? How do they maintain some ground in order to build a sense of memory and produce images and narratives about where they come from? For such are the means to anticipate possible forward trajectories in order to decide to act, as opposed to succumbing to paralysis or constant anxiety.

Despite the persistence of the anchors of belonging, belonging is implanted in ground that either is being constantly repositioned, resettled and rearticulated (Diouf and Fredericks 2014; Geschiere 2005). We are compelled to produce an image that we know what we are, to constantly add on to this knowledge and to be prepared to be many different things simultaneously. But we are also ‘instructed’ to never forget where we come from and to articulate all of these possibilities to diverse channels of indebtedness.

We are made to feel that we live on borrowed time, that we will only get anywhere by leveraging opportunities, rather than earning them. But this compulsion is not easy to address in situations where you have a good idea about where you are since everywhere looks pretty much the same, but where, at the same time, so much effort is expended in making that look of similarity deceiving. Any place can be so thoroughly networked to different sentiments, evaluations, ratings and operations that there is no way it can seemingly stand on its own, be itself. Yet,

every domain and resident is also implicitly asked to ‘be themselves’, to have some kind of unique ‘address’ (Galloway and Thacker 2007). At one and the same time, we are supposed to be self-sufficient, find sufficiency in being a bigger and better self, but to also understand the insufficiency of such a position, since we are tied down to so many relationships to other things.

This conundrum is reflected in the intricacies of information economies and how they configure new spatial dimensions of the vertical and the horizontal. In what Benjamin Bratton (2016) calls ‘the stack’, promiscuities of all kinds are superimposed on each other – the confluence of interoperable standards-based complex material-information systems. Each place, person or locale is the superimposition of proliferating signifying systems. What something is or could be, what it can do and where and with what it can relate is something increasingly multiple, all over the place. It takes place in such a way that no place belongs to any particular ‘sovereign decision’. There can be no easy, even if arbitrary, declarations of what belongs or what does not; about who is friend or enemy. The various ways in which entities are located and addressed, in various networks of information, means that there can be many layers of sovereign claims over the same site, person or event. Bratton (2016) includes the example of ubiquitous computing, which will soon be capable of assigning unique addresses to a near-infinite variety of shifting forms of relationships between things. Also, he cites the ways in which augmented reality directly projects a layer of indexical signs upon a given perceptual field of vision and literally dislocates it from any single set of coordinates.

Similarly, when every site, every location becomes not simply the afterglow of averages, samples and approximation, but can be directly accounted for and mapped, they are the ‘starting points’ for all kind of emergent relationships and configurations. As it is possible to zero-in on anything and to subject it to demographic, economic, biochemical and meta-ecological probabilities, what that place is becomes the stacking of a plurality of models and frameworks that produce opacity rather than any kind of knowledge. The excess production of localization has thus become something that both spans across physical distances and tightly packs many dimensions into any place as ever-shifting sentiments. Heightened data dependency, far from expanding the capacities for visualization, can also generate blindness.

Contemporary attempts to quantify the positional space in which urban inhabitants interact, assign its own unique value in relationship to all others, deprive them of the knowledge that all meanings are partial and that ‘elements that are part of one system are also, in another dimension, conceived as part of others’ (Strathern 1992: 188). In the post-plural world of the ‘stack’, then, there may be no order to take for granted; no plurality of perspectives gazing upon a singular reality. But what is offered to inhabitants is instead a dissolution of wholes into

parts that cannot be reassembled as anything other than as so many parts, but everyone is assigned a particular ‘value’ in every unfolding relationship. Similarly to Brighenti’s (2014) point of ‘indexing visibilities’, we all then know where we stand in relation to everyone else. But for what reason or purpose is actively made elusive or irrelevant.

The excess production of localization and the surplus of meaningfulness, instead of providing more tools to work with, produces unease and ramifying uncertainty. This is not the anomie of urban alienation but rather the intensive proximity of the surplus of knowledge to sheer noise. In Jia Zhangke’s frequently cited film *The World*, the entirety of the world is made available in Beijing through replicas of famous monuments, wonders and sites, accompanied by glitzy shows where performers are drawn from around the world. This spectacle of globalization, of everything brought near and localized, demands the brutality of cheap construction labour and service work that borders on and often literally becomes prostitution.

While the film entails many characters and relations, it particularly focuses on a friendship without reason or basis between a Chinese and a Russian performer. Neither knows the other’s language, but nevertheless they develop an intense intimacy and are attuned to each other’s sufferings, anxieties and hopes. Here the ‘world’ is brought to this space of intimacy, for otherwise there is nothing much to it. To the two interlocutors, the world becomes a proportioning of intimate distances laid out in a positional space that is both too big and too small for both of them to coexist in (Stasch 2009).

