

Beyond Inhabitation: An excursus

AbdouMalik Simone

A proper place?

What is the proper designation of the inhabitant situated within contemporary processes of urbanization? As the urban extends across more heterogeneous spaces and categorizations, not as a univocal entity or dynamic but as a multiplicity of protocols, genealogies, imbrications and forms, so too it is increasingly difficult to discern with confidence the salient signifiers capable of operating with both breadth and discretion in depicting urban life. Of course, urban contexts differ greatly in their composition and character, and the sheer extremities of situations inevitably pose questions as to any generalization. For there are combatants, consumers, denizens, migrants, workers, precariat, civil servants, casual laborers, service workers, domestics, freelancers, professionals, sex workers, diplomats, businesspersons, police, officials, hustlers, thieves, dealers, artists, musicians, homeless, children, casualties, physicians, nurses, infirmed, technicians, engineers, and so forth.

Most everyone is a citizen of some place but not necessarily the place they inhabit. What rubric can subsume each of these roles into the commonality of “the inhabitant?” Particularly at a moment when once again there is an infatuation with the narcissisms of minor differences, where people, each with a substantial claim to and stake in belonging, often do not see themselves as related beyond being antagonists to each other. Indeed, what connects the inhabitant who rarely leaves the confines of their household or micro-territory and those that are rarely

at “home.” What connects those whose feet rarely touch the ground and those whose feet traverse rivers of mud and debris. There are cities whose distinctiveness collapses in a homogenous blur, where the inhabitant could be anywhere, as there are divergences within and among cities that point to radically discordant temporalities.

While a pragmatic accord may entail recognition that inhabitants will inevitably differ, reflecting the purported ethos of an urban cosmopolitical, this might be too easy a way out of any conundrum, for differences are far from being equal or even proportionate. Here, the problem is that a liberal recognition of diversities is largely based on the primacy of the individual as a dissimulation of a self-contained unit that embodies and carries with it most all of what one needs to know about how specific performances will be enacted in urban life. This is reinforced by accounting procedures, modes of address, loci of comparisons, and assignments of culpability. Subsequent claims of rights and responsibilities and affirmations of entitlement are largely made based on being specific kinds of individuals, and this despite how evident neural networks, technical prosthetics, and collective cognition are extended into and across the urban fabric. Urban systems largely remain informed with a fabricated ontology based on whiteness, which has long sought to solidify the locus of authenticity and freedom as the recognition of the self as the predominant mode of property. Here, the individual self is the proper mode of being in the world, and that the reflexive consideration of the self is a determination in the last instance of an ultimate veracity—as in one’s own “truth.” “Self-determination” is recursively instituted as its own continuous prophecy, where dignity, moral valor, and fulfillment act as superseding values that must not only be preserved at all costs but also become a measure of all costs.

While the individual as standard bearer for the urban inhabitant might appear universal, it is fundamentally at odds with the excess and indetermination that characterizes urban life despite the advances made in calculating every move and maneuver, every impact factor, every relation among statistically relevant criteria. Beyond the biopolitical impetus that weighs whose lives are expendable in relation to those afforded protection, even the notion of a cultivated “population” reverts to an obsession with individualized exceptions and pre-emptions, where specific bodies are assessed for the likelihood of causing trouble or generating profit. While some bodies are availed affordances without negotiation, others must claw their way through incessant negotiability for the smallest increments of enhancement. Even when the latter constitute most of the population of many cities, the biopolitical assurance of “well” populations recede in face of the insistence on individual eligibility and worthiness. The excess of urban productivity, beyond its capture as surplus value—that which is to be expended without rational—is compartmentalized into the banal litanies that no matter how bad a person’s situation may be, that with determination, they can exceed those conditions and materialize a more viable, proper life.

Yet such litanies are a waste of excess, an excess that is indeed meant to be wasted but in terms of it embodying an exorbitant uncertainty as to what it could do, something beyond meaning; an exorbitance that constitutes a deluge of dangerous proximities, of a blurring of the virtuous and toxic, or a kind of “dirty computing” to invoke Janelle Monae. In its extensiveness, then, the urban, long used to hiding many of the details of its operations, no longer is effective in occluding both its mundane procedures and waywardness. Often overbuilt, overtaxed, overused, under-serviced, and overly leveraged, built environments, no matter how pristine and intricately managed, commonly face climatic excesses, illicit uses, sudden spillovers of waste or implosive vectors of entropic jouissance.

The capacity to format, formulate, and inform is so tethered to the maximization of individual efficacy and enjoyment that built environments erupt in seemingly inexplicable urges for destruction.

When that Instagram moment is dissolved, there is no longer any reason for something to endure, leading to specialization in continuous effacement, even exhumation, as if what is to be disattended to never existed in the first place. It is increasingly difficult to remember what specific neighborhoods looked like even when the observer is aided with vast expanses of digitalized archives capable of engendering perfect replicas when documentation does not exist. One perfect image substitutes for the other, desiccating the entire notion of perfection where the valued thing is the act of infinite substitution rather than the thing or image itself. Everyone may be entitled to their 15 minutes of fame, but it is viewed as unreasonable to even hope for more. Not dissimilarly, the renderings of premium built environments often adorn the walls of realizations that fall far short; as one occupant of a now ghost town luxury development in Sihanoukville, Cambodia put it, “as long as we have a wall to hang it (the rendering) on, it does not matter how the thing actually turned out.” Here the excessive intentions, plans, and fantasies of developers are instrumentalized to acculturate consumers to the perfection of inadequacy. This is especially the case if buildings are equipped with infinity pools and machines for individualized workouts (as well as mortgages with built in workarounds).

