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Editorial

The ineligible majority: Urbanizing the postcolony in Africa and Southeast Asia

1. Showing up anywhere

A theme that runs through contemporary hip-hop from Luanda to Jakarta to Phnom Penh to Kampala is an indifference to location. MCs claim not to care or pay attention to where they are. The street is a constantly expanding zone of subjugation and incarceration, yet it expands, it takes on space. The specificities of language, beat, and social conditions are engaged with precision, yet it is largely a matter of taking these specificities elsewhere, making them part of some other domain, as if there is little to hold back even the most circumscribed of youth from moving across a larger world. The Angolan rap crew Vagabanda issues the warning that they are “coming to theater near you; and may already be there, but don’t look for them on the screen, because they are in the front row, unconcerned about who are “watching their backs.”

What is particularly striking about many youth in today’s urban postcolony is the disinterest in “holding” territory. In part, this attitude stems from the nature of the postcolony itself—i.e. cities that continue to struggle with their colonial histories, the ways in which colonial rule has taken new shapes in its apparent aftermath, and the ways in which residents tap into diffuse memories and aspirations to make city life different from the normative forms of urban development. So-called gang violence may persist in many places, with its classic defense of turf and local economy, but belonging also entails “fanning out”, showing up in all the places where one apparently doesn’t belong. The “holding cells” of neighborhoods may still be replete with intricate lingos and stylized defenses, but even the most computer virus-infested *barrios*, *bidonvilles* and *kampung*s continue to pack in kids to social media sites with slow but activated connections. Another Angolan crew, Futuro Supremo, advise that if you wait for the invitation, you’ll only get to the party lying down. And in one of the world’s densest urban neighborhoods, Kampung Rawa (Jakarta), youth show up at drama and music clubs, mosques, political meetings, and civic ceremonies without a clue about what is going on but nevertheless take their positions and make vociferous contributions to whatever the proceedings may be. There is no attempt to overtake or overturn; others are graciously given their space. It is more a matter of deciding that there is no good reason for them not to be there, even if reasons for them to be there may be difficult to find.

As urban middle class dwellers ensconce themselves into tightly controlled spaces—a people consolidated only by the administration of collective fear and insecurity (Ranciere, 2010)—there is little left anyway in terms of community or civility for these youth to belong to, as their exposure to a diffuse world intensifies, but also a world in which they are not free to circulate. A patchwork of deals and accommodations, as well as ambiguous livelihoods that straddle conceptual and legal divides, undermine

and undermine any provisional coherence of city districts that may be often be legitimately slums but more often are more uncertain mixtures of decline and renovation, resourcefulness and cynicism. Vast and expanding peripheries mix density and empty space; central city superblocks cast long shadows over the persistence of heterogeneous residential districts whose adamancy to cast their own confusing images makes them difficult to displace.

What is being staked out, or rather pushed through, is an indifference to eligibility. In other words, an indifference to whether or not they have the authority, skill or appropriate motivation to speak or to act. Generations before them had succumbed to the notion to wait their turn, bide their time, prepare themselves to take on the mantle of whatever. But the past decades have seen the status of “youth” turn into a never-ending deferral—of employment, marriage, and other trappings of adulthood. Hard sacrifices for education have indeed been worth something, but too often that something is a near-permanent low level managerial job in a service occupation that is a cruel commentary on past years of learning. As the Indonesian hip-hop artist Jalan Surabaya explains, if you are going to spend all your life training to sound stupid, then certainly this is something that you can do right now. Instead of waiting to make your move, first make your move, make it big, and then wait and see what happens. At the same time, there is no need to “stick around”. Taking care of home is now frequently something better done from elsewhere anyway. Better yet, make home into something no longer easily recognizable. As Rafiq, a 20 year old motorcycle taxi driver in Kampung Rawa explains, keep the bigshots guessing about what is going on, so they never know whether you are “for real” or not.