In his commentary on the film, Eric Hayot (2012) explains how ‘the world’ is now made visible not as the configuration of a global as opposed to a local space, but as a series of stories within stories. It is of the world within the world but one that neither represents, imitates, embodies nor reflects but rather is just a citation whose machinery is still run by bodies desperately trying to act on a fantasy that they are really of a larger, cohering world. After all, Hayot states, ‘what is globalization, with its perfect capture of the fantasized relation between present and future, but the current now of History’ (2012: 100).

So the conundrum of urban life is how to manage the interstices between the accelerated and extensive circulation of things – a process which produces a density of dispositions and a continuous unsettling of identifications – and the control, and thus stabilization, of a population that renders bodies traceable, legible and available for specific functions (Adams 2019; Leszczynski 2016). If the settling of accounts, that is, the capacity to tell how people are related to each other, is potentially unsettled by spiralling circuits of mobility and exchange, how do urban bodies coalesce in ways that incorporate the overall fluid densities of urban life? How do they deter expending inordinate amounts of energy defending particular

modalities of being social from such urban volatility and thus enable them to recalibrate their coexistence with each other in ways that adapt to continuous movement but in a manner in which they continue to experience themselves as enjoined? How do particular itineraries operate as narratives of movement, a constantly updated archive of how people move through each other's lives?

These are the challenges that inform experiments with urban popular economy around the word: all those efforts to build collectively run living situations without everyone having to adhere to an established set of protocols.² All those efforts to produce cheap things for people who otherwise could not afford them by keeping labour cheap but in a way that is not exploitative, that allows plenty of room for workers to do other things. All of those efforts to participate in political decision-making and planning where disagreement does not necessary result in compromise but in figuring out how very different scenarios can take place at the same time, sharing the same budget and administrative space (Gago 2018; Gaiger 2019).

The elaboration of the social that mediates these questions then cannot simply be the implementation of specific laws or structures of commonality. Rather, the social as experiential milieu is an economic matter of combining whatever is at hand whether the elements seem to go together or not; combining ways of tying things down and letting things go. Such combinations are not the products of prescribed formulas; they are not pieces of a puzzle predesigned to fit with others. Rather, combinations reflect expenditures of effort, of an inexplicable affording of interest, enthusiasm and patience on the part of individuals and groups to processes and events that they do not fully understand or view as relevant to them.

In the context of urban life, with so many bodies, events, dimensions and transactions to pay attention to that touch human and non-human residents in so many varying ways, the dilemma is always one of alignment, of how one operates in the 'crossfires' of such postplural intersections. To be sure, adaptations cannot rely upon defensive or immunological manoeuvres alone. They also require active assertions of emplacement, opportunism, belonging and risking in the face of all the things that can draw a person into various associations beyond their control. This always entails what actors will show of themselves and what they are up to; what they try to keep away from scrutiny, or how they may flood the field with dissimulations and contradictory images (Benjamin 2008, Berlant 2016; Knox 2017; Corsín-Jiménez and Estalella 2014; Richmond 2018).

For the notion of a self-possessed individual, an individual in possession of their faculties, and who may demonstrate who they are through the character of their possessions, such inoperable visibility, that is, 'I am not what I appear to be but always take me for what I appear', entails a kind of dispossession. Such dispossession is always enfolded into the efforts to shape some form of commonality.

Yet, these expenditures that risk dispossession, these proximities, feeling out of attachments, the working out of conditions to coexist, the obligations to extend one to another and to continuously invent new terms for collaboration are the grounds of urban sociality (Nielsen 2012). As such, this emphasis on expenditures of effort, of a surplus of feeling, energy and regard, the obligations to give and receive, to consolidate and invest, to risk, update and revise are the bases of an economy of relations. Here, relations themselves generate economic value that underpins the capacity of a collective to continue to be what they are through a process of continuous transformation – at times volitional and at others involuntary.

Amidst the jumbles of interstices, enclosures and openings that ensue from the interaction of materials and metabolisms, power is mobilized through efforts to posit ‘architectures of possibilities’. These architectures are of specific lines of association and distancing; gathering up things as mutually implicated and affected, while separating off other possibilities and matters viewed as disallowed and irrelevant. The density of the city is not just those of human bodies but of the multiplicity of possible associations among bodies and various materials (Grosz 2001). While state and municipalities may try to steer these associations in particular ways, even through the use of the basic elements of zoning, citizenship responsibilities and infrastructure provision, there has always been something that slips through, leaks out, overflows or generates long shadows. Indeed, as Foucault (2009) reminded us, the strategies of localization that are put to work by overlapping and often inconsistent logics and logistics of accumulation can never keep up with the spilling over of life and place themselves; they can never quite contain what actually takes place.

