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A Town on Its Knees?
Economic Experimentations with Postcolonial Urban Politics in Africa and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

At best Fanon had an ambivalent attitude toward the potentialities of African cities. As largely colonial creations, they were never viewed as the 'real' locus for an elaboration of a critical national consciousness or political project. Yet now that Africa is an 'urban continent', with cities moving in disparate directions through various broken infrastructures and temporalities, urbanization conveys both a desire for collective capacities that would seem to exceed both the terms of colonial residues and Fanon's revolutionary projections, yet simultaneously to reiterate the fundamental tensions in their relationship. The very practices that would seem to waste political mobilization may be those which defer a definitive foreclosure of them. While African cities remain exemplars of the region's captivation with redesigned imperialisms, they are generative of the potentials Fanon identified but assumed would never come from them.

Key words

Fanon ■ postcoloniality ■ subaltern ■ third world ■ urban development ■ urbanism ■ way of life

Introduction: Getting your town dirty

The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how;

they die there; it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. (Fanon, 1990: 34)

FANON WROTE this passage nearly 50 years ago. What has changed since this time? What has become of the 'decolonized' city? On the one hand, the massive growth of cities in Asia and Africa represents the intense aspirations of people for a better life; it is a testament to the capacity of cities to accommodate and materialize very different aspirations. On the other hand, cities have become venues for commodifying nearly everything. Urban spaces and institutions have been systematically engaged, infiltrated and appropriated for this purpose. As a result, the majority of urban residents across the Global South may be better off than 50 years ago, but many may be more vulnerable than ever (Peck et al., 2009).

In this passage, Fanon seems to denigrate the possibilities of urbanity as a vehicle through which the 'native' aspirations for freedom and self-determination could be actualized. He views the *bidonville*, the *quartier populaire*, the slum, the shanty town, the 'location' or the township as a place of envy – so proximate is it to the capacities, the proficient infrastructure and wealth of the colonizer that it freezes the way the native looks at their own living environment as that of incessant insufficiency.

But Fanon also complicates matters in that the native town also becomes the place where the political leadership – on the run, emergent or waiting for the right time to move – finds shelter and periods of gestation. In part, the native town as a shelter for the city to come is made possible by its apparent wretchedness. Because the rulers don't see anything of value there within it, except for its pools of exploitable labor, there is no need to gaze too much upon it. As long as the native town exudes signs of its own debilitation and its residents the exhaustion of trying to survive day to day, surveillance can be largely perfunctory. Yet, as long as a vanguard is present; as long as various networks within the native town continuously shift places of hiding, sites of deliberation and venues, bodies, and domains in which to rehearse the collaboration necessary to move goods, ideas and affiliations, the apparent insufficiency of the native town is always something else, always a mask or dissimulation.

While no long-lasting institutions may be built within the native town, there may be the profusion of incipient systems of production and exchange that renew valued collective understandings and keep potentials from being foreclosed. At the same time, this complicity between debilitation and emergence, precarity and possibility, has long been a claustrophobic game, making it difficult for residents to clearly assess their chances. Despite the vast range of manipulations embodied in most efforts at the urban development of poor districts, the poor are often unwilling to let go of the status quo. They conclude that improvements in infrastructure,

services and administration will disrupt the intricate forms of compensation that have been elaborated to make up for the lacks, and that these compensations, fraught as they are with both substantial reciprocities and authoritarian power, are the only bases to accomplish real change in their lives.

Nevertheless the Wretched, Still an 'Earth'?

It has long been common sense that the coverage and instantiation of overarching institutional frameworks capable of steering collective sentiment and effort have been limited in the bulk of African cities. In face of intense partialness and partiality – the hoarding of resources and opportunity by an urban elite – livelihood entails careers of individual insertions into various densities of affiliation, from kinship networks, neighborhood interdependencies and patrimonial games to political maneuvers. While individual lives may appear easily expendable without clear terms to assess efficacy or failure, individuals must still constantly refashion themselves to become key ingredients in scenarios they are often ill-prepared for, or have little faith or belief in. An incessantly exterior focus means that domains where ties are assumed to be strong without much negotiation – such as family or kin – can become replete with jealousies and tensions; and so whatever transpires inside the house, or organization or neighborhood, is being assessed, even experienced, in terms of its implications across other networks and events. Associational life is not any conventional notion of multiple belongings to different kinds of institutional arrangements, but quite literally the work done to associate often highly discrepant contexts, actors and facets of everyday life, making them have something to do with each other, using one involvement to eke out some stable position in another, as if in a constant game of chance, or to make sure that the gains in one domain filter their way into another that had nothing to with it. As such, clear working distinctions between family matters and those of neighborhood, work, religious, ethnic and political affiliations, are difficult to sustain.

Sometimes events in one affiliation may imply and contribute to others; at other times relations between these domains are grating and at times debilitating. There is simply too much to figure out, too much to balance, too many toes that are stepped on in order to keep a few moving (Bayart and Warnier, 2004; Tonda 2005). Cedric, Lumanu, Makoto, Bazana and Armando are the titular heads of the 'Bloods' in the quarter of Kasa-Vubu, just south of Kinshasa's central market area. With their red bandanas they have styled themselves around the American gang and indeed are well informed of its histories, personalities and organizational structure. The K-V crew intends not so much to be a 'branch' of a global organization, but rather to appropriate certain 'themes' and ways of operating in order to instantiate themselves into the local economy. With the exception of Makoto, all are university graduates, and their grooming and eyewear convey the looks of young professionals rather than thugs. They all occupy

a *parcel* left to Armando when his family unexpectedly departed for Europe without informing him, and he needed to recruit his present 'associates' in order to hold onto it in the face of competing and aggressive claims from kin. The crew spreads across Marché Gambela at the start of the trading day. They canvas the initial expectations – for a market is also a field of affective textures, from indifference to driven urgency, and these forces compel an array of discursive tactics and deals. In the decaying infrastructure of the market and the various cloggings up of the transport routes in which it is embedded, the trading day must also circumvent incessant delays – from gridlocked traffic, the wait for deliveries, the goods that are set aside for pick-ups that are slow in coming, sporadic supplies of electricity and unanticipated arguments that are not resolved quickly. As marketing entails getting what one has access to out into the largest conceivable world of consumers willing to pay a good price, trading concerns opening up vistas of sight and perspective. It entails what the trader can actually see, but also what he or she can anticipate, what they imagine to be taking place beyond the immediate field of vision. To a large extent this is what the Bloods deal in. At the outset of the day, they try to get a sense of what the market, in all of its various individuated and grouped sensibilities, anticipates; how the market 'feels' about how it is situated in a larger contexts of events.

