

URBAN  
LIFE  
WITHIN AND  
BEYOND CAPTURE

THE  
SURROUNDS

ABDOUMALIQ  
SIMONE



# THE SURROUNDS

BUY

Theory in Forms | A series edited by Nancy Rose Hunt and Achille Mbembe

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## Contents

Preface | vii

Acknowledgments | xi

Introduction Exposing the Surrounds  
as Urban Infrastructure | 1

One Without Capture: From Extinction to Abolition | 21

Two Forgetting Being Forgotten | 61

Three Rebellion without Redemption | 100

Coda Extensions beyond Value | 134

References | 139

Index | 153

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## Preface

This monograph on the surrounds is based on a series of three lectures delivered under the auspices of the Sheffield Urbanism Lecture Series, October–November 2020. These lectures were titled “From Extinction to Abolition” and attempted to explore the ways in which both extinction and abolition are prefigured within diverse urban environments, and how what presents itself as dissipative and useless often conceals a site of potential generativity, of transversals that point to improbable yet existent responses to persistent injustice. These lectures were primarily rehearsals for a range of different conceptualizations and ways of bringing together diverse theoretical and field materials not under any overarching rubric but as a gathering of the disparate, an attempt to narrate how they might find their way to and through each other. This book builds on these rehearsals, developing an architecture of loose ligatures that can hold these rehearsals together as a sustained commentary on *extensive* urbanization. Here, *extensive* does not mean the extending across space of a univocal process of urbanization. Rather, *extensive* refers to how the growth of the urban, in its appropriations of and extractions from heterogeneous logics, practices, and modes of accumulation, extends the urban beyond either the clearly recognizable forms or the spaces that are subsumed to specific operations or values (Mezzadra 2019). Thus, the surrounds.

This Sheffield series followed three lectures offered at the University of Cambridge in November 2017. Those initial lectures centered around the notion of the *uninhabitable*. Building on reflections of Katherine McKittrick (2006), this notion does not so much concern those aspects of urban life that made human residency, for some, nearly impossible but instead seeks to identify those aspects of urbanization that do not fundamentally center on or concern the possibilities of inhabitation. That is, even though urbanization is driven by human activity, it entails intersections of materials, things, and times

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that assume unanticipated dispositions, that produce eventfulness and potentialities that do not so much foreclose residency as continuously shift what it means to reside, what it means to instantiate a sense of home or position.

The *uninhabitable* also refers to collective lives of continuous remaking, where the rootedness of a sense of “we” within territorial emplacement and identification both exceeds these parameters and continuously posits new intersections among the ways in which the material operations of urban space are composed. These are new intersections between the abstract designs that steer such operations and the collective enunciations that make sense of them. These formulations on the uninhabitable are ways of seeing how specific urbanization processes constitute what Michel Foucault (1986) called the ungrounded arts of existence—those practices and desires that are aimed neither at furthering life, nor at institutionalizing settled forms of recognition.

In the subsequent book derived from these initial lectures, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South*, logics of what has often been referred to as “Great Black Music” (rather than jazz) were mobilized to examine how ensemble work constitutes a particularly salient mode or metaphor for navigating terrains of the uninhabitable. Rather than focus on the conventional tropes of political mobilization or collectivities rooted in accordance with clearly delineated identities or territories of belonging, ensemble work constituted a convergence of disparate technicities and soundings capable of playing the same “notes,” the same “score,” but generating entirely different trajectories of sonic possibility. The attempt was to extend this notion to the ways in which the continuous reinvention of capital across “Global Southern latitudes” was, in the end, driven by changing ensembles of the marginal:

In a game of state politics, where affordances and territory are continuously reapportioned to different factions, where the overconfidence of big developers and real estate financiers is increasingly punctuated by an incessant anxiety of getting the timing right, of having to preside over intricate sutures of money, land, labor, technology, rules and political deals, maintaining peripheries as spaces of compressed livelihoods, maneuvers, and backgrounds is critical. They not only offer a possible hedge against the bulldozing regimens of homogenizing shopping malls, industrial parks and export-processing zones, but are also instruments of leverage within that very game. (Simone 2018, 135–36)

This present book extends these notions through the invocation of *the surrounds* as simultaneously the spaces, times, and practices within and beyond capture, where experiences of detachment from the predominant forms



of accumulation and dispossession enable the specification of dispositions in ways that ward off being apprehended in any definitive sense—where moments of suspension from the traumas and obligations occasioned by individual and collective memory are momentarily possible. The surrounds can function as a literal type of territorialization possible when extensive and extended urbanization is no longer rooted within the *city form*, and thus dependent upon multiple articulations of different ways of doing things and different logics of settlement and production. These are, in turn, sutured together, not through a single overarching process but rather through a range of plural stitching and mutual implication.