Perhaps then it is only possible to see the excesses, the spilling over, the profusions of sense without meaning in the most desperate of places, whose excesses are not a matter of dystopian aesthetics but of the ordinariness of tenuous orderings of the disparate. As Japhy Wilson points out in his depiction of a once utopian city in the Ecuadorian Amazon,

The mundane rituals of commerce, consumption, rest, and recreation are performed amid a mute carnival of disposed and degrading objects, beneath a black rush of descending vulture wings. As the waters at last begin to rise, the piles of refuse that had accumulated over the long months of the dry season drift out from their random resting places to choke the emerging canals, which are thronged with motorized canoes laden with the plundered riches of the wild rivers that writhe around the city. The resurrected garbage sprawls into a surrealist collage of obsolete commodities, in which the cheerful colors of once desired things shine through a dark humus of disintegrating matter (Wilson 2023, 725)

The Exorbitance of Blackness

In contrast to the “white infrapolitics” of urban life, blackness is “exorbitant materiality” as David Marriott (2022) puts it. It is what the urban cannot afford but also cannot do without, so that the operations of blackness can never be generative in any clear sense, nor can they be anything determinate. For even though we may know that the urban could not come into existence or endure without blackness, we do not with any clarity know what it does. It is possible to discern its operations only as fragments, affective inclinations, the gnawing feeling that something has been left out. Here blackness is not a racial identity per se; it is not a categorical equivalent or alternative to whiteness; it is not exclusively territorialized within a specific status or even body. Far from being a defining characteristic of a particular population, blackness is everywhere, not as a transcendental ontology or rubric, but as an *earthly matter*, a modality through which the earth comes to matter to those who dwell in it, and where dwelling is

geared toward mastery. Blackness is the earth's refusal of such mastery, it enunciates itself as its suspension, its endless night of doubt.

The blackness of inhabitation is that which is always *beyond inhabitation*, for it does not seek a consolidated place. While it may remind us of the incompleteness of human "nature", the inadequacy of all that has been established as adequate, or as the interminable pursuit of adequacy, blackness offers nothing as an alternative. What it offers rather is a constant struggle to refuse whatever is on offer, to ensure a space where offerings offer nothing specific or rather something excessively specific such that no program can be formed. Blackness is an inoperable operation—ways of being definitive in a world that is always in the process of coming to an end and beginning again in a repetition that renounces both sameness and difference, in favor of a blur that conveys its own solidity without apparent empirical underpinnings.

Returning to Marriott's (2023) reflections, blackness is that which cannot be discursively stated within the vernaculars available, yet it always intrudes upon the scene and in paradoxical fashion since the intrusion is not that of an unconscious, not that of something repressed but an affect astoundingly apparent. It is apparent not because it is meaning that happens upon us in circumstances fortuitous with it, but rather is the very effect of urban cultures predicated on the self-determination of individuals whose materialization is anchored in the system of property and propriety (da Silva 2017). It is that which is sensed as having no life on its own, that plays not part in history, that cannot be represented in any account or count. It is that from which the individual takes its "stand" (point), that from which the represented subject must differentiate itself from, that simply "is not" according to any calculus that would determine an identity (Marriott 2017).

Instead of asking, “who is the inhabitant of the urban”, perhaps a more salient question is, “where does inhabitation lie” in both the sense of a place of positioning and falsehood, where every position is in some sense false, and falseness is the condition of having a position. To go “beyond inhabitation” is not a matter of apprehending the truth of a situation but rather to exceed considerations of epistemology altogether, to relinquish the possibility of knowing for sure exactly where one is, how they got there, and what the probable future might be. For as Fanon (1967) tells us, and why, too he insists that:

the future to come makes visible an opening that has no arche, telos, or predestined end... Nothing is more deluded than the desire to reveal a truth whose essence, we assume, brings to an end all that deceives us, but only insofar as we follow it and take it as a model of an exemplarity that enthralls or marks us, for as soon as we recognize its authority we know how we in turn have been deceived—by what?—by the truths by which we deceive ourselves (179)

To go beyond inhabitation is to recognize that the city is not for us, or not just for us, no matter the substance or empirics that demonstrate just what we inhabitants did to create it. We cannot reasonably make a claim to exclusivity nor expect the urban to treat us justly, since whatever justice may be on offer cannot shake the traces of a proportionality that designates some things and bodies as more worthy than others, even if the tropes of that just posit a sense of the egalitarian.

As Jane Doe walks the heavily commercialized street full of neon lights and traffic near midnight crying inconsolably, there is no clear ontogenesis of these tears. Sure, she may have just broken up with a lover who she found had been cheating on her, but she also traverses the thick affects of the street exuding the

struggles and tears of a myriad of actants. The tears might have been withheld if not for the heavy pollution in the air or the stress of roadside hawkers desperate to make a few bucks before the two-hour commute home. The tears might have been further precipitated by the digital news on a towering billboard announcing that the death toll in Gaza had just exceeded 40,000 or might be attenuated by fond memories of cake in a bakery window like the one her mother had bought her when she was little. There are interminable lines of implication too overwhelming for any cogitating body, all which curate atmospherics of existence that are neither good or bad, that are beyond the exigencies of acting in the next moment, where decisions must be made about what to pay attention to and how those decisions are frequently made for one in ways that are incomprehensible in that moment.

Here, proportion, the relative weight of causes and effects, is an imposition upon the intrusion that is blackness, a disciplinary effort to order this intrusion in ways that implicitly accord a specific value to the thoughts and feelings experienced. The intrusion of blackness is the possibility of getting lost in a city thoroughly signposted, where digital maps guide the traveler to any location through a plurality of possible itineraries, and where there is an implicit equivalence of all places, but an unbodied equivalence constituted by graphemes rather than smells or sounds. This is an intrusion disinterested in the reigning genre of our humanity, but rather impels an inclination toward a succession of passings-by where every moment is available for something to happen beyond the confines of its infrastructural signification. It is rather an inhuman enactment that exceeds discernment, for everything becomes unrecognizable yet meaningful in terms that are never yet to come but somehow eminently familiar even as they have never transpired before. As Neyrat (2023) puts it:

The inhuman is what in us refuses – partially or totally – the future-oriented humanist process of becoming, a process that is also at play in posthumanism. What is proper to humankind may be less its capacity to turn its indetermination into a form than its capacity to avoid any sort of determination, development, or adaptation. Far from affirming some agency, the inhuman negates it in order to affirm an inoperative life and a thought for nothing. I think that one of the challenges of the ecopolitics to come will be to leave a place to the desire to stay inhuman (8).