The crew will return to Gambela in the late afternoon just as things are both winding down, and thus speeding up. It is a time where the tendency to desperately try to unload, to make some money, is at its peak, and this feeling intersects with the accruing patience of those who feel they have done as well as possible, and that it is important to sit tight and not make any mistakes, not to go out on any limb. It is a time when the market is also most a mess. Not simply because it has been 'worked' all day and that the mess is a sign of that work. But also because traders have been holding goods for others, bundles may have been put together but are not going anywhere, and things now have to be disentangled, returned to their proper places, but just as they are on their way back, something else may intervene to convince them of still other possible last-minute destinations. This is one facet of what the Bloods do. They wait until the last minute and try to force through different kinds of 'alliances' between these goods on 'their way back'. Given what they observed in the morning – the various assessments of location, the different moods and expectations, the different opening prices and bottom lines – the question for them is where these sentiments, expectations and assessments are now, now that the trading day is almost at a close.

For at the end of the day the task is to work with the loose ends, to concretize potential futures from what is left over, not as the only horizon, but to use the task of working with leftovers as a means of reconfiguring relations within the market and beyond. Cajoling, seducing, steering, sometimes pushing different actors into each other's attention, the Bloods will 'suggest' ways of packaging leftover food, some recently arrived bundles of clothes and 'diverted' electronics that didn't quite find their way to the

expected pick-up into a near-by van that could quickly arrive at a planned mega-prayer meeting in Matete and park near the bevy of food-sellers that would catch the pre- and post-meeting multitudes. As everyone rushes from the market into the crowded thoroughfares and mini-vans and buses, a Blood or two will be making sure that certain vehicles are able to jump the queue, as long as drivers are willing to make room on their rooftop for a few bags of cement delivered for free to a group of construction workers willing to do a few hours of underpaid overtime at a trader's little satellite shop in the suburbs in return for a connection he has with the ministry handling a big project in Gombé.

Much of the work of the contemporary African city revolves around the leftovers, the loose ends, the things that are not yet tied down, that could be put into play. This is not surplus to be hoarded, but leftovers – to be spent right away since, in this context, making something left over means that someone is going to lose out. This is because there are few cushions, institutions that can cover all the demands that are exerted over individuals. These are demands that tie one to families – with their frequently stretched out definitions, to church or mosque, to neighborhood and other places of origin. What can be spent is already tied down several times; so it is not easy to think about 'freeing up' money, resources, feeling or time.

A frequent complaint about small-scale entrepreneurship – those small shops, businesses and trades that form the economic anchorage of most residents – is that too many people eat of the assets; there are too many relatives and associates whose needs become associated to small profit margins. This dilemma – the choice to retain the established modalities of belonging or to speculate on new lines of connection – makes contemporary African cities a dynamic fulcrum of calculation and decision.

But as the brief vignette on the Bloods demonstrates, these calculations are not simply matters of economic exigency and accumulation. They also are matters of how the everyday interventions in the circulation of goods and bodies aim to open up different ways of seeing a larger world, and how residents try to reposition their relationships with each other to open up new vantage points, new ways of operating together. Sometimes, as in the work of the Bloods, this takes place at the level of things and their movements into different hands and across different trajectories, regardless of their prior use or proprietorship. At other times, it is a matter of intersecting stories and anticipations, bringing together ways of making accounts that happen to be in close proximity.

This may not be the consciousness of a new nation that Fanon had in mind, and it may not be a sensibility rooted in collective responsibility – based on a shared appreciation of mutual work or oppression – but the operations in the market of Kasa-Vubu do point to how residents continue to anticipate the possibilities of new horizons that go beyond individuated economic success and which broaden the scope of both maneuverability and understanding. Fanon, of course, remains prescient here in warning about the extent to which this endeavor to see as part of a larger world simply

reiterates a colonial maneuver that dissociates residents from cherished forms of rootedness into a world view that is not of their making. This is the incessant risk of the work that the Bloods do here – that is, in getting things and people to move in different directions, actors are loosened from their anchorage, become more willing to speculate on relations of trust, and to excuse themselves of responsibility when things go wrong as a result. Experimentation is necessary, but not everything is to be experimented with. This seems to be the critical issue of postcolonial politics in urban Africa today.

Experiments with National Life

If Fanon had lived beyond his time, he might not have had sufficient appreciation of the complexities of just what it takes to administer African cities. Historically, it was rare for any given segment of society to attain sufficient overarching control of cities to impose either a unifying vision or generally accepted rules of the game. Even when specific regimes exercised national power for long periods of time and kept national capitals, in particular, under tight rein, these efforts often had limited traction in the day-to-day operations of a heterogeneously composed urban population. Policing the streets and the airwaves was not the same thing as securing a functional cohesion of an urban population that largely had to make their own way, their own livelihood and their own practices of dealing with each other. The fundamental challenge was always: who can do what with whom, under what circumstances, and what could ensue from the resultant actions? And governments did not have the means to impose the answers to these questions, even in the harshest regimes. As such, these questions remain open ones, and a continuous locus of everyday effort.

Because many cities were built with circulatory labor markets, curtailed residential rights, maintained highly uneven relationships with territories external to them, and often fractured linkages with rural areas, they functioned as places of mediation between locality and mobility. As such, they always had to find ways of incorporating new kinds of residents and their articulations elsewhere (Georg, 2006; Guèye, 2007; Guyer and Belinga, 1995; Yntiso, 2008). As a result, cities are a context for making claims, figuring particular narratives of legitimacy that enable individual and collective groups of residents to access resources and opportunities, such as land, services, participation in institutions and other entitlements (Abbink, 2005; Cueppens and Geschiere, 2005; Freund, 2009; Hilgers, 2009; Lund, 2006).