Unsubsumable visibilities: Stories that the city tells to itself about itself

Rewilding thus points to the situation where there is something outside of relations based on an economy of affordability, outside of the relationship of human sustenance with any immanent extinction that creeps into the very interior of human life. This is what Eugene Thacker (2012) has called the sense of ‘black illumination’. By this he means a sense of the unhuman which is completely indifferent to human life, which takes no regard of it, yet is a critical aspect within human life. As such, it is a source of incessant unease but also a propulsion to look outward, to always see something else that has nothing to do with us. The question remains, however, what the workings might be of those indifferent formations, tendencies and relational figurations that exist at the heart of the urban but resist the pervasive operations of localization.

Indeed, despite the cascade of inscriptive manoeuvres there remains something about the urban that ‘hits you in the face’, an aesthetics of appearance where things can be anything whatsoever. This aesthetics is not driven by a single force, does not match up in a point-by-point correspondence to empirical conditions but exists as an underlying reverberation, an impulsion to continuously ‘move on’ that overrides the very registers of value that are ‘negotiated’ at the intersection of capital and vernacular processes. This is not about the assemblage of hybrid urbanizations, mutant forms or cyborg worlding. Rather, it is a continuous proliferation of non-subsumable details incapable of being made ‘inter-operable’ in the intersection of a generalizable, planetary scalable urban form and its instantiation within specific fields.

Devices do exist that order and individuate bodies through plotting out discernible and repeated trajectories of movement and livelihood and that organize them in terms of property and properties, kinship and clearly identified affiliations. Bodies and activities are territorialized and subsequently posed to take up particular kinds of association and take on particular kinds of characteristics (Engin et al. 2020; Kitchin et al. 2015). Infrastructures establish their own modes of connectivity, division and visibility. But there are also ‘trajectories of force’ that gather up, disperse and enfold bodies in ways that exceed these categorizations, open up new possibilities to accumulate resources, generate value and sometimes dispossess residents of their forms of identity and anchorage altogether. How these forces of emplacement and dispersion are combined constitutes a relational economy, neither strictly virtuous nor destructive.

According to Claire Colebrook,

To live is to tend towards *indifference*, where tendencies and forces result less in distinct kinds than in complicated, confused and dis-ordered partial bodies. Why have we fetishized the differences of our own making, and why are we so sure that we know about the differences that make a difference, or the differences that are readable?

(2015: 5)

Instead of manifesting our fundamental attachment to the natural or materials beyond our species form, the city rather amplifies our detachment from a confused, tumultuous world neither beneficent nor destructive, without any clear intention or direction. The vernaculars and tools through which we have attempted to impose a sense to things are themselves fundamentally detached from any specific meaning or objective, yet we have relied upon them to chart relations among things, to locate ourselves and measure our supposedly ‘forward’ movement. Not dissimilarly, making the urban landscape ever more spectacular and self-operating

conceals all of the mundane technical instruments and labour necessary to keep the machine running.

Cities contain layers of inoperable relations that give to the urban its unique aesthetics without themselves ever being actualized. They are the stories that the city tells to itself about itself. Sometimes only as a whisper that cannot be heard by anyone except the narrator for whom there is no difference between telling a story and listening to it. These urban narrations seem timeless precisely because they change at the same pace as the worlds of which they are part. Not unlike the myths of certain Amerindian tribes, they ‘readjust’ themselves in order to produce the ‘least resistance to the flow of events’ (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 610).

Inoperable relations reset the scale of the city, then, by ceaselessly changing the modulations of social life as if they were always already in sync with a pulsating aesthetics that manages to desist actualization. As the city’s identical but constantly mutating anti-twin, the city’s numerous clusters of inoperable relations constitute shadow economies of urban affordances that both human and non-human inhabitants are captured by but which cannot themselves ever be captured.

For example, in one neighbourhood of the Tanah Sereal district in Jakarta, residents who largely work in a self-constructed produce market and who collectively manage the proceeds have invested a large portion of their proceeds in constructing a huge building the size of a football field. They have been working on this building for nearly a decade and refuse to finish it – constantly changing it around, not knowing how to decide for sure what it will be used for, how to calculate the apportioning of the space according to either the money or labour that individual residents have invested. After a decade they remain uncertain as to what it is that will be eventually completed. There is no clear end in sight, yet the efforts of the residents have generated many ‘side-effects’. Not far away stands the ‘official market’, fully staffed by municipal officials but completely empty. Yet, in the parking lot in front, from mid-afternoon to early the following morning stands the nerve centre of a market that has expanded throughout the surrounding area, over which the market officials nominally preside, if not necessarily run. Even though the ‘real economy’ is elsewhere, a lot of attention is still paid to the void of the official market, with constant reference to what the ‘market’ is doing, as if it is a black box replete with secrets and mystical power.