Likewise, Derrida would propose an unconditional receptivity to an “anyone” who appears prior to any metaphysical determination as subject, person, or consciousness (Cheah 2016). Yet at the same time, blackness is that whose intrusion is to be capitalized upon, assigned distinctive purveyors; it is a danger that must be contained and instrumentalized as in the absolute service of human pretensions, plunder and accumulation. It is an intrusion to be met with unrelenting violence. Certainly, the urban with its own relentless undermining of ritual, its protracted histories of displacement, estrangement and uprooting—excavating thick social relationalities and converting them into reified discrete entities subject to exchange and speculation as to what bodies can do—is a war machine where nothing is sacred or sacrificial. Blackness lives in unyielding violence whose deployment through lynch mobs has been formally incorporated into the protocols of legal systems as the fundamentally arbitrary deliberations of culpability and punishment. Yet blackness is the aporia in the relation between settlement and unsettlement, interweaving these terms in such a way that settlement always unsettles, what unsettlement is always already converted into settlement. Yet this movement of inversions and reversals posits an infinitesimal space of unmappable potential, an abyssal and infinite beyond.

Three “black towns”

When Simone first came to Bangkok in the late 1970's, he spent several weeks at the Welcome Palace, a hotel retrofitted by African entrepreneurs who stayed in the city for various durations to trade, as the city was a center for cheap garments, electronics, and gems at that time. The hotel was a crossroads of different practices, identities, aspirations, and specializations, and the “management committee” always strived to curate productive synergies among them. The scope of management also entailed cultivating an image of heightened professionalism to the wider neighborhood, which included a major police station directly across the street. Residents were here for business; neither sex workers or narcotics were allowed, waybills and invoices were scrupulously accounted for, and guests were treated as an extended family—something not easily accomplished given different linguistic and national backgrounds.

In part, the hotel operated in a fashion not dissimilar to the *zawiyyah* of Muslim Africa, i.e. way stations where traveling traders were welcomed but also charged with a responsibility to offer information and impressions about their travels and trades, thus forging an extended body of loosely coordinated operations that could be shaped in places far from the location of the *zawiyyah* itself. As these were not places exclusively for Muslims, they often occasioned intense debate about religious matters, and the Welcome Palace was no exception as the vagaries of regimes and social movements across Africa were dissected in detail and passion. Ultimately however the ethos of the place, “this is not just for us”, proved to be its undoing, as slowly over time young Thais, at first primarily Muslims with relatives living in the politically volatile south of the country, started hanging out and engaging the place for their own discussions and quiet activisms. Despite the long-honed accords with the police, substantial quantities of narcotics

were planted and hotel subsequently closed. This coincided with the shift of Diasporic trading to China and the intensification of anti-black racism in the city.

Fast forward to 2023, during which I continued to hear vague stories from African residents in Bangkok about the demise of the Welcome Palace and the existence of a “black town” on the other side of the river in Ekkachai, a series of alleys situated below a single-track ancient railway line that continued to run once every hour and a series of canals branching off the Bang Khun Thian river. It was necessary to pass along an overgrown path along these canals to reach a heavily forested area, surrounded by huge condominiums in the background where a series of about fifty old, large wooden houses, set in the midst of intense foliage housed not only a “community” of seventy or so African households but also groups of adolescent runaways from both elite and poor families, refugees from the war in Myanmar, elderly Thai residents who had lived here all of their lives, college students and hipsters experimenting with hybrid seeds of all kinds.

While each house had its own preponderant composition, no house contained only one kind of resident. Each was left to its own devices unless they volitionally entered some kind of bartering arrangement with others—affordances that include childcare, cooking, house repair, gardening, shopping, and social gatherings. While clearly set back and apart from the surrounding urban fabric and cut off from automobile traffic, there was nothing substantially inaccessible about the place, and there are few obvious attempts to maintain a sense of secrecy. While immersed in dense foliage, “black town”—a designation fully embraced by the residents—the area seemed to be as much a creation or byproduct of the confluences of diverse infrastructures rather than a remnant of a prior time. Its relatively inaccessibility to through traffic certainly contributed to the endurance of a built environment that had not radically been altered for many

decades, but this was also amplified by the indifference of the original owners, now long deceased or absconded, to maximize land value.

While members of the Black Axe, a Nigerian criminal cartel that coordinates significant levels of drug trafficking from Bangkok across Asia, had made attempts to utilize the area, they found it both inconvenient to the business and faced intense blowback from the African residents in particular who sought to maintain distance from the cartel, and most significantly from their enablers in the police and government. It was unclear after several cursory visits just what the financial underpinnings and arrangements of black town were, about who paid rent to whom if at all, and if and how these lands were formally registered in a cadastral system. But as most inhabitants had remained in the area for at least five years or more, the trappings of sustainability were evident even as many youths returned to their families and the hipsters got degrees, jobs, and sometimes even condos.

Less an instance of marronage, black town was an intentional appropriation of an opportunity carved out in a cacophonous series of urban “developments”, something excessive of the normative formatting and spatial punctuations. During a recent visit, it was even revealed that black town was not a singular anomaly but rather a node in a series of “black towns” across the city which maintained some kind of relationships with each other.

The second black town I encountered was in Talat Noi, a neighborhood next to Chinatown and very much within the ambit of the urban core. It is historically a Thai Chinese working class neighborhood full of mechanics, car repair, and shop houses and the beginnings of gentrified hipster night life. In fact, the second black town, consisting of a back alley of contiguous shop houses that had been retrofitted to provide multiple living, work, commercial and leisure spaces across

an expanse roughly half the size of a football field, had only a single black resident, an intern at UNDP, with the remainder 28 self-identified “queer” residents of an assortment of nationalities. Some were escaping SE Asian countries that imposed heavy restrictions of queer life, and others took advantage of Thailand’s liberal immigration policies for digital nomads.