Particular modes of address are constituted where residents seek to have particular identities and needs recognized. These modes of address frequently change, stretching and shrinking to accommodate or exclude particular actors and territories (Boujou, 2000; Hilgers, 2009). As a result authority is often diffused across sometimes competing, sometime complementary institutions, replete with different meanings and formulas, as well

as different forms of consolidation. Some have formal attributes and structures; others are more ephemeral and dispersed, not easily categorized or defined (Bellagamba and Klute, 2008; Kelsall, 2008; Lund, 2006; Miran, 2003; Nielsen, 2007; Rakodi, 2006). In such circumstances, it would be difficult to identify or sustain a particular 'vanguard movement' as Fanon would prefer. But this doesn't necessarily mean that without such a movement there are not substantial efforts to transform social relations.

Even in cities under severe forms of authoritarian rule, there is contestation in terms of the fundamental rights and obligations embedded in relationships between children and parents, between extended family members, between men and women, patrons and clients, citizens and government officials (Marie, 2007). Basic questions as to the place of self-initiative, individual decision-making and the conditions of belonging to family and other social groups are intensely debated. People are working out many different kinds of accommodation between the needs of autonomous individual action and the security of life that largely remains rooted in long-term forms of social belonging (Marie, 1997; Rodrigues, 2007; Tonda, 2005, 2007).

These dynamics have a direct impact on what governments and civil society can do in terms of managing and changing urban life. Fundamental issues about what people are able to do together and what they can legitimately do on their own are often replete with great tension, controversy and fluidity. Policy prescriptions that both explicitly and implicitly deal with people's responsibilities to each other, to the state and to evolving public norms can exert significant influence on how such contestation takes shape and how it plays out. But no single actor or institution can completely anticipate the directions that such a fundamental reworking of everyday life will take. They risk doing more harm than good if they attempt to impose premature solutions or act as if such important conflict must head in one specific direction or toward a particular resolution (Dorier-Apprill and Domingo, 2004; Harrison, 2006; Jaglin, 2007).

In much of urban Africa, then, livelihood has been a matter of 'connecting the dots', of extending the ways in which different actors, their interests and ways of doing things would become implicated in each other in expanding circuits of relations. Different social statuses, associations, ascriptions, ways of earning a living and economic sectors had to find ways to become active parts of each other without overarching political or cultural guidelines. While conventional ideas about the control of populations seem to prioritize assigning individuals specific positions and roles in various hierarchies of responsibility and authority, most African cities relied upon fostering cross-cutting interdependencies and bringing together people and things that on the surface would seem not to fit.

This does not mean that the everyday organization of urban societies did not have its hierarchies. Urban politics and economies are full of patronage. Individuals will 'hitch' themselves to a 'big figure', with loyalty being traded for opportunity. These patronage relationships anchor individuals in

a clear framework of reciprocal obligations. But while they are important for the task of organizing urban neighborhoods and districts, these systems were seldom sufficient for governing relationships across the entirety of the city.

When things work, when complementarities manage to be built among provisional assemblages of people, things, and spaces, it comes primarily from the very openness of people to each other, who recognize that in all of the turbulence some kind of ground needs to be established, some kind of *terra firma* or platform upon which it is possible to stand, to rest, to look out from and to be momentarily recognized – not as anything in particular, but simply as specific. Whatever endless calibrations, compensations and conflicts may ensue from the intersection of bodies without clear prospects or visions, it is the persistent generosity of those bodies to provide the rudiments of a solid world – still easily swept away – that is the resource-in-the-final-instance of the city. People will die needlessly in childbirth, crossing roads without light, in flooding from clogged drains, and from arbitrary violence, but at the same time it is rare that anyone will be without a place, without a way to survive for another day – a place and day that come from nowhere in particular, that is guaranteed by no one but that is effectuated simply in the openness of someone(s) to some other(s), that establishes an economy of transaction and rest.

In cities where negotiations, contestations, compensations, wheeling and dealing, and *débrouiller* are constant, there is a fascination with events that would seem to have no need for negotiation or for working things out. There is fascination with a capacity for doing things that just seems to happen.

Eligibility Doesn't Matter, and Neither Does Consciousness

This fascination with a wordless efficacy is why many residents of these native towns, as well as new towns in the swelling metropolitan regions across the Global South are fascinated with stories about how mirroring relationships might be broken, where neither emergence nor dissolution reflect one another. Instead, the images are refracted in such a way as to further pluralize the times and spaces of both old and new quarters, as well as their relationships to a larger urban world.

In many respects these stories are continuations of a long-term fascination with how individuals can 'step out' of the futures expected for them, and make a life that is totally unanticipated, a life for which there is no obvious preparation or eligibility. Good fortune, chance and unknown fate have always filled the stories about what people do in life. In these stories that can preoccupy residents in Dakar, Jakarta, Lagos and Kinshasa – to name only a few – the accumulation of unanticipated wealth is more than simply a matter of good luck, but entails particular kinds of opportunity and skill (Geschiere, 2001).

This accumulation is attributed to the capacity of certain individuals to skillfully operate at the intersections where the bodies of others are exposed and opened up onto the larger city – that is, those vectors of contact that bring eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, anus and vulva into shifting alignments with the materials of the city. Bodies take things in and put things out; eyes and ears are pointed in certain directions among many. By zeroing in on those moments of ingestion, elimination, reception and incorporation, where the body is most destabilized and de-centered from itself, these individuals gather up and redirect the energies, attentions and inclinations of those around them. In a literal sense, they take people away from themselves. In doing so, they enfold people, things, ideas and opportunities into a gravitational pull of passions and resources which the individual then accumulates and uses.

By intervening into those moments where bodies drink, eat, shit, piss, fuck and spit, scenarios are scripted that make money flow in a particular direction. The actual mechanics of how this intervention takes place is subject to constant speculation as some of the more renowned rags-to-riches biographies are intensely scrutinized in living rooms, markets and coffee houses across cities. Who were they in contact with, who did they manage to bring together, where and under what circumstances? How and through what means were they able to insert themselves in various lives? The key thing is that these are questions asked not only of the specific trajectories of accumulation for rags-to-riches individuals, but also those at least implicitly asked all the time by urban residents of themselves and others. These stories and questions become incentives for people to convert whatever is around them – the most mundane activities, the seemingly useless pieces of things strewn here and there – into possible tools, new uses and a new means of relating to others.

Wealth here is not the product of eligibility, of striving in well-defined parameters of work or social networks. It is not a process of discernible preparation or entrepreneurial acumen over time. Nor is it the progressive aggrandizement of territory or loyalty. Nor is it the deployment of cruelty.