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## INTRODUCTION

# EXPOSING THE SURROUNDS AS URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE

### Going Around

In spring 2020, global media was captivated by images of Indian urban migrant workers walking home, often thousands of kilometers away (*Times of India* 2020). The pandemic-induced lockdowns put at least a temporary end to their already precarious jobs, jobs that left little opportunity to acquire any kind of savings, jobs that barely covered the costs of a bed in a hostel and a single meal a day. Existing as the cheapest labor possible, thoroughly expendable and ineligible for other opportunities in these cities, these workers were left little choice but to return to homes most had not visited in years.

Many NGOs and community associations were mobilized to provide transportation and food for these migrant workers on their way “home.” This included my colleagues at the Hyderabad Urban Lab (HUL), who were constantly on the phone with local councilors, businesspersons, and social welfare agencies in an effort to organize a coordinated response in Hyderabad. Unlike many organizations that viewed the situation only as a problem to be solved, HUL made a concerted effort to elicit stories from departing migrants regarding their past employment conditions, hopes, and aspirations.

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It tried to find ways of interlinking these stories in narratives that sought to understand the characteristics of the social lives that these migrants had attempted to piece together with each other and the ways in which these lives not only were fractured by the closing of factories and the imposition of pandemic controls but now were being extended across different geographies. In these collected stories, it isn't so much that home was seen as the place of any stability, of any strong affective attachment. Rather, many of those heading across the scorching highways indicated that it was simply a place from which to think, to assess, to contemplate the next move. These workers would not necessarily return to the cities from which they were departing, but they also didn't expect to remain long in those places to which they were going.

Drawing much less attention than those workers on their way "home," HUL also encountered other workers who neither stayed where they were nor left. Although some were indeed immobilized from the sheer uncertainty of their situations, there were other workers who simply set off from their hostels, their entanglement in improvised relations of care, debt, making do, and exploitation, and headed somewhere, seemingly without a plan, without clear direction. When my colleagues at HUL attempted to find out more about these workers' choices, some simply stated, "We have more work to do." So the question is, what is this work? Long seen as simply bodies who labor, and labor at the most menial and backbreaking jobs, this invocation of having more work to do points to a refusal to be reduced to labor. While most workers HUL engaged were leaving the city to find some kind of exteriority from which to reassess the prospects for their lives, those workers who remained were telling HUL something else, something about how their position within Hyderabad was always already something more than sheer labor, that there was something about this position that required work beyond the factory and hostel, and now that, for the moment, they were dismissed from factories and hostels, this "other work" was to be done with all seriousness. They sought to find within the city those spaces of operation that perhaps only they could identify and elaborate.

Some would describe this journey as a matter of paying attention to the slightest details: the color of a rusting truck seemingly unmoved for generations; the sudden and inexplicable laughter of crowds of women hurrying home after some essential but now furtive shopping; the flickers of neon lighting emanating from an empty schoolyard. These details operated as indecipherable signs yet were operationalized as directions—time to go left and down this road, or time to stop and take momentary shelter in the hollowed-out confines of an abandoned building's parking garage. Across

these improvised and arbitrary itineraries, there were sufficient numbers of public soup kitchens to be visited, and of course, things always fall off trucks and unanticipated generosity sometimes manifest. The twelve- to sixteen-hour shifts these workers had usually put in had acted as a kind of confinement; they rarely had opportunities to take in the larger city in which they were embedded.