Through university-based networks, the two “towns” had been brought to each other’s attention, with the latter brokering arrangements with local restaurants and markets to gather unconsumed food that could be used for the hawkers operating out of Ekkachai, and residents from each frequently participated in conjoint social events. When asked why they referred to themselves as a “black town” when only a single resident was black, their response was that this was exactly the point, that she, the “straight” black resident, was, parodying Bateson, “the difference that made the difference”, that distinguished their extended household from other queer experiments across the city. This was something that constituted a kind of aperture in the interface among different settings and enhanced, at her very beckoning, a more open-ended relationship with local long-term residents clearly agitated at the prospect of losing their livelihoods.

We learned of another “black town” that one of the residents of Ekkachai, Ferdinand, had experienced in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, a 40-minute flight from Bangkok. The city is emblematic for being a “cartel town”, dominated by Russian, Chinese, Armenian, and Nigerian mafias. The latter have long consolidated the narcotics sector in Bangkok, with its complicities among police, government officials, and several key Thai entrepreneurs. The Black Axe and Maphites gangs use Bangkok as a base for transshipments of narcotics to Taiwan, New Zealand, and Australia in particular, at the same time as using the city’s extensive markets

to launder the proceeds and ship clothing, pharmaceuticals, and electronics throughout Africa.

There are periodic and largely symbolic interdictions, but the ease in which they operate in the Sukhumvit area of the city, where they own several hotels, apartment blocks, and nightclubs, conducting street level trade in drugs and women point to their tacit accommodation by the police. Their more recent appearance in Sihanoukville, with the almost free reign cartels are accorded to the shipping and airports and the vast laundering operations through real estate development, as well as gambling and sex tourism, is intended to reinsert their dominance in the region. Both Nigerian cartels, as well as other more minor outfits, have used what Daniel Agbibo calls, “run youth” in order to affect this expansion. These are youth who not only escape economic desperation in Nigeria, but also “run” from their ties with family, community, and local social engagements to pursue usually vague opportunities elsewhere, with only their own benefit in mind. They become the entry-level foot soldiers in the more risky and visible aspects of the sector, and in Southeast Asia are often sent out to “frontiers”—small regional towns to establish footholds and to recruit ingenuous girls for a marriage scams and other sex work.

Sihanoukville is well known for various “mining” operations, i.e. cryptocurrency and investment scams (often referred to as “pig butchering”), as well as high level, nonstop gaming, which usually consist of scores of very low-paid and ketamine fueled “miners” sitting in front of rows of computer banks in windowless hotel ballrooms surrounded by armed guards—a truly captured labor force. These operations rake in enormous profits, usually through hacking dating, online gambling, and social media sites. Nigerian syndicates have long specialized in phishing operations, and they proceed with few regulatory operations in

Cambodia, where the state itself has been largely compromised through affiliations with Chinese based illicit economies. The capture of run-youth is also facilitated with the application of the same ritual magic as that applied to sex workers who have been deceived by promises of nursing positions in Europe, where blood oaths are coerced, and the woman's family members are threatened with death if the woman does not comply and pay off heavily inflated debts purportedly incurred by the journey. A key difference with the situation of run-youth, who are seeking to escape any sense of family responsibility and who might be indifferent to any threats made, is that the failure to comply does not result in the infliction of death but rather "eternal slavery", where they are treated and housed as animals.

Yet inserted into this vast criminal machine is a "minor" operation of which our contact in Ekkachai, Ferdinand, was recently affiliated. While Nigerian gangs employ vivid symbology of blackness to express a total lack of hesitation in plundering the world as they themselves believe their origins to have been plundered, reference to a "black town" in Sihanoukville has heretofore been reserved for a decayed yet still elegant, covered veranda on the rooftop of an old hotel that overlooks the Phsar Chas market, shoddily rebuilt after a mysterious fire burned it down in 2019. Replete with the familiar computer banks that characterize the hundreds of mining operations across the rest of the city, the run-youth working the machines are pursuing entirely something else.

Managed by a Cameroonian-Cambodian woman, Cecile, with a philosophy degree from the Sorbonne, this operation specializes in delivering Wakanda to the world—developing virtual reality games that speculatively wager of different images of futurity based on the detailed stories that run-youth bring from their Nigerian neighborhoods in Benin City, Calabar, and Port Harcourt, but also beyond

Nigeria—Conakry, Douala, Abidjan, and Lome. Cecile spends hours with each new arrival, often surreptitiously pried away from other operations, including the most marginal of the African Chinese trades in Phnom Penh, to delve into their stories, childhood memories, and then converting them into storylines to be applied to what she calls a “re-perspectivation” of depictions of banlieues in Marseilles and Paris, or neighborhoods in Atlanta or Oakland. Far from the Wakanda of the movies, these re-renderings do not rely upon technophilic utopian images but a complete reworking of the tropes of ordinary life and built environments; intruding upon them an infrastructural sensibility cultivated in African “popular” neighborhoods.

While it is not clear exactly what is the business model applied, Cecile has money. She is the daughter of a Cameroonian former nightclub owner who had lived in Phnom Penh since the early days of its reoccupation following the fall of the Khmer Rouge and a grandniece of the former King Sihanouk, who was essentially paid off royally to keep a vast list of transgressions off the map as much as possible. Cecile had invested whatever inheritance she had wisely, and it was evident that she funded much of the operation in Sihanoukville from it. It also seemed that the location of what she, herself, labeled the “black town” in Sihanoukville was in part motivated by some deep hurt as both parents died in mysterious circumstances. This was made known to our contact in Ekkachai by her girlfriend at the time, a Khmer woman had escaped trafficking and had a penchant for weed-induced voluble moments with some of the staff.

Otherwise, Cecile was a model of opacity, generous to a fault and astutely sensitive to the affective implications of the stories she elicited, but otherwise taciturn, even regal in demeanor. She regularly threw lavish parties at the luxurious La Passion by Achariyak Hotel for a menagerie of “big players”, whom

she otherwise avoided. But rumor had it that she relished playing games that set these players against each other, and that she had something quite damaging on one of Hun Sen's sons that enabled her to feel protected, although Ferdinand himself found this somewhat implausible.