Though Fanon may largely have denigrated the political capacities of urban populations, it is often bewildering the extent to which an 'urban majority' across the Global South has been kept out of view. Of course, cities have had particular trajectories of development, of relationships with states and global capital. Dilapidated and hypermodern built environments do not necessarily signal a univocal development pattern; cities are much more textured in their singularity than available to some broad set of generalizations. Nevertheless, analysts and policy makers seem to have a much broader knowledge about the lives of the poor, the middle class and elite than they do about the civil servants, laborers, workers, salespersons, entrepreneurs, traders, bureaucrats and artisans that have managed to carve out the semblance of stable livelihoods over time.

These livelihoods may never have been sufficient to produce significant savings or assets; and they may never have produced a reliable sense

of confidence that did not necessitate incessant compensations and adjust-
ment. Yet, these lives were urbanized and did implant themselves in cities
for the 'long haul'. This 'majority' in many instances did not recognize itself
as a coherent political entity, although there is much evidence across cities
that a majority, made up of variegated professions and histories, was able
to coalesce at different times to implement specific political regimes and
programs (Benjamin, 2000; Holston, 2008). At the same time, circulations
through labor markets and sectors, as well as highly differentiated settle-
ment histories meant that any such 'majority' proves slippery as an analyti-
cal object. While labor unions and civic associations were sometimes
capable of providing a locus of connection among discrete groupings,
broad-based popular mobilizations rarely possessed sufficient power to cur-
tail the interests and resources of long-entrenched ruling elites. The labor-
intensity entailed in maintaining viable urban footholds reinforced tenden-
cies toward specialization in and differentiated orientations to urban living.
But at the same time, the limitations of earnings, the rapidly changing con-
ditions of city life, and the tenuous positions Southern cities assumed in
global economic networks meant that any particular job, profession or
living situation was never in itself going to be adequate in order to keep
households going. So, despite economic specialization, the segmentation of
city spaces and fluid intra-urban mobility, residents from different walks of
life continued to pay attention to and make use of each other in intricate
complementarities that still dominate the day-to-day social economies of
most urban districts. The circulation of opportunities, the heterogeneity
of contiguities in the built environment, the multiple uses and interactions
of discrete spaces, and the trade-offs in resources are continuing evidence
of the ways in which residents implicitly forge collective effort, even when
this effort finds no consistent or even discernible organizational format.
Additionally, this capacity of residents involved in different kinds of
work – and with different networks of access to information, resources and
opportunities – to cooperate, to make use of each other outside of formal
institutional procedures reiterated the city as a space of opportunity, move-
ment, and of being part of a larger world. In highly mixed inner-city dis-
tricts remaining in Bangkok, Jakarta, Lagos and São Paulo – to take a few
cities – the ability of individual residents to find out about things, to have
access to different experiences, to know where to go in order to take care of
specific concerns, and to know how to experiment with different ways of
pooling resources and acquiring work and new assets is not a matter of
training or eligibility. A resident does not need to feel 'eligible' in order to
participate in these practices and experiences, which are put together pre-
cisely because the differences – differences in profession, capacity and aspi-
ration – can only be sustained because they retain the openness to pay
attention to each other. At the same time, the ability of the district to act
in concert – despite how provisional and implicit this acting in concert
might be – depended on an increasing differentiation of types of work,

affiliations and networks. Such differentiation could be proof of the exten-
siveness of local collaboration and commonality – not evidence against it.

But increasingly 'eligibility' becomes the complicity of the majority in
its own dissolution. It is clear that many urban residents of such crowded
heterogeneous districts now prefer to live in homogeneous tower blocks out-
side of central areas, away from the street and its 'messy' interactions.
Preference is registered for less noisy and dirty environments, and for
more privacy and nucleation. In some sense, much of the majority succumbs
to the notion that the aspiration to live in more sanitized, well-ordered and
segregated conditions is the ticket to concretizing aspirations to be in a
larger, globalized world of efficacy and accomplishment. Instead of the het-
erogeneity of dense and highly mixed districts – mixed in terms of social
composition, built environment and spatial use – signaling the capacity to
navigate a larger world of transactions, it is reframed – initially by devel-
opers, policy makers, politicians, and the elite – as a parochial and disor-
dered world, an impediment to progress and mobility. Mega-development is
not just about making big buildings and shopping malls, it is also institut-
ing a highly individualized orientation to the city. It entails the elaboration
of a personal development that is discernible and progressive, but also muta-
ble – able to cultivate skills and personae necessary to move across the city
as a whole, a city increasingly defined as the seamless interpenetration of
work and leisure, optimized performance and self-development, singular
style and proficient adaptation to changing globalized norms. Here, the indi-
vidual once again is 'eligible' to participate in the larger world.

In contrast, the fascination of many residents with the stories of inex-
plicable success and accumulation circumvents the notion of eligibility.
Efficacy is not something that one prepares for, but rather something for
which a person should be prepared. It is not a set of rationalities or prescrip-
tions, but more a journey to be taken and a willingness to answer a call –,
a beckoning for which one is prepared to 'walk through walls'. In fact, this
is a concept explicitly cited by residents in Nylon – a massive district of
Douala – especially when a person feels beckoned. This beckoning could
be that of a child who is in trouble, an unforeseen opportunity that presents
itself somewhere, a request to come to a gathering of some kind, but also
more frequently an undefined sense of urgency, an almost mystical sense
that one now has to go somewhere. Depending on the situation from which
the child is to be extricated, 'walking through walls' can take several forms.
At times the person will take a straight line, keep his or head straight
ahead, blocking out the view of others who have inevitably heard about
either the difficulty or opportunity, block out the gossip, the derision, the
anxiety, and try to eliminate the distance between themselves and the child
as fast as possible.

At other times, the person will themselves appear lost, take circuitous
routes through various neighborhoods, through church services in progress,
through different family compounds, or bars, markets, circling back and
forth, and perhaps arriving hours and even days later at their intended

destination, having accumulated the murmurs of hundreds of conversations. In this second version of 'walking through walls', there is a tacit acknowledgment that the addressing of the task on arrival cannot be unmediated. The person must be prepared with the right gestures, the right words and demeanors to deal with the situation and the actors present, whether they be police, teachers, priests, or whoever shows authority. This capacity only comes from exposure to the ins and outs of the larger context, the ways in which the sentiments and actions of everyone appear, spread out, intersect and recede. Neither form of 'walking through walls', however, takes precedence. Both are necessary lines, both support the other, even though definitive decisions have to be made, on the spot, about which one to deploy. Both cut across and go beyond existent framing devices and structures of inhabitation to create new frontiers among otherwise incommensurable spaces and things.