With these attitudes, youth are not only saying something about themselves but about the cities they inhabit. The discreteness of individual cities seems to dissipate in face of their intensive articulations with others. Subsequently, “urban life” becomes something more dependent upon the interstices between territories and sectors, rather than a composite of clear allegiances to economic specializations, moral codes or lifestyles. With so much to pay attention to, it is unclear where the particular boundaries of any city begin and end, as individuals have to take more and more things into consideration as possible explanations for why they feel the way they do, for trying to account for what is happening to them, and why they can or cannot do things. Kids in Kampung Rawa talk about what is going on in America, China, Egypt and the neighborhood next door as if they were interchangeable, somehow equally proximate references.

Navigation becomes a matter of subtraction. In other words, with so much to pay attention to and the impossibility of paying attention to everything, urban dwellers have to decide what to leave out. They have to decide that a particular way of doing things,

a piece of information, knowledge, event, or life simply cannot be taken into consideration at this time. Its excision is not so much a matter of a judgment about significance—it is not that the individual doesn't consider whatever is excised important. Despite the fact that individuals know that many different factors and people impact on what they feel and what they can do, it becomes impossible to pay attention to everything, and some things just have to be let go of, some things just will have to go unnoticed, unconsidered. Space has to be opened up in order for some kind of reflection to occur, and many facets of everyday life, then, simply have to go. What people have left to work then feel like "leftovers." People may think that there is probably a better way to see things—like there is the possibility of a better meal that could be had—but one will take what one has to work with. At the same time, the obverse holds true as well. As a group of young female adolescents explained to me in Douala, Cameroon some years ago following the break-up of a public concert, "when the cops come to take you away, it is best to go naked, throw away your identity cards, throw away your civility. Make it look as if there is nothing to you—no pride, no memory— and dare them to fuck you; make them "eat" the city." In part, this statement reflects the futility that youth often feel in face of abusive power. But it also points to a sensibility that now seems to dominate much of the contemporary urban world—i.e. only when a critical distance is erased can one have unmediated access to a "real" city life. In fact, far away from Douala and in the world's most gleaming cities, the built environment embodies this disjunction of the surface from function and historical depth. The surface becomes a performance with its own autonomous operations, allowing actors and places to be tied together in ways that their relative "functions" would otherwise make improbable. As such, consumption is to be attuned to ever more particular sensibilities, inclinations and situations (Cronin, 2008; Terranova, 2004).

If the tools of livelihood then increasingly rely on the leftovers of arbitrary decisions regarding what in the complex fields of urban living is not to be paid attention to, then why should urban youth try and become something in particular? Why should they try to accrue a sense of significance and worth by virtue of preparation and training? To "not stand out", or more precisely, to be out of the usual stream of events and considerations would seem to actually heighten the chances to be "left standing" in someone's social world. This is especially important since decisions about who gets work and opportunities seem to depend not on what one knows but how one is known. Instead of sitting around waiting to get noticed, might it not be better to take one's chances to make some kind of an impact, some dent on a situation, any situation regardless of how well suited an individual may be for it. In other words, the key move is to toss eligibility to the wind.

2. The majority dispersed

This indifference on the part of youth to having some legitimate ground on which to speak and act, says something about how the majority of urban residents in the postcolony may have been able to make lives that worked more or less well. Urban residents have long been accustomed to the efforts on the part of those who govern them to try and make space legible and ordered. Things and people were to have their place, their identity and use. (Laclau, 2005; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2007; Rose and Osborne, 2000; Thrift, 2008). At the same time, residents would make sure to "mix things up"—both in the sense of making what they were doing and the spaces in which they were doing difficult to read, and thus control. They would also stir up unanticipated, sometimes untraceable collaborations among themselves. (Cross and Morales, 2007; Hilgers, 2009; McFarlane, 2008; Schler, 2008; Pieterse, 2008; Williams, 2002). This practice contrasts with a recent history of

contemporary mobilizations of the urban "disadvantaged" which have often sought to make their economic and social practices locatable in terms of normative frameworks of household management, labor, and citizenship. The idea is that the poor may be poor but what they do to put bread on the table makes sense; they may be poor in terms of material capital, but they are often rich in terms of "social capital." Making everyday livelihood practices legible in terms of their individual efficacy as well as their contributions to the running of the city as a whole has been an important element in substantiating claims to rights and services. (Dikec, 2009; Holston, 2008; Mitchell, 2003; Sugraves and Mathivet, 2010). If the poor can be seen to be struggling to "do the right thing"—to make the "right" assumptions about themselves while on their way to a better managed life and recognize that they are sometimes in need of the "technical" training to do so, then they are "eligible" for the full benefits of urban citizenship (Di Muzio, 2008; Huchzermeyer, 2008; Goetz and Gaventa, 2001; Milbert, 2006).