Without commitments or attachments, without the luxury to compare themselves to others, and refusing the obligation always to think of the others to whom they had been attached, these excursions revealed all varieties of spaces that didn't seem to be committed or attached to the uses they would seem to purport. This was not only a matter of schools being turned into vast communal houses, markets into mathematics classrooms for orphaned teenagers, shrines into all-night popular political assemblies, or government tax offices into repair shops for homemade inventions. Rather, these were all those spaces in the midst of things, within crowded thoroughfares, jetties, underpasses, hallways, and arenas that didn't quite fit with what was happening around them. Spaces ever so slightly out of joint, where the anomalous, the marginal, while clearly visible, remained ever so slightly undetectable, enough for moments of rest, the rehearsing of some kind of weirdness, a base from which to build a modicum of confidence to venture forward or back.

It wasn't that these excursions were going to lead to any salvation or posit a new horizon of opportunity and security. It wasn't that these workers who remained garnered any clear sense of what they needed to do or could do. But almost all of them, without fail, indicated a renewed determination to stay, not as they were but as something else. They talked about a newfound ability to ask questions of strangers, to deliver the necessary niceties and ingratiation to make somewhat outlandish propositions as a way of registering the elasticity of particular personalities and situations. They talked about how they would acquire random partners who accompanied them part of the way and that these companions would ask them questions about things they had never considered or at least had not deemed themselves sufficiently worthy to consider. Something was taking shape. They couldn't always hold onto what it was, and they would have to start over again, but none reported this as a traumatic loss or a foregone conclusion. Of course, incessant movement is wearying, and the indeterminacy of purpose and result is difficult to sustain. At the same time, they felt less marginal to the city, they sensed that they surrounded all that they traversed with something that did not exist there before. They sensed that even though they were not essential workers, they were an essential surrounds.

## What Is/Are the Surrounds?

Instead of envisioning processes of urbanization as the unfolding of definitive forces of value capture, asset creation, and resource extraction, one must ask how these salient categorizations of spatial production are accompanied by a growing multiplicity of entities and their exertions. Particularly at the extensions, just beyond what has customarily been purported to be the “real city,” it is increasingly evident that a continuous recalibration of “projects,” material inputs and residues, and altered ecologies of reciprocal causation are generating landscapes that exceed the salience of available vernaculars of analysis and intervention. Here, intricate landscapes of provisional sutures, half-lives, diffractions, disjuncture, compensation, and transience create unsettled urbanities and populations.

While dedicated genealogies may be capable of grasping how particular built environments, spatial dispositions, and fabrics got to be the way they manifest themselves, there is something that eludes coherent narratives of development and prospective futures. These are spaces of intensive contiguity of the disparate—disparate forms, functions, and ways of doing things. Such spaces are replete with gaps, interstices, breakdowns, contested territories, and sediments of dissonant tenure regimes, financing, legalities, and use. Instead of being able to discern legible articulations among the details of composition, these proliferations of housing, commercial, industrial, logistical, recreational, entrepreneurial, and governmental projects are less subsumed into overarching logics of capital accumulation or neoliberal rationalities than they are “strange accompaniments” to each other. Nothing quite fits according to design. Things dissipate or endure without obvious reason, and improvised alliances of use and rule continuously reshape what it is possible for any particular individual or institutional actor to do.

While now perhaps most evident at the extensions, these spatial formations of the disparate do not occur only within these extensions. Rather, they proliferate across all kinds of urban geographies. As such, the consideration of these disparate forms is not just a matter of space but one of time, of things coming and going, appearing and disappearing and reappearing again, dependent on the practices through which they are engaged.

I call this mode of accompaniment, of not clearly discernible or translatable territories of operation, *the surrounds*. The surrounds constitute neither an explanatory context nor a relation of interdependency. They are neither a strictly geographical nor a temporal phenomenon but can alternate to varying degrees. The surrounds do not surround a given space, project, environment,



Intro.1 | Extensions of Jakarta. Photograph by the author.

or ecology as a boundary limit or as some constitutive outside. They are not some alternate reality, just over there, just beyond the tracks or the near horizon. Sometimes they are heterotopic, exceptional, intensely specific, hidden in plain sight, prefigurative, or dissolute. In all instances the surrounds are infrastructural in that they entail the possibilities within any event, situation, setting, or project for something incomputable and unanticipated to take (its) place.