Markets without Walls

Such a notion of walking through walls, of going beyond what can be readily seen or talked about, has long been important to the operation of so-called traditional urban markets. There, small entrepreneurs configure new temporalities of consumption through making ambiguous the divides between wholesale and retail and between different enterprises. Sellers and buyers 'go in together' – in various combinations and proportions of investment – to enlarge the scale of individual transactions. Similar and discordant items are bundled into packages that make any single item more accessible to those who otherwise could not afford them. Instead of frugality, prudence, individual and household savings, limited disposable income is put to work in various bundles of investment. These bundles draw in the goods of different sellers with whom individual buyers may have established long-term relationships in order to attain specific volumes of merchandise that lower the price.

Instead of counting on 100 shirts being sold at a particular price to a specific customer, by putting those 100 shirts 'in play' across various deals that bundle different items, sellers know that they will be able to 'make their volume' – which allows them to maintain a low price for a particular consumer. Here, an economy of excess is put together, where individuals go beyond the rationale of disciplined household spending and the relationships they have to markets, and where sellers go beyond the conventional frameworks of distribution and profitability.

Tanah Abang in Jakarta is one of Asia's largest traditional markets. It is now managed by the city's largest mega-developer, bringing it revenue that exceeds all of its other high-end projects. The market sets out to clearly demarcate sectors of goods, types of sale, delivery, parking, storage, services, management and so forth. Yet these demarcations bleed into each other, in part because the crowded neighborhood in which the market is located

generates various congestions, concentrations and traffic flows which are compensated for by creating new densities and hubs.

These compensations breathe new capacity into neighborhoods otherwise vulnerable to the more brutal invasions of big projects. Those who manage the choreography of people, who sell, transport, service, finance, warehouse and park can easily be seen as enforcers or mafia – part of tightly bound hierarchies whose actors extract and shakedown. But their ability to manage depends on their capacities as interlocutors, as those who can constantly recalibrate relationships among different interests, perspectives and jobs – always making people feel that they are part of each other and that everyone can operate with each others' interests in mind.

The character of managing such markets seems to reiterate the extent to which the prevailing logics of municipal governance have limited applicability to urban life. Not that urban life itself is a coherent organic body on which human endeavor, combined with various technical and symbolic instruments can yield stable aspirations. Rather, the point here is that, despite the capacities of many cities to encapsulate living within highly structured and efficient assemblages of sustenance and transformation, the vast potentialities of urban life remain caught within limited terms of operation. Productive, protected, networked, distributed and extended, even 'advanced' urban lives can remain insular and insecure. The most advanced municipalities struggle to raise money to ensure adequate services and provisioning systems. What 'functions best' is often spatially highly circumscribed and privatized, leaving the public realm a largely truncated, media-saturated exercise of gestural consent. What still eludes policy makers, administrators, politicians and technicians is 'the city as difference machine'. This is a city:

> constituted by the dialogical encounter of groups formed and generated immanently in the process of taking positions, orienting themselves for and against each other, inventing and assembling strategies and technologies, mobilizing various forms of capital, and making claims to that space that is objectified or materialized as *the* city. (Isin, 2007: 223)

This point is important given the urgency of considering the enormous growth of cities in the Global South, particularly the growth of a population that largely must fend for its own survival. The abject conditions of this urban living have often been pointed to as evidence of the failure of nation-building projects, of the generalization of accumulation by dispossession embodied by neoliberal technologies of the restructuring of global capital, and the dispersed networked character of urban functions which locates the bulk of urban economic product within increasingly narrow, circumscribed spatial arenas. While these considerations are crucial, they tend to make definitive judgments about the capacities and values of urban majorities that miss their transformative engagements with cities – engagements that persist despite the material conditions in which they must live.

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In other words, the very absence of definitive apparatuses for maximizing economic productivity, value and security, and for taking into account the aspirations, skills and backgrounds of urban residents as the foundations for political institutions, forces residents to incessantly urbanize their engagement with the city. The enforced provisional character of livelihood means that they use the frequent change of residential location, of work, affiliation and social network to draw lines across discrepant spaces and aspects of the city. These may not be coherent narratives – not straight lines – but they amass multiple trajectories of connection that bring into the orbit of each resident a wide range of stories, experiences and actors.

Movement as Propositions for Connection

While there exist substantial differences in the capacities of cities in Africa and Southeast Asia for stabilizing urban residents in place, the increased uncertainties regarding urban livelihood everywhere also change how residents move through their cities.

Through their own investments in mobility, many residents make inordinate efforts to expand the terrain they cover in the city. It could be a food cart dragged across miles of forbidding freeway to distant neighborhoods or a car repair service installed at the periphery of a new shopping mall. Residents attempt to forge new perspectives by inserting their labor or limited money into small ventures away from the neighborhoods they are accustomed to. They change jobs – not for an increase in wages or security – but to have access to new social networks. All of these efforts constitute working 'propositions' for how different districts of the city could be brought together. Through these linkages, neighborhoods take on greater complexity and thickness that in turn engender unforeseen opportunities.

Contrary to conventional wisdom that collective effort ensues from people who are linked by history, trust or painstaking organization, many residents are taking risks precisely on those with whom they would have little recourse or adjudication if things go wrong. Someone may have a little cash and someone else a truck. Someone has got a connection in the ministry and someone else has tools, a small warehouse or many favors owed. The idea is that opportunities come and go, and if people don't take the chance now, than someone else will. What prepares individuals to take such risks, how do they practice and work them out with few available maps, expectations or relevant authorities?