Contemporary mobilizations of the urban poor demonstrate their willingness to locate their practices within the prevailing rubrics of intelligibility. At the same time, the attitudes of youth I have sampled earlier in this discussion, reflect the possibility of being in and of the city in ways that don't require the constant need for clear definitions and consolidated forms of collective belongings (Benjamin, 2008; Goldstein, 2004; Gooptu, 2001; Guyer et al., 2002; McFarlane, 2007; Rigg, 2007; Rowe, 2005). Of course residents, including youth, have their "markers"—racial, ethnic, class, territorial, gendered—and are participants in many clearly defined associations—religious, political, labor, residential, kinship.

But what these attitudes of youth point to is the possibility that the "majority" of residents of cities in the so-called developing world have found ways to function as a "majority"—in a series of reciprocities, complementarities, contestations, circulations and mutual shapings—but without a stable form of collective address. Here, the need to always be locatable to governmental power is displaced, made peripheral to day-to-day social and economic operations of residents as they seek to substantiate their urban lives. Even if residents were civil servants, merchants, teachers, nurses, drivers, mechanics, entrepreneurs, salespersons, artisans, or police, they, at times, operated in concert in ways that were not clearly defined.

As Chatterjee (2004) has pointed out, the postcolonial consolidation of national development had to confront groups of residents who could not be readily assimilated as regularized government subjects. Late colonial rule was often predicated on the cultivation of a specific class of residents deemed eligible to assume various managerial roles in the city or conduct the necessary forms of entrepreneurship and trade. The majority of residents, on the other hand, lived with rights, formal recognition and provisioning that were largely provisional. Forced to fend for themselves, the majority had to deal with the condition of being established urban dwellers but not counted as real participants in the formal development of the city. While colonial governments certainly depended upon ruling over a population subjected through the structured deferral of recognition and rights, they could then never fully anticipate or control the forms of urban life that ensued.

When colonialism ended and the "natives" had to govern themselves, the need to now manage the entirety of cities compelled city governments to work through the continuously transformed logics of "informal settlements"—not only to exercise authority, but to elaborate anchorage points of engagement that would allow it to bring these populations into the fold of policy and law over time. At the same time, the preoccupations with quickly putting together built environments, regulations, and economies that embodied the prevailing understandings of modernity also threatened to make the presence and contributions of large numbers

of urban residents less visible. The modern city was to have modern markets, factories, and houses. But what about the substantial parts of the city where homes were workshops and streets were markets and things in general were messy in terms of having assigned places and functions. These areas not only represent residual strategies of city-making, but the “messiness” became a way of signaling the presence of these districts within the larger urban system—a way of insisting that the city had to be also built in a “non-modern” image. In a situation where many major population centers did not have any official designation on formal municipal maps, residents needed to amplify their distinctiveness as a means of capturing attention, of making themselves be addressed. And they were not to be addressed simply in terms of whether or not they were “eligible” for modernity (AlSaiyyad and Roy, 2006; Berner and Korpff, 1995; Keith, 2005; Kudva, 2009; Mitlin, 2008).

Postcolonial regimes could repeat the maneuvers of their predecessors in large scale evictions and curtailment of economic activity. But, there was also a certain wariness of the limits of repression—not only in terms of its efficacy and the labor involved—but since many urban districts appeared largely illegible, it was never quite clear just what these districts were capable of if the authorities tried to change them (Auyero, 2007; Bayat, 2009; Eckstein, 2000; Gray, 2004; Yeoh, 2001). Added to the legacies of insurrections, indocility, strikes, and other forms of resistance, the opacity of everyday life became a critical political supplement (Bayat, 2000, 2009; Cocquery-Vidrovitch, 1991; Elyachar, 2005; Narula, 2004; Scott, 1990).