Or take the small movable stall from where salaries are paid out to Mozambican workers who are hired by a Chinese construction consortium to work as day labourers on the new national airport in Maputo, Mozambique’s capital (Bunkenborg et al. 2022) (Figure 6.1). Without any viable alternatives, the young Mozambican men accept the arduous and often dangerous work conditions as a means of securing a minimum income for themselves and their families. To the young men, a relationship between employer and employee has to involve the

mutual recognition of equal rights and needs and thus allows for a considerable degree of flexibility in the organization of everyday interactions in an unstable socio-economic universe.

During extended periods of illness or in situations of bereavement, employees are usually allowed to take time off and are offered their salaries in advance in order for them to take care of unexpected costs. According to the workers, such employer-employee relationships are based on mutual trust and intimate knowledge of each other's personal lives, which cannot be exposed to friends and colleagues. Indeed, keeping secret the terms of an individual agreement is what gives to the relationship its strength and viability. The Chinese superiors, however, refuse to engage in such intimate relationships. From the small stall placed in front of the new national airport terminal once every fortnight, salaries are paid out as wads of cash for everyone to see. Before receiving their salaries, the young Mozambican workers have to wait in line from where they observe how the Chinese accountant handles the money and puts their salaries on the counter as if on public display.



FIGURE 6.1: View of the construction site at the Maputo International Airport in Mozambique. Photo by Morten Nielsen.

The Mozambican workers argue that there can be no personal relationships made with these superiors. Working at the construction site results in hardship and sweat (*suor*) and produces only a further desire for making viable relationships elsewhere through which to establish a decent life.

Cities often conceal those inoperable relations that they also cannot do without. When urban positions and locations are stripped of their opacity and thus can be accounted for, they seem to enter functioning relational economies that compose and are composed by the city. As such, the very act of elicitation will supposedly actualize the expected functional socio-technical forms. But relational configurations constantly emerge, which do not manage to take care of themselves and which are therefore incapable of conveying the relational predictability that otherwise synaptically connects detached stacks and socio-temporal layers in the city. While being conjured through unique elicitory processes, such sets of urban relations assert themselves more like inconsistent or even heterogeneous potentialities that never quite make it in the open (Wagner 1987). And still, they do not disappear. Until the moment arises when they no longer have a disturbing or even disruptive effect on the movements, directions and orientations of urban residents (both human and non-human), inoperable relations endure but can be grasped only as the awkward realization that urban life is mirroring an original that might never have existed (Taussig 1993).

Conclusion

In recent years there has been greater emphasis on extending notions of the public to non-human entities. This is viewed as perhaps the most accessible way to rewild the urban, to recalibrate inhabitation to a more appropriate scale of human positioning and resource use. This move seeks to disrupt the stringency of a biopolitics that seeks only to extract a surplus of power from living things or that associates generative forces only with circumscribed notions of a 'subject' (Esposito 2012). For example, the assumption here would be that there is something about urban life that makes it always in need of some kind of redemption, as if urban residents are by definition unable to figure out how to do something productive with the situations they face and the materials they can use. The exigency for substantive urban transformation, even if perhaps necessary, often occludes all of the ways in which the urban is being transformed all of the time in the everyday lives of residents.

Not dissimilarly to Perce's (1997) idea of the infra-ordinary, it is at the level of ordinariness where the fact that the power of the meaningful becoming increasingly meaningless does not seem to matter. Ordinary life in ordinary cities, to a large extent, has little to do with us, with our search for meaning or for the meanings

we use to motivate or explain what we do. The endurance of the urban majority cited earlier rests precisely in this capacity to dissociate from the imperative to make everything fit, to generate coherent images of itself and instead continuously upend stable meanings in favour of availing person, places and things to all kinds of different uses and values.

Conversely, the city necessarily must be good for us no matter how much its 'realities' are augmented. The city will never be the city we know. If the city that is made by us always leaves us deficient and vulnerable to dangers from which we must defend, but at the same time, no matter what, it is the culmination of everything that we are able to be, then the very act of ensuring our survival is that which renders us most vulnerable.

NOTES

1. The importance of analogy then demonstrates how relational economy emphasizes, though is not limited to, the 'non-contractual' dimensions of urban life. It is not subject to the relationships between already constituted, autonomous entities that contractual forms assume. The concept shifts the emphasis of social life from constellations of predetermined formats and interactions among cohered entities – such as individuals and 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. 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 other's orbits and establish the conditions that enable them to intensify their exchanges with each other (Protevi 2009).
2. From the feminist collectives of Argentina that rearrange the infrastructures of social reproduction, from childcare, education, household maintenance, to the night produce markets of Jakarta where carters, sellers, truckers, deliverers, packers all know each other's jobs so intimately that they continuously circulate through them, to the vast reassemblage district of Seelampur in Delhi where electronic waste is repurposed into all kinds of 'new' products, popular economies straddle contradictory logics of production to continuously remake themselves.

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