At the outset there is the question of whether the surrounds are singular or heterogeneously plural. Is it one kind of thing or many? The answer throughout this text is that they are somewhere in between or, in Marilyn Strathern's (1991, 27) formulation, "more than one and less than many." The surrounds can take the form of an untranslatable specificity but yet remain always in the form of the multiple, of many specificities, and thus not simply reducible to "one thing." The fact that the surrounds then "show up" across different contexts in many different forms renders them a prolific possibility, capable of appearing across many different kinds of structural constraints but without having to demonstrate a set of common features. At the same time, this multiplication of specificity needs some kind of connective tissue, some kind of at least vague assurance that each instantiation is not simply an anomaly, exception, or transgression, that each participates in something

beyond itself, and thus the surrounds comes to act as a concept or as a possibility inherent in the very formations of urban life. As a marker of this in-between position, while encumbered by the linguistic constraints of indicating the one or the many, reference will be made to surrounds across these shifting registers, highlighting at times the dimensions of singularity and at other times that connective tissue pointed to earlier.

In each sense, singular and plural, the surrounds is a product of a *relational location* rather than a geographic one. Cities are replete with clearly designated spaces—industrial, carceral, administrative, domestic, festive, logistical. But there is always something “left over” in their operations, something not completely captured by the terms of their respective functioning. Then there are spaces that seem to comprise elements of all these functions; spaces that are partly carceral, domestic, administrative, and so forth, but where the proportions of each characteristic are too difficult to discern or to stabilize within any particular calculation. Just as soon as you think you know what they are, they “move on,” or the function on which you have staked your analysis is suddenly superseded by others. So the surrounds is the relationship among spaces, whose complexions exceeds their function while maintaining them and whose functions are never clearly stabilized because they seem to absorb the multiplicity of characteristics that makes up the place of the surrounds. Each of these distinct circumstances surrounds the other. Not necessarily liminal zones, terroir vague, secret recesses, or domains of uncertainty, each space is in most circumstances clearly identifiable, accessible, with little reticence about announcing itself. But in this relationship between what exceeds definition and coherence and what insufficiently consolidates clear definition is an interstice of momentary possibility: a possibility for propositions and the rehearsal of experimental ways of living that circumvent debilitating extraction, surveillance, and capture—for the time being.

Forms of the urban are engendered across different registers and scales, whereby the elaboration of proficient logistical systems, modes of computation and interoperability, obdurate practices of long-honed livelihoods, financialization, and makeshift economies coincide, exerting a specific agency, albeit in disproportionate capacities. As indicated earlier, it is particularly in the figurative surrounds of the city, those arenas in which urbanization is being extended and, in turn, extending these processes in multiple and sometimes unprecedented ways, in which it is possible to amplify the existence of a more conceptual surrounds as a relational location, one that also entails a different kind of time. This surrounds is a tremulous, provisional interstice among disparate forms of spatial development that often concretely sit right





Intro.2 | Young man working within and beyond. Photograph by Michele Lancione.

next to each other, that physically overlap but do not touch completely, that do not have a *settled* relationship.

As such, the surrounds comes to embody a more generalized process of unsettlement, a maximizing of *exposures*, which like the apertures of cameras, fundamentally disturb the image of something that may have otherwise been taken as “for sure.” Intensified exposure can be seen as representing the intense precarity of urban lives in the so-called Global South, as well as the compiling of indebtedness driven by promises of middle-class attainment through consumption and the subsequent disappointments as to what this consumption has really accomplished. For those to whom opportunities for indebtedness were never offered, who were forced to completely improvise their daily existence, the proliferation of games of chance, of dissimilitude, of working around the constraints or seizing the weakly guarded, was often enough to hold on to some kind of anchorage in the city. But these opportunities, too, are also shrinking, and the subsequent desperation is sometimes repurposed as a threat, an instrument of blackmail, even as such populations can now become, quite literally, expendable, as exemplified in the extrajudicial killings of Rodrigo Duterte’s Philippines or by those workers forced to walk hundreds of kilometers to their homes. Exposed to intensified vulnerability and cruelty, they alternate between having little and having everything to lose.