While popular mobilizations of labor, traders, students, and the poor may have been undertaken in order to secure a range of rights and services common to established citizens, the notion of the “common” was also problematized (Agarwala, 2007; Haber, 2006; Hart, 2008; Lindell, 2010). The ways in which popular culture, street life, festivities, and vernacular became tools for addressing authorities was an attempt to give shape to that commonality. This is similar to what Ranciere (2007) refers to as the ordinary, i.e. that the distinctiveness of the presence of other is simply an ordinary part of the city, demanding neither exception nor special development. For example, throughout much of urban Africa, the ways in which residents enter and exit each other's lives, conversational spaces, and social transactions without an overarching sense of propriety, eligibility or relevance—commenting, joking, berating, and congratulating about everyday performances of all kinds—often does not sit well with the procedural strictures of decision-making fostered by local municipalities or NGOs (DeBoeck and Plissard, 2006).

But to residents, these social “promiscuities” are a part of the very affective resources of sustaining life in the city, with its inexplicable generousities and cruelty, its astute resilience and banal parochialism. They are what people have in common, and they are the vehicles through which an experience of the common is constructed (Arnaut, 2008; Fourchard et al., 2009; Konings et al., 2006; Lund, 2006). For example, buses are often full of people debating about the meaning of certain events. No one cares where passengers have come from or whether they are eligible to have an opinion or not. Even when there are flare ups on the street and things about to get out of hand, people will often intervene to try and calm things down regardless of whether they have anything to do with the situation or people involved.

For most districts of the urban postcolony, much of the complex textures of economy, social life, cooperation and decision-making are difficult to get a handle on as they are obscured by prolific efforts to impose specific conceptual categories on the economic and social activities of “peripheral” residents. Terms like “informal” “popular”, or “irregular” are hard to shake from analytical and policy vocabularies. Efforts to see the poor as or turn them into “micro-entrepreneurs” “relational economists”, or the “grassroots” tend

to oversimplify, normalize, or occlude methods of composing everyday life that entail much less stability or calculation than those terms would seem to connote (Elyachar, 2005; Meagher, 2007; Robinson, 2006; Walton, 1998; Watson, 2009). Residents who earn limited wages in service sectors, public institutions, or small commercial establishments are often treated as if they are about to disappear into a burgeoning middle class or are simply expected to relocate to insignificant residential areas at the periphery of cities. Attributions of a certain efficacy to the practices put to work in the construction of settlements and the maintenance of urban livelihoods, particularly those of the “poor” or the “working (at all kinds of odds and ends jobs) or (barely) middle class”, are tested constantly against the resilience of hegemonic political theories about governance, cosmopolitan conviviality and rights to urban space, or the security, sacredness and dignity of human life. (Boonyabancha, 2001, 2009; Davis, 2006; Dawson, 2004; Khosla et al., 2002; Meagher, 2010; Roy and AlSaiyyad, 2004; Sharma, 2000). It is as if those that engage these cities are only eligible to do so if they talk about the need for rights, democracy, and the eradication of poverty.

The usual control of media, government institutions, and education by the elite not only mean that they are able to produce prolific representations of themselves—shaping what can be known about them—but also couple their positions and histories to the progression of normative urban development. They are the drivers of development, and no matter how irrational, illegal, or unconventional their methods of accumulation and management may be, they are the critical actors capable of making cities “world”, “creative” or “economically viable”.

Paradoxically, such analytic accounts make invisible the daily and active piecing together of aspects of city life – people, things and spaces – by the majorities of urban residents in the postcolony unless those majorities are contained by nominations that provide a ‘proper’ political address – as the urban poor or as multitudes. As “matters of concern,” to use Bruno Latour's language, the “urban poor” and the “multitude” have mobilized attention and publicity, assembled audiences and opened up the willingness to engage with the postcolony on a global scale. Yet these nominations have perhaps obscured something else that goes beyond a neat convergence of class, deprivation, and knowledge production.