While working in Sihanoukville, Ferdinand had his own room in the hotel, and there was a general atmosphere of conviviality but also wariness given the not infrequent visits from some branch of some secret service and the ways the general hostility of the overall atmosphere compelled Cecile into often excessively protective gestures that limited her staff's mobility and social networking outside the confines of the operation itself. Ferdinand also wanted to eventually go home, reconcile with his family, and for this he needed the support of two cousins that had remained in Bangkok. While clearly an idiosyncratic and probably exceptional manifestation in a city almost completely given over to crime, its incipience is not completely unrelated to the suspension of the usual rules of representation, as it transgresses the boundaries of certain proprieties in order to intrude upon conventional depictions of urban life elsewhere, just as narcotics and scamming intrude upon the normative orders of representation.

Beyond the fears of uncertainty

In all these depictions of black "towns" it is possible to posit viable genealogies, a classic array of sociological tools. But both in their composition and the relations among them, there is something that exceeds these accounts, where the invocation of blackness is not simply that of an identity but rather an extensionality, a vector that is more than a line, more than a representation of articulation or flight. Rather, it is a flow constituted of its own materials. Instead of

thinking then of the inhabitant in terms of either an integral entity or aggregation, we might refer to the notions of flesh long explored by many critical black scholars.

Here, flesh is that mode of existence that is both the object of capture but also the precursor of that captive body that lends substance to the personification of that body in terms that exceed whatever the whiteness that it allows into existence can say about it. In this sense, Hortense Spillers (1987) will argue that “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh.’ While discourse and iconography may attempt to “whitewash” flesh within binary categorizations—more or less, this or that, flesh is that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment (Judy 2020). But because it cannot be concealed, it acts to both constitute the energetic reserve from which value might be appropriated without necessarily attributing to it any fixed valuation as it become fungible across all registers. There are no limits to how flesh might be appropriated or shaped; it does not belong to a specific territory; it can be marked with all kinds of signs and inscribed in all kinds of situations without regard to propriety, yet it is in the service of the proper, the mode of existence to which all forms of subjectification are referred. At the same time as it absorbs any signification and can be put to any use, it is nothing in itself and thus can lend to those who are enfleshed the materials needed to exist beyond capture. Thus, it lends blackness an extended body that is more than a collective or network, more than simply an array of individuals, but the very enactment of the urban as matter in motion.

As Rizvana Bradley (2021) brilliantly argues:

It is the sequestration and concealment of this fleshly exorbitance through the dissimulation of the “black body” which enables the conceit of the subject who belongs to the world, and for whom “the world remains isomorphic.” When I say

that it is crucial to make a distinction between black enfleshment and the dissimulation of the black body, and in the very same breath proclaim such a distinction impossible, it is to signal the hermeneutic inextricability of the two, insofar as the black body dissimulates the appearance of that which cannot in fact appear, while flesh, as the body's condition of (im)possibility, that which bears the corporeality of the unthought (41).

For it is this very notion of the unthought, that thought which so troubles the compulsion toward certainty that thinking itself must do everything possible to avoid it, which is the abyssal space beyond any possibility of inhabitation. Here, livingness is wrenched from the exigencies of life having to have a place to reside, and where that residence comes to characterize the life emplaced there. When earlier in this essay blackness was conceptualized as “earthly matters”, this livingness beyond inhabitation concerns “earth’s invisible infrastructure—those intensities making and remaking earth that typically operate below or beyond the threshold of human perception” (Parry 2019,116).

The black individual, as an exteriorization of the white desire for epistemic certainty, grounds the structuration of the transindividual relation of racialization as a pre-individual process, imprinted prior to any self-representation. The black individual therefore recognizes blackness as a “symbol of that which is always already given to be seen”—a projective facet of the colonial perceptive arrangement that preforms the black individual around the naturalized fantasy of the white subject. (Marriott, 2023, 51). This is why it is possible in liberal regimes to accord rights and opportunities to black individuals, to turn over governance of cities to black regimes, but where blackness persists as an infrastructural condition of urban life in general.

When Fanon so famously registered the young child's pointing him out as *négre*, this was not the identification of a category of either spite or curiosity, but an affirmation of the very condition in which blackness exists—i.e. the inevitability and naturalization of the very act of sensing that is unable to identify anything without being situated in a state where there can be no identities. Here the urban, driven as it is now through the hyper-production of commodified images and experiences, the intricate and nano-level assignation of values, the blurring of the material and immaterial, and relations of derivation which transgress any boundary registering the discreteness of objects, temporalities and territories, must constantly undermine the significations of whatever it produces to keep going. This very possibility is established through blackness, which both refuses all identities, the very notion of identity, yet by default comes to stand for the possibility of something more than this refusal.

As Marriott (2023) refers to in the case of black power:

Resistance therefore leaves us with no choice: it is nothing but the meaning of black life's resistance to itself. Without this resistance of life—to its meaning and esteem as life—that is, without this black power, whose finite loss becomes an infinite chance of defiance and revolt, blackness would not have the assertive force that it does—and there would be no possibility of it becoming other to itself: the black overcoming, or caesura, for which no figure exists, and in which neither law nor power can be figuratively grounded; that is to say, an x that is neither fugitive, nor para-ontological, but a catachrestic alterity that denotes a new attitude to both knowledge and possibility (315).

Individuation, according to Gilbert Simondon, is the provisional working out of problematics, and the individual an embodiment of tensions and temporary

resolutions, whose actualizations generate information that any stage of individuation cannot fully use or contain, and which provide possibilities of disjunction. As conditions and responses are remodulated, the crystallization of value –such as epistemic certainty as the way of orienting oneself in the world— becomes transduced into other arrangements. This takes place through a series of translations in which value acts as the consistency, such as, for example, the anchorage of the white individual as the determiner of their fate, who volitionally reflects on their situation as a matter of determining degrees of freedom; the sovereign individual who can then only perform that sovereignty through its curtailments in others, exercising its prerogative as a self-reflecting entity with an interior life through defining another whose entirety is read on the surface of the skin.