Part of the story here is that while the rigid administration and economic segregation of urban spaces may be severe, urban life largely remains a disparate collection and disconnection of fragments. Nigel Thrift (2004) labels these fragments 'fugitive materials' – traditions, codes, linguistic bits, jettisoned and patchwork economies that are 'on the run', pirated technologies, bits and pieces of symbols floating around detached from the places they may have come from originally. Not only does the city attract human migrants from elsewhere, but also all the bits and pieces of ways of

doing things, long dissociated from their original uses, that 'wash up' on the shores of the city. Bits and pieces of discourses, things, signs and expressions are assembled into personal projects of survival, ways that people have of dealing with each other, of making deals. What is it in the way these materials are collected that supports life or acts against it? It is not clear. What in this practice supports the tendency of global capital to make people and local networks fend for themselves and what operates in ways that global capital will never get? It is not clear.

Clear or not, useful or useless, urban bodies are entangled with such collections (Colebrook, 2002). For many, inhabitation takes place in environments weakly insulated from the effects of producing life in conditions where the inputs have no consistent supply chain or vehicles of evacuation. Bodies are intimately entwined in scrap, fuel, rain, heat, waste, sweat, tin, fire, fumes, noise, voices and odor on the one hand, and multiple stories, generosities, violence, arguments, reciprocities and fantasies on the other. There is no bringing all of this into account, into a predictable means of calculating opportunities and reasonable futures. Here, impetuousness coincides with cautious and seemingly endless deliberation. For many, the difference between gambling and planning, saving for years or spending whatever you have right away is non-existent.

Yet in situations where many forms of belonging and mediation have been lost, a capacity for discrimination emerges which turns what has been lost into an opportunity. If you look out onto the world and see few prospects, if doing the right thing doesn't get you anywhere any more, and if everyone basically has the same ideas about how to get ahead and therefore there is a kind of traffic jam in front of any new initiative, and if you have got to use the people around you for things no one is ever going to be fully prepared to undertake, then everything stable in your life has to be looked at as if it were only one fleeting version of itself. The loss of mediation, of maps, of anchorage, then, is taken as an opportunity to reclaim various forms of paying attention to things and of being receptive to all that circulates through the city as bits and pieces of different knowledge residents have brought from various elsewheres, times and circumstances. Often reduced to the status of being 'distorted traditional practices', 'magic', 'intuition' or 'street smarts', to name a few, these bits and pieces can be used as tools for inventing and implementing specific ways of thinking and feeling. Discrimination thus entails how one learns to pay attention to family influence, social affiliations, local and distant authorities of various kinds as if they were something else.

Usually individuals and households have particular ideas, norms and cultural rules about how people and things are to be considered, are they close to us, or are they far; should we take them seriously or just not pay attention to them? There are people and groups with whom one can exchange things, lend things, as well as forces and people that must be resisted. But here, discrimination is a way of paying attention to what one's neighbors or associates, co-workers, friends or acquaintances are doing, not

with the familiar conceptualization of what a neighbor is or should be, but through creative conceptualizations that enable a shift in the conventional patterns of how distance, proximity, reciprocity and resistance among people are orchestrated (Stengers, 2008). Those that are familiar become something else – you are not quite sure what so you have to try different things on for size, or you have to not care so much what they think, or you hear them say the same old thing you've heard a million times before but now it makes a different kind of sense.

These maneuvers become of way of anticipating what might happen if a person decides to take an unfamiliar course of action. When we act, we do so only if we have some sense about what is going to happen to us if we do something in a particular way, otherwise we won't do it. This is why we are hesitant to take risks or do something new. So what I am talking about here is the way that people invent probable outcomes for experimental actions in situations that no longer have a strong relationship to reliable institutions for interpreting what is going on. Thus what is proposed is ways of making connections among people and ways of doing things that don't seem to go together. This, then, opens up possibilities for individual residents to make new affiliations and collaborations, and to take risks with them.

In important ways, municipal institutions, civic associations, labor unions and religious institutions provide important mediations and anchorage. Still the inability of urban institutions and regimes of production and control to anticipate, engage and make use of even some of the plenitude of affects and effects that urban living has generated both lengthens the learning curve necessary to develop viable responses in governance and planning and, by default, intensifies the reliance of residents upon the succession of provisional systems to ensure life. As such, the everyday is 'everyday' in that it seems impervious to collective justification or recognition. As Callon (2004) has remarked, there is no necessity that all entanglement be rendered and articulated in order to justify action.

When the Wretched Are Invisible

Returning to Fanon, what, then, can we say about sufficiency or wretchedness? Of course, there are numerous vernaculars which capture dejection, disgust and fantasy. In various local languages neighborhoods are called 'the place that God forgot', 'they treat us like dogs' or 'Disneyland of the living dead.' As Fanon indicates, residents are captured in an imaginary maze, fearing supernatural forces. Many residents go to inordinate efforts to get out of where they are and go somewhere far away; some save and plan for years; others make spur-of-the-moment decisions and are on their way in no time. Many residents are indeed stuck, unable to go anywhere, make any changes. Some are buried under a pile of obligations, mourning, depleted confidence or just too many expectations. Some run interference for others, and here sacrifices and obligations mount, and much time is

wasted calibrating at the level of meters and grams just what constitutes a fair settlement of indebtedness sufficient to ward off threats. Basic feelings of trust and belonging are leveraged as the very means to keep them operational. Without unspoken confidence in the edurability of critical family and local ties as a means of framing reliable interpretations of people's actions, individuals, however, become uncertain about how their words and behaviors might be construed by both known and unknown others. An exaggerated transparency then often ensues, as individuals display their incapacity, their wounds or their good intentions.

Again, it is sometimes difficult to sort through a murky game of whether the surface conceals important dynamics or forces, and even if it does whether this means anything in terms of how the policed and violent surfaces of cities could be opened up. Is show and tell necessarily a protective ruse?

Even though invisibility is an important protection, the invisible world can quickly become an antagonistic one. It is a world where forces are no longer known, no longer rooted in the day-to-day experiences of people linked by common understandings of who they are for each other, and what they are expected to do with each other. Yet, if these forces then have nothing to do with how specific cultures try to maintain a sense of coherent practice constantly in touch with a past that remains vibrant, then they can possibly be put to use in other ways. For example, in Mandela, outside Khartoum, one of the most abject urban peripheries in the world, the alcohol and prostitution business has severely disrupted local moral orders. Yet it has meant that these slums do have some vehicle through which the city 'comes' to them in order to buy these services. In recent years, residents in these businesses have tried to take note of where their regular 'customers' come from. They have sometimes made elaborate efforts to track the cars, using lookouts stationed at various key road junctions with cell phones. Sometimes taxis are hired at key points once cars are tracked back to Khartoum in order to pinpoint the person's office or home. On future visits then, calls are made on cell phones for 'operatives' in the town to leave mystifying amulets or signs. Sometimes attempts are made to rob the house. Even if there are absolutely no connections made, even when these efforts produce no discernible result, which they almost never do, residents still talk about the fact that they make some impact on the city, that they are steering it in a particular direction that will ultimately have some kind of payoff.