## Exposures to Accompaniment

Exposure also entails a more volitional suspension of settlement, an often impulsive but determined decision to upend valued ways of living and operating within specific spaces in favor of more provisional circulations through various sites, occupations, and household compositions. Here, there is a more opportunistic, speculative orientation to urban futures for which any systematic planning or preparation makes little sense. It is all about being in the right place at the right time. But that right time is not foreseeable in advance. Rather, it is the outcome of simply “being there.” “Being there” in any particular emplacement is increasingly short-lived, as lengths of residential and work tenancies shrink. Youths in particular are more inclined to make impatient assessments about what a particular job, place, or training program has to offer. Increasing one’s exposure to the various spaces and populations of the larger urban region assumes greater importance, with its concomitant sense that what is available within a particular place is simply not sufficient for the future that is coming.

So, urban residents are increasingly situated in multiple exposures. There is the exposure to environments shaped by forces seen as being beyond one’s control. There is the exposure of wounds and trauma; the exposure of the insufficiency of any livelihood or political project to affect the array of forces that exceeds anyone’s capacity to pay attention or understand. But there is also the practice of residents exposing themselves to more nebulous eventualities, a conviction that passing through different territories, deals, itineraries, games, and conversations somehow prefigures and culminates in a space that both absorbs the weight of exploitation and simultaneously detaches from it. I will return to this notion of exposure in chapter 2, when I talk about how many of my associates in Jakarta view exposure as a critical method of inhabitation.

Many residents of Jakarta, Phnom Penh, and Delhi with whom I have worked over the past fifteen years do not have any clear idea about exactly what is being prefigured or what kind of life is likely to work. As they increasingly cannot count on the familiar infrastructures of care or see these infrastructures as inadequate in preparing for an uncertain future, they “drag” them across the thresholds of various operations that are not clearly collective but neither are they individual. Families and friends are set in motion, encouraged to spread out across cities to hunt for momentary opportunities. It is not that a single opportunity will be construed as the most opportune or a final destination. The objective is to multiply opportunities, find ways in

which they complement each other; the endurance of households is staked more on individual members inserting themselves in various “elsewheres” than on consolidating themselves in place. The concomitant itineraries of circulation across urban regions for one person are *accompanied* by the itineraries of many others also in circulation. Together, they forge momentary tribes of scavengers, adventurers, mercenaries, and friends in movement. For many, home remains somewhere, is revisited time and time again, often simply as place of momentary parking but then vacated again.

For those households with even some limited savings or multiple incomes, home is distributed across multiple sites, each hedging on the eventual prospects of increased valuation or access to opportunities. Each outpost surrounds the other; it changes function depending on whether it is a place of refuge, a primary residence, a rental for additional income, or a place of storage or commerce—a continuous relay, back and forth, of shifting investments and assessments.

Particularly at the peripheries of urban regions—in the sense of the actual hinterlands and those domains, regardless of physical location, that remain or become marginal to the officially valorized components of an urban economy—layer upon layer of sedimentation of diverging tenure systems, land uses, and regulatory frameworks are never quite subsumed into an overarching authority. Megacomplexes sit next to active farmland, owned perhaps by large corporations to offset taxation. These sit next to thousands of units of migrant hostels, sit next to industrial parks, sit next to thousands of small pavilions of so-called affordable housing, sit next to artisanal workshops—all without settled relations to one another but rather in relations that produce gaps, uncontrolled or undersurveilled spaces. The spaces may indeed be *surrounded* by both an emergent order of rationalization that will come to settle present uncertainties and a sense that *eventually* what exists as unprofitable, over- or underbuilt, informal, or tacitly contested will be normatively valuable. But for the time being, such spaces become opportunities for rehearsal, for experiencing the possibility of being exposed to something unprecedented, caring, and suggestive of new ways of moving and living.

One might see the surrounds as a kind of urbanization from below, a materialization of a more pluriversal territorialization of urban space, or an essential subaltern politics. Indeed, there is much to suggest that the surrounds, as posited here, lines up with these conceptualizations. Certainly the propositions offered by Arturo Escobar (2019), Asef Bayat (2013), and Gautam Bhan (2019) have been instrumental to the propositions offered



Intro.3 | One thousand doors of Jakarta extensions. Photograph by Miya Irawati.

here. Rather than identify a particular scalar register or attribute capacity to a particular kind of actor or positionality, the surrounds here are suggested as a kind of accompaniment to processes underway from those different scales and actors. It is not a relationship of symbiosis, co-constitution, or codependency but of companionship not based on the recitation of complementary interests or reciprocities.