As Marriott (2023) points out, this is a constant non-arrival of presence, but at the same time, a never ceasing to “arrive.” This is a body always coming into presence but in terms of an absolute withdrawal of cause and ground—where Fanon’s “child” need never consider any story about how “this” *négre* got there in the first place, what their intentions or feelings might be, for all these dimensions are not applicable. Such contrasts with Nancy’s notion of the “identifiable ones”: this pebble, this community, this thought – which are not constituted as a “one” merely through the formal process of “counting as one.” Rather, the individual entity constitutes itself as “one” through a plurality of internal events and external relations, which gives it its own recognizable style. Self-identification as such, since it is not a question of an external process that identifies what counts as one, “prevents the absolute enclosure of any singularity, including infra- and supra-individual ones, since it never leads to the sublation of the internal and external edges upon which the singularity is exposed to itself and others.

Furthermore, such a movement takes place in the world, or as the world itself, the “real” world, as we call it” (Nancy 2014, 23).

This very relay among inside and outside is abruptly through blackness as an intrusion upon the world, that which both underlines and undermines the very possibility of self-identification. Again, blackness embodies an uncertainty that cannot be thought, that cannot be incorporated into the fundamental axiom of a whiteness that “thinks, and therefore ‘is’”. This relationship to uncertainty is ingrained in the very operations of the urban in the form of the inevitability of something becoming something else. In this way everything is prospectively linked; there will be no surprises or ruptures, no radical uncertainty to deal with.

For, to avoid uncertainty one need not foresee the unforeseeable or calculate what seems incalculable (Baranzoni 2024). As Whitehead said, ‘the future has objective reality in the present’ (Whitehead 1978: 215). Rather certainty is established when the consequences of the future are projected into the present and becomes certain to the extent that its consequences are projected in the present as a driving force, as something ready to be actualized thus impeding any continued operations of the virtual, where anything is just about to happen. It doesn’t matter whether the actualization takes place. Rather, it is the sense of things about to happen that results in a vitiation of the virtual, of roads that could have been taken, of ways of doing things that might be possible. Rather with this sense of inevitability, that anything is just about to happen, the present is extended infinitely without the experience of a radical break, as whiteness lives on to face another day, seemingly in control of its dispositions.

As Konings (2016, 2020) points out, capitalism operates through a constant passing along of the sources of our discontent and anxiety onto other persons,

scenarios, along this trajectory of eventual actualizations, as well as causing trouble for a host of known and unknown others. Whiteness is thus a distribution of feeling, a recognition that this constant line of things that make us anxious or uncertain is compensated for through an affiliation with a near-future always pregnant with metaphors and palliatives, new commodities to consume, new venues for self-promotion. This is not social reproduction restoring the values and capacities of one generation to another, but the materialized delusion of an eternal life constantly replenished through new actualizations of old motifs. Here, whiteness itself, empty of anything except for its own self-referentiality, demands to go on and on—something which it cannot do based on its own archive of resources, for nothing belongs to it. Its aim is to colonize the future, projecting onto the unknowable a series of probabilities that enables whatever disposition does arrive to be experienced as predefined, amenable to being fit into whatever vernaculars and aspirations we might have at the time. No wonder, as urban contexts confront the certain uncertainties of climate catastrophes, whiteness is desperately clung to as the experience of inhabiting a place, of having a place to inhabit.

This is also evident in the way that value becomes an accounting procedure. Urban economies continue to be dependent upon minimizing the costs of production—deploying all kinds of financialized tricks to reduce the price of raw materials and the wages of workers, while attempting to enhance productivity to reduce commodity prices and automizing production to reduce wage obligations. While such actions may increase the profitability of individual firms, in the long run it introduces debilitating strains on the logic of capital accumulation in its entirety as it strives to reproduce social capacity and general intelligence (Best 2021). Here the very economic underpinnings of whiteness are eroded by

“milking” it for all it is worth and where the system ends up instrumentalizing precarity as much as possible to retain surplus value.

The desperation of this clinging is also evident across the world as even the faintest of its conceptual trappings are relinquished as “development” is increasingly experienced as the wanton violence it is. That cities are more frequently converted into sites and modalities of warfare is not simply a matter of how they are forgotten, plundered or actively underdeveloped. It is also a matter of how whiteness as “civilizing mission”, as a model of proper inhabitation loses any legitimacy. So, the distinct architectures of hospitals, schools, housing projects, interchanges, markets, and transit corridors offer distinct affordances to generalized warfare. There is an erosion of the difference between the civilian and the military, as everything is converted into a legitimate target, in part because each space and body can be scrutinized according to the interoperability of multiple technologies of “seeing.” They can be reached by projectiles emanating in different form and intensity from varying locations. Situations and bodies are pre-empted from assuming some kind of “dangerous potential”, in part because the political semiology that might have generated reliable connotations, that might have in the past ranked a particular person or scenario within the acceptable bounds of risk management have themselves been unsettled.

As such, there are few confident assessments about what a particular place or body is, and therefore they are available to be eliminated before any untoward actualization takes place. No matter the identifying markers, uniforms and materialized signs, these vocabularies are no trusted. For, indeed now anything can be faked, dissimulated. As such, the veracity of an event or account is subject to methods and discourses that are themselves increasingly opaque. There is no “normal life” composed of repeated rituals, invocations, and gestures, as what is

also foreclosed is a language through which ordinary social ties might be reproduced, leaving many individuals in precarious situations where their only source of income is to act as informants, to live within acts of both volitional and involuntary betrayal. The lines between friend and enemy become more arbitrary. While such lines may continue to have declarative value, the spaces “behind” enemy lines are fraught with intricate complicities, where the continuation of war must rely upon institutionalized instances of random “peace” that not only spell out temporary rules of engagement but recalibrate the circuits of movement and supply required to keep the war going. Family dinner tables may seat siblings who fight for different antagonist militias or who are charged with building networks across different associations, points of contact, and institutions. Who then sits at these tables, who are they for each other, and to what extent does the protection of the family constitute a superseding motivation?