The effect of cell phones has been substantial. Even for households that can barely feed themselves, it is not unusual for the household to have at least one phone. In Mandela most of them are stolen; SIM cards and air time are shared, but even here some residents have found ingenious ways to manipulate using them for almost no cost. So when women spread out across Khartoum, going to their different domestic jobs, or scour the city looking for them, they pay attention to the surroundings, perhaps now in new ways. Groups gather at night talking about the city, not only in terms

of developments that directly affect the security of their camps and districts, but also the facets related to the city's explosive development, the construction of new districts, buildings and shopping malls. In their excursions to and from work, or searching for work, calls will be placed regarding the off-loading of building materials on a particular lot, or a house that has been left weakly guarded, or a car seemingly abandoned in spot for several days, or the arrival of new stores of food or other supplies where the workers have smuggled off part of the proceeds to some near-by bushes, vans or crevices to be disposed of later. These calls will be relayed to friends and relatives, who will contact others more capable of taking direct advantage. Sometimes groups of women will themselves rendezvous to intervene in an opportunity where just a few hands are needed. They will carry off some pipes or tin sheets into the desert, or stuff their dresses with calculators that a hole in a warehouse fence has left exposed.

Most often it will never be clear to them just what was done with the observations they report on their cell phones or by whom. But they are convinced that somewhere down the line, a Baggara merchant selling bits of cloth in the main commercial area of near-by Mayo offers a discount as a returned favor for something that transpired a few weeks before, or that their sons have a few extra Sudanese pounds in their pockets because some merchant with a truck picked up on a load of cement blocks that had been delivered to the wrong address. Significant here is that many of these residents explicitly see themselves turning into the invisible forces that have haunted them – that have brought illness and misfortune. These invisible forces are no longer the familiar vehicles of consolidation existing within a set of coherent cultural references. Rather they are signs of the estrangement of Mandela residents both from a past and from a viable future. As such, they are to be inhabited instrumentally as a way of trying to act on the city as a whole. Residents act as if they are some kind of invisible force moving across the city, finding the loopholes or, at least, acting as if there are many different ways in which the city is unable to defend itself, unable to keep the residents of Mandela out, to keep them from living a city life.

These invisibilities are combined with the equally opaque trajectories through which money pours into Khartoum from all over the world. Here, the built environment serves as a platform that concretely links repatriated earnings from Sudanese working in the Gulf, various earnings and payoffs related to the Chinese domination of national oil production, inflows of finance and investment from the Arab world, and the proceeds of the city's distribution activities that link Asian imports to markets across the lower Sahel through Cameroon to Douala – just to take a few examples of such elements. It seems that, rather than paying attention to the conditions that presently exist, both rich and poor are looking at the city in terms of what can be destroyed and remade.

In July 2006, John Garang, the former leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, arrived in Khartoum following the signing of

a peace deal with the Sudanese government. Two million Dinka, Nuer, Azande and Shilluk gathered in the center of the town to welcome him. The gathering sent Khartoum into shock since most residents did not, and probably had refused, to acknowledge the number of so-called 'foreigners' in their midst. Largely condemned to live at the periphery, visual images of their consolidation were not readily available. Yet, as it was impossible to stay put in the periphery, they had continuously dispersed across the city for decades, spreading out through its crevices, among deserts and rivers – a quotidian invasion of the city practiced under the radar.

These invisibilities constitute the city as a place of play, as something always in play, immune to any overarching image or plan of what it is to be. Too many discrepancies are produced within the dense relationship between the poor's conversion of themselves into invisible spirits and the invisible deals that circumvent municipal development frameworks. Money is put to work in hasty constructions not really built to last – as if they were high-class shanty towns. There are too many lingering questions about who people really think they are and about what forces are at work making things happen. Together, these two kinds of invisibility make it difficult to grasp what would constitute a clearly recognizable and stable citizenry or set of locations that could be brought together under the auspices of municipal justice or equanimity.

Still, in districts across Africa and Southeast Asia, what is very visible are the inevitable gatherings of temporary collectives – in markets, overcrowded buses, streets, apartment blocks, churches – that are full of deliberations. These are deliberations about ethical actions, tactical maneuvers, mockery of governments at all levels, celebrations of efficacy, of getting over, of hard-won victories to secure something. These are deliberations among people who, in some times and settings know each other well, in others, not at all. These deliberations waver between the familiar tropes of civility and incivility. There are impulsive statements, outbursts, care and tenderness. Sometimes everyone speaks at once; sometimes there is a deafening silence. Generational lines are suspended, as are the prevailing conventions of respect, gender, propriety – in relations that come close to what Stefania Pandolfo (2006) calls 'the affective tie' – that conjoining of self-destruction, mutuality, recognition and forgetting all at once. Here, residents seem to evacuate their 'composure' for moment to engage someone else not seen as something other or different. Whereas collective deliberation usually attempts to project ahead, these 'convocations' perform an incessant presence, and as such are difficult to appropriate as evidence for the elaboration of new institutional forms.

At the same time, cities are contexts of war. And many residents must constantly navigate territories that constantly switch up on them and relationships the quickly waver between generosity and duplicity, spiteful violence and impassioned nurturance. Urban politics in postcolonial cities seems to move away from organizing the capacities of the poor to improve the conditions of life through their own struggles – both in elaborating

forms of self-provisioning and demanding basic rights of shelter, service and livelihood. The emphasis may now be on coalitions of the urban poor with a growing middle class which can deploy the discourses of civil society, accountability, transparency and good governance to at least attenuate the available instruments of marginalization and exclusion. Yet the ongoing efforts of the urban poor to associate, to take matters into their own hands – while of limited effect in terms of influencing policy, projects and the overall trajectories of urban development – reiterate the city as a locus of conflict. In an era of preoccupation with urban ecological security and its concomitant obsession with consent and partnership (Hodson and Marvin, 2009), it draws out the fact that impoverishment is a product of war, as a particular assault on life, and where the self-valorization of the poor, restores urban space as battlefield about what it is possible to do and say in cities.