3. Eligible for the same place

Just as youth in the urban postcolony may make seemingly outrageous claims that the world belongs to them and that they are prepared to go anywhere, do anything regardless of whether they are eligible to do so, perhaps the key aspect of the work of an urban majority was that residents could be involved in each other's lives without necessarily feeling eligible to do so. They did not need to have a certain education, status or background to make some kind of intervention into the mix; they could make their opinions known, their presence felt and, by doing so, became visible, and as visible provide others with information about what they could expect from them. Making themselves known in this way, without hesitating or feeling anxious about their capacity to do so, enabled others to feel secure in their presence. Of course the unanticipated and the unknown could always occur. But even here, a tolerance for the unanticipated could gradually evolve with an underlying confidence that people making themselves visible and available to be known could then be engaged as either active or silent resources for sustaining local residence.

There are concrete manifestations of this orientation across many urban districts today. Streets are full of different styles and temporalities in the way the built environment is constructed. Residents from different walks of life and capacities have incrementally, over time, made changes in the space and infrastructure

that they had available to them, and, as a result, a remarkable heterogeneity of buildings and activities function side by side. While conflicts, divisions, and crises certainly take place, the key to the viability of this heterogeneity has been the willingness of residents to invest in each other—to accord each other a sense of potential, a sense that each in their difference potentially adds something useful as a resource to cities where nothing can be counted upon for sure.

This is a matter of not knowing one's place, or of being indifferent to whatever knowledge is brought to bear. Granted, the elaboration of middle class identity and urban life in general increasingly valorizes notions of eligibility. Access to opportunity and space increasingly is predicated on whether a person is eligible to do so. Even when eligibility is not explicitly specified or enforced, the shaping and stylization of built environments implicitly intimidates those whose purchasing power or lifestyle is not consonant with the values embodied by these environments. In line with the economic logic that has long characterized urban development, specialization becomes more differentiated and individuals are encouraged to recognize the need for continuous training and education, so that insufficiency is something generalized across the urban population. People then do not participate, speak or intervene because they conclude they are not eligible to do so; they do not have the expertise or training.

But this is where it is important to again turn to the sensibilities of youth cited earlier in this discussion. For they have much to say about the attitudes necessary to win spaces of operation, even freedom in the city. In cities where people's vulnerability can be manipulated and traded for political advantage, where divisions within localities can be easily cultivated, and where individual assets and capacities never are sufficient to change much of anything, collective solidarities are important instruments of diligence, focus, and step-by-step concrete change. It is reasonable that residents will seek to defend their gains and protect the fruits of hard-won struggles. But they also must be careful if preserving hard-won gains becomes too preoccupied with being on constant alert for possible threats and thus potentially limits what residents within a given locality do in relationship to the larger city. Such defensive postures risk atrophying the very capacities that went into the collective struggle in the first place. New exteriors have to be applied, new intersections with the city, and these intersections often are exploratory and experimental—the locus of individual and small initiatives and not the outgrowth of collective decision-making. After all, the locality in its entirety can't be "tied up" with any one experiment.

While organizational efforts have often tried to capitalize on the advantages local residents have of "knowing their place"—of knowing what is really going on, and using this as a form of political capital—this tends to reinforce the privileges of eligibility. People are eligible to have a say about how "their" locality is developed because they live and operate there. While this can be an effective strategy for political inclusion, it does not deal with the capacities of residents to move across the city and situations without being eligible to do so. If localities are understood by what people have in common—to focus this commonality on a shared territorial or social location ends up reducing the salience of "the common." As Ferdi, a youth in Kampung Rawa puts it, "if all we know about each other is that we come from the same place, then what is it worth knowing each other in the first place?"

Indeed, the individuated trajectories of engagement with the larger city are the "ultimate actualizations" of that commonality that exists among residents. On the other hand, each of these individuated trajectories, built as they are on the platforms of improved conditions which are the product of collaborative efforts, contains within them varied aspects of that commonality—inclinations, capacities, and techniques—that are not used or made visible

in these trajectories. This excess is the very material that goes into further developing the collective life of these residents—an excess that wouldn't exist without individuals "forgetting their place" and forging their own particular pathways out of the locality which is nominally the "territory" of that collective (Virno, 2009). As Victor, a 19 year old motorbike driver in Douala puts it, "I can bring the bread home, sure, and we can all eat it until it is gone, and it will be gone soon. But I also need to bring home all the stuff I have seen and heard from parts of the city no one at the table even heard of before, and make them realize that those here and there are all living in the same place."

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