This is why Yusoff (2020) states that it is time “to imagine another subject capable of apprehending the differentiated and differentiating geoforces it is historically embedded within. That is, to ask can “we” stay in that state—in the tense of geophysics—without the fantasy of a materially autonomous subject that does not need the earth and the racialized forms of its extractive economies?” (666). Here, identity is not to be understood in terms of self-sameness but rather something that exceeds it since it includes potential energy that enriches it beyond self-coherence (Guerlac 2021). Similarly with notions of the virtual. Instead of constituting that which is to be constantly extracted from to produce an endless series of actualizations that semiologically disguise themselves as such, it is, as Simondon (2013) insists, “a true reality charged with actually existing potential energy” (301). Instead of regarding the individual as some self-contained, self-reflective unit that endures through a process of continuous metaphorization and compensations for its perceived lacks or the exigency to

always convert itself into some superordinate value, it is necessary to think of it as a center of activity (Guerlac 2021), “the singular point of an open infinity of relations” (Simondon 2013,334).

Finally, in a world with a surfeit of information, with individuals inclined to provide too much information, it is important to move away from a programming model, not to take information simply as signal or code, “but as real, relational, activity” (Guerlac 2021, 147). Thinking about information quantumly introduces difference, divergence, and disjunction as modes of potential energy interrupting the continuous flow of actualizations and upending the practice of colonizing the future as derivations of the same. “All of these “reforms” of inherited concepts contribute to thinking what I am calling livingness, as distinct from the dull entity that “life” becomes in the context of synthetic biology and the culture of capitalism” (Guerlac 2021, 147).

Here, the beyond of inhabitation rests with the potential elaboration of the “black town” away from its truncated manifestations and emblematic signals. Beyond inhabitation is beyond the predominance of a “line” that specifies trajectories of one thing leading to another, that captures the immanent within predefined categories of meaning. The extensionality of the flesh does not retrospectively or prospectively reach for some coherence or integration. It is not an elongation of the specific practices of domesticity or systemic cohesion; it does not precede from a baseline that identifies prefigured options from which to choose. Extensionality is fundamentally wayward and rambunctious. It is not transgressive in that it does not refer to boundaries that are to be crossed or violated. It simply reaches outward, not as a heat seeking projectile but a practice of generosity willing to unsettle the terms of its own recognition. It “takes” the world by surprise and is surprised by what it takes as a moment of engagement.

Consolidations are acknowledged a pragmatic form that provide necessary rest and momentary stasis, as any dynamic configuration requires various speeds and rhythms. Blackness as extensionality then does not announce itself, it does not go and tell it on the mountain that some messiah has arrived, but is rather incisiveness in its ordinariness, its quiet perfusion of gestures and touch, the cadences of enunciation rather than the semantic content, the opening and closing of porous flesh exposed to the world, attentive to its wounds, yet sufficiently shapeshifting to operate in volatile environs, protecting its capacities to fold and unfold rather than defending any specific formation. It is in this way that the urban is beyond inhabitation even if habitability is retained as something critical to the livingness of flesh.

Technicity and Beyond

In ways not dissimilar to blackness, contemporary technical operations also exceed familiar notions of inhabitation. Long considered the necessary augmentation of human cognition and capacity, a means of through which intelligence can assume the form of generalization, technicity is no longer, if ever, the domain of prosthetics. Rather than being an elongation of human capacity, as a way of concretizing mnemonic archives or formulating and deliberating a quantitative view on life processes, technicity now operates environmentally. That is, it not only augments human cognition, but curates entire atmospheres in which humans and non-humans operate, and in ways not necessarily predicated on enhancing the habitability of human life, at least not as conceptualized by human actors. In other words, technicity affects a mode of individuation that exceeds the relationship of individuals or collectives with a given milieu and directly impacts on the sensibility of an overall environment, “generating a

subjectivity that is not bound to any particular subject” (Hansen 2012, 49). No longer are individuals the predominant mediators of relations between what Simondon identifies as pre-individual domains—virtualized resources of energy, desire, and inclination—and *transindividual* individuation as an extended subjectivity (Hansen 2012).

In part, this takes the form of interventions directly into the domain of the half second delay between human exposure to sensory input and its perception, so that what the human sees and affectively responds to is something already shaped by technicity itself. It also includes the dispositions of high frequency trading, as well as the indeterminate distinctions between storage and transmission. All continuously resituate the relations among the micro-temporalities of technical operations—be they of social medias, artificial intelligences, cellphones, and search engines—as well as the perceptual responses triggered by these operations, and the social discourses about the temporalities entailed using such devices. Hayle (2017) refers to nonconscious cognition and its assemblages, where the body is already actionable prior to conscious perception, and where consciousness is thus always belated. This is a means of acting directly on affective dispositions prior to consciousness, which is itself contingent upon those dispositions for its tenor and inclinations.

“What is different in computational microtemporal addresses is that the messages are not simply coming from the body’s sensory interfaces with the outside world (as well as from internal sensing mechanisms) but rather are targeted by corporate interests specifically to create a propensity toward certain kinds of information” (38).

Here consciousness is already predisposed to acting in particular ways regardless of whether external inputs have entered conscious awareness.

Perhaps more importantly, as *techne* converts into a vast array of technical instruments, is that the presumption of universal causes related to the development of human capacity increasingly dissipates in favor of the capacity of technicity to deviate and redirect these causes into an extensive plurality of dispensations. From Pierce, we already know that all organisms possess the capacity of creative experimentation, a kind of abductive “reasoning” that posits an orientation to the world beyond genetic endowments through the functional transformations of expressive techniques (Tuckwell 2019). How can agents of all kinds then give shape to an increasing range of a transindividual forces shaping modern technical instruments. Already in many urban contexts AI is shaping, extending, and replacing the human calculation underpinning the management of urban functionality (Cugurullo et al 2024). Whereas smart systems valued optimality, control and efficacy, the instantiation of AI is geared to the productive uses of uncertainty, randomness, and chance.