Collective Life and the Pace of Urbanity

Much is being asked of cities like São Paolo, Cairo, Lagos, Karachi, Mumbai, Nairobi and Jakarta. Perhaps less of places like Medan, Chang Mai, Recife, Bamenda or Chennai, even if these more 'secondary' cities have populations larger than most American cities. Intensive urbanization presents particular challenges and potentials to cities everywhere, and perhaps particularly singular ones to those still reworking the interstices between various colonial and postcolonial apparatuses. Perhaps what characterizes a point of commonality among these cities is not so much the divergent growth of slums and mega-developments, or the growing separation of rich and poor, but the proliferation of uncertainties. Many cities no longer have any room to grow in face of environmental hazards, traffic gridlock or excessive density. But it is uncertain how they will manage without becoming closed cities – which in itself is unrealistic. Municipal governments are convinced that they must move millions of poor people residing on riverbanks, tollways, rail lines, garbage dumps, but there is uncertainty about where to put them, as cities already have overbuilt peripheries. It is uncertain whether residents are citizens or 'shareholders'. Uncertainties about how land will be used and its price are linked to uncertainties about which actors will get to do what and where, as future development rights are dissociated from notions of ownership or tenancy. The financial underpinnings and eventual uses of existing and planned mega-developments are shifting all the time. Even with great legislative specificity, the relations between the various tiers of municipal government are not clear; the more competences are specified, the greater confusion there is, not only about whether a specific tier has the capacity and resources to carry out its functions, but whether they have the clear authority to do so.

Still, cities are expected to demonstrate good governance and growth, and their residents are expected to demonstrate patience, savings, discipline, aspiration, social responsibility and initiative. Even the slums must become

machines of political possibility – the awakening of a new proletariat. In the labor-intensive demands of everyday survival and the adamant desire of urban dwellers to enjoy the city, to do more than survive, what is to be made of such expectations?

Here, the continuing relevance of Fanon may not so much be in the specificities of a political vision, but rather his sense of timing – that is, a sense of patience, of not taking easy solutions, of waiting for the right time but coupled with the ability to act quickly and decisively with regard to unforeseen openings. While city life, no matter what its conditions, provides people with a platform to feel as if they are a part of a larger world far beyond the city's boundaries or specific features, there is always the temptation, even exigency, to try to address these expectations – the expectations to be fully modern and effective. So timing is important; it is important not to rush things, not always to be compelled to respond, or to do so in ways which step out of the ambivalence which Fanon so incisively documented – the ambivalence about practices that could wedge open possibilities for new forms of collective action but could also indicate psychological subjugation. To step out of the need to respond and to prove; to step out of demonstrating eligibility and worthiness.

Resilience and improvisation – as I have tried to show in stories about markets, buses and slums – is certainly a resource. But, as indicated previously, experimentation for its own sake is not enough. In following Nancy (2002), when experimentation is able to bring discordant materials together, to graft new capacities onto a body, life is sustained in ways not previously imaginable, but it is a life outside of its time, a life that has stepped outside of the terms by which it was to be recognized. As notions of self-integrity and wholeness intrude upon the plural operations that make up a body, and the operations necessary to sustain that body intrude upon any sense of wholeness of that body, there is a space in between. This is the space of the collective, not imbued with any story of its integrity or coherence, but as the force which sutures these intrusions together, never certain as to what future it is bringing about.

Cities can be places of striving, and certainly maximizing the participation of the majority, or, at the very least, paying greater attention to what the majority are actually doing in cities, is a necessary facet of urban sustainability from now on in. Yet there is something in Samuel Weber's (2009) description of the irresolvable aporia at the heart of politics which is apt for thinking through Fanon and his possible relations to today's contemporary urban postcolonial politics. For Weber, to take the place of the other – to fully demonstrate the capacities of autonomous self-management – has to take into consideration the place and circumstances where the terms of such capacities originated, no matter what the potentials of translation or mutual constitution have been among a multiplicity of vernaculars. So to take the place of the other as whole means doing away with the whole as other – and therefore, as Weber says, with the identificatory basis of constructing oneself as something whole, something fully realized.

From this dilemma comes the 'synechdochal compromise' – that is, the substitution of the part for the whole. But existing as a singularity or a 'part' that exists through compromise, it can never be absorbed into a totality, does not 'obey' it, in Weber's terms, nor is itself subject to it. Rather, it can sustain attention to a long-established field of reference while, at the same time, directing attention somewhere else. It keeps tabs on all the ways the colonial game has not changed, yet still points to a way of living, already under way, that takes its place, right there and somewhere else.

Given this, the victimization of the poor, and the conversion of the poor into an object in need of constant remediation and spatial control, tends to obscure the inability of urban governments to come to grips with a wide range of economic activities, networks, spaces and practices neither formal nor informal, licit nor illicit, sectored nor diffused, and which combine various modalities of production, management and laboring, and that often constitute half of a city's combined urban product.

Fifty years after Fanon, fifty years after the independence of most African nations, what remains a conundrum is how to demonstrate that cities of the Global South will be both viable and worthy cities yet different from the urban logics that subjugated them. The difference that would most clearly embody such a break lies in the relatively invisible piecing together of aspects of city life – people, things, spaces – that are not conventionally thought to be associable. But how can such a difference be demonstrated, and at what cost? Whether cities completely mirror the purported efficiency of those of Europe or North America, exceed them in the spectacular quality of new-built environments, or are full of gang wars, ethnic conflict, parochialism, patronage and other signs of an impending implosion, none of these aspects serves as evidence that 'different' forms of collective life are being definitively ruled out. At the same time, for cities to demonstrate 'their own way', 'their own difference' in a highly networked urban world linked through skewed advantages, information systems, investments and controls risks cutting these cities off from essential links to the larger world.

For now, what we do have is a constant impetus of experimentation, where residents in Messina, Ikori, Penjaringan and Klong Toey – to name some of the South's most crowded and heterogeneous districts – use what little they have, not just to put bread on their own tables, but to take small steps with other residents from districts across the city to be in a larger world *together* – in ways that do not assume a past solidity of affiliations, a specific destination nor an ultimate collective formation to come.

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