In technicities based on cybernetic models, the codes issued by a sender must coincide with those eventually received so that “understanding” is possible. This is a process independent of the code that inheres in the structure of any information system. For Simondon, however, both code and functioning are interdependent and, as such, code can both produce and be produced by the process of information exchange, and consequently there can be then “communications” among and modifications of different systems (Bardin 2015). As Lucian Parisi explains, any technical object is part and parcel of a multiplicity of systems whose operations are independent from one another even as they align to perform a single function. “Operations rely on a heterogenous fractality—an intersection of not only

different ways of doing things but a fractality produced in the operations themselves, a veering off of component facets suggesting other trajectories” (Parisi 2021, 10). It is not the case where the distinct operations necessary to perform a specific function are aligned only in the “straitjacket” of performing that function, but that in the very act of actualizing that function a range of other actualizations are also possible, actualizations that have no precedent or pre-existent representation.

Such technical operations subvert the semantic models that accord a specific meaning to a function, and thus do not reveal a world as it is or regulate a continuous homeostatic response to its fluctuations. “Instead, the fractal algorithm of a non-transcendental image clones its own real image—a cloned image without original or copy—corresponding to a spatial surface that extends (or fractalizes) forever without uncovering any pristine form behind it (Parisi 2022, 330). How then do we think about inhabitation for a “world” that we have little idea about what it is or capable of becoming? An initial impetus has been to “swing” for both smaller and larger scales as a way of perpetuating some kind of geographic sensibility. But even here there is great uncertainty. As Engelmann and McCormack (2021) point out, the molecular, for example, does not help us in retaining some sense of categorical stabilization by instituting a specific kind of “molecular” form. Rather to the contrary, it “signals something irreducible to this form: the molecular becomings of the elements refer to combinations and compositions operating transversally to the formal schematics of technoscience and extending into the processuality and politics of many domains of life” (6).

Likewise, algorithms in fact produce unprecedented experiences of complexity for both time and space. Time is reoriented to the number of steps that a program needs to reach completion, and space refers then to computational “extra-space”, or memory, that is required for a specific function to execute a program—and this is coupled with increasingly enormous expenditures of energy (Lotte). Far from its Ricardian origins then, price functions as the manifestation of incomputable exchange—“it testifies to the open axiomatic that constitutes financial market the radical openness of computation as a mode of discontinuous relation that is functional to the individuation of the market-system” (Lotti 2018, 52). For Turing’s machine then, whatever is potentiated by the actual occasions of computational work is grounded on the incomputable as the residue of infinity (Fazi 2019), and these ingress, to use Whiteheadian language, into each actuality of computational processes in a relationship with indeterminacy that is non-empirical rather than sensible. In other words, we cannot sense this relationship even as it is being actualized in every instance of computation. Each instance then holds up the potential of something excessive of the given terms of inhabitation. No matter where we are or how we are we are always already beyond somewhere that is in the first instance and final instance non-locatable.

Rather than the imposition of specific technical affordances, AI is focused on the inter-relationalities of complex urban systems that exceed human computational and assessment capacities, both detecting and configuring patterns of cause and effect beyond the established parameters of correlation, often assuming direct responsibility for coordinating functions according to protocols that may circumvent current modalities of systematicity. Instead of improving urban functioning according to its given topographies and atmospheres, AI compels a readjustment of urban conditions to facilitate its own operations. It is not evident what the implications of a more extensive roll out of AI

within urban systems will do, particularly as the orientation of these instruments is geared to instrumentalizing uncertainty not as a predictive function but as an additional layer to the profitable hedges underwriting many aspects of urban economies.

What kinds of scenarios might be anticipated is not only a reflexive question a step removed but an object of the operations of AI itself as it responds to our expectations and anxieties. It is likely sentient AI “beings” will soon exist and, as such, a concern about what this will entail for human–AI interactions, compelling efforts to “run ahead” to consider these issues before they arise. Running ahead characterizes our relationships with AI in general as if there is an exigency of more overtly bringing the future within the present, contributing to the overall plasticity of time. Will robots be subjected to conditions of near slavery; to what extent will self–driven vehicles, household and domestic “managers” subject us to unwanted scenarios; will new unprecedented levels of suffering be introduced into the world? While many of these conundrums have already been taken up by science fiction, there is sufficient wariness for some to advocate for a moratorium on advancements in this field.

The times of processing and conveyance, the instantaneities of call and response, the perpetuation of events through inordinate capacities of stored memory, the incalculable and indecipherable production of entities whose existence is the sole product of algorithmic operations and incompressible data (the way that the pure potentiality of computational actual occasions is grounded on the incomputable as the residue of infinity, that ingresses into the actuality of computational processes (Alva 2023)—all contribute to an intensified plasticity of time. Here memory is actively reproduced according to multiple modes of transmission that exceed conventional narratives of “recall” or representation. As

in the case of elastic graph-bunching facial recognition technologies, High Frequency Trading (HFT) with AI, and neural networks like AlphaGo, associative memory structures and symbolic cognitive modeling are displacing the storage-and-retrieval model of the database.

Such plasticity does not so much connote a more expansive sense of time's durability or a reorientation to the future as much as it points to the parsing of power into more versatile and mobile configurations, reinstating the political as the invention of substitutable frames of bringing something to life, to make live that which otherwise might be consigned to foreclosed representation. These are acts "to disinter something that has been hidden, and which has been hidden not only because it has been neglected, but because it has been carefully, deliberately, and wickedly misrepresented" (Foucault 2003, 84). Not dissimilarly, da Silva and Parisi (2021) insist that this disinterment is actionable:

"by following models of computation (constructivism, experimental axiomatics, interactive language, alternative logics), mediation becomes techno-language, and procedures become acts or interactions—responding to one another as complex patterns, abstract information, randomness, and models (04)."

As such even the notion of habitation recedes to the point that it perhaps makes no sense to invoke it as an anchor for some kind of "beyond." For to point to a beyond still reiterates it as something that is still possible in an environment that would now otherwise seem to dismiss it altogether. Thus, habitation persists as a pragmatic marker of an abyssal condition—something which it was never intended to do—thus undermining its own sense. Whatever is beyond this then is already in a fundamental way already here, has always already been here.

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