Neither the spatial products nor processes under consideration necessarily need a surrounds, so whether an accompaniment is present is a matter detached from the character of those products and processes. Accompaniment means something that operates aside, on the side, that does not entail obligation or a manifestation of mutual desire. If I accompany someone it does not mean that the person accompanied could not accomplish a designated task on their own. Someone can still perform “solo” without missing something essential. Accompaniment is a supplement that shows up, now and then, and goes along for the ride. It is not unaffected by the going along, but it is not essentially invested in the outcome of the task at hand. It does not constitute a debt owed the recipient, even though such debt might ensue from a particular accompaniment.

This book’s intent, then, is to draw attention to the ways in which we are accompanied by an array of “companions” throughout the urban environ-

ment. Rather than seeing the built environment as the stage through which to exercise our privileges or as the concretization of aspirations, needs, and accomplishments, the built environment acts as an accompaniment to whatever we do. It pays attention to our practices; it bears witness to our travails and attainments. There is always something not used or only partially used, something that remains just out of reach, something barely noticeable or deemed irrelevant that accompanies all that is standard operating procedure, all the demarcated, sectorized, and zoned spatial arrangements. Accompaniment is a submergent infrastructure that suggests something other than what is recognized.

### Surrounds as Infrastructural Effect

For this reason, the surrounds here is considered a fundamental urban infrastructural effect.

As a method of formatting, of bringing form into existence and informing matter, infrastructure may seem to be informed by linear visions, clearly demarcated lines from “here” to “there,” or a geometric arrangement of materials in space. But infrastructure also restitutes potentials that have been subtracted by subject-centered ways of seeing, which establish specific sensory boundaries and angles of relational possibilities delimiting what is relevant to an existence and what is not (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018). But infrastructure is never complete, neither in its closure to further articulations nor in its process of immediate decay. It may be repaired, expanded, and updated, and as such it constantly shows evidence of not only what it bears and extracts, or the force that it imparts, but the limits of its anticipations. For in trying to impose specific lines of connection, it implicitly excludes others that remain to haunt it, that simply do not get out of the way or cease acting just because the concrete is poured, the pipes laid, or the wires drawn. So if the surrounds are an infrastructural effect, they, too, carry with them an ambivalence of use, for they can be as much exploited and exhausted as they can enable indeterminate uses and endure.

Infrastructure can be read as the embodiment of specific instantiations of capital flows, the aspirations of various kinds of articulation, the concretization of political accords; as strategic devices for socializing bodies and places; and as technologies for *throwntogetherness* (Massey 2005, 94). Yet equally important, infrastructure can be seen as a gesture toward the uncertain stabilities that exist in and as a result of the territorialization of space into discernible points, units, tangents, and vectors. Instead of a constantly expansive

hardwiring of metabolism, atmosphere, and geomorphology, infrastructure is also an increasingly frenetic signaling of volatility. Each suture, hinge, circumvention, or agglomeration is insufficient to the uncertainty infrastructure both registers and constitutes. Creative destruction makes infrastructure a plaything in the recalibration of value; exhaustion acts as a crisis that prompts repairs and renovation; and aesthetic incompatibility to prevailing sentiments subjects infrastructure to radical makeovers. But from its inception, infrastructure seems to point to the simultaneous presence of many temporalities—all the actions never quite constellated as event, all the intersections and transactions that either could have happened somewhere but didn't, or that did but didn't go anywhere specific or didn't leave enough of a tangible trace to point back to or move on from.

Environs are replete with what Brian Massumi (2014, 20–21) calls “bare activities,” imperceptible adjustments and immediately lived hypotheses about what is about to happen that incline persons to attend to particular textures, pathways in the landscape at hand. A thickly configured affective field pulsates with tensions constantly worked out, usually under any radar or conscious deliberation. Infrastructure intervenes not only to constitute starting positions from which to trace webs of causation, relevance, and impact but also to etch out channels of evacuation. What is important is not only what infrastructure brings together, how it connects actions, bodies, and sites, but also how it provides channeled lines of flight that provide a way for people and things to get away from having to absorb or be the bearings of work, home, institution, or place. What might happen if we stayed on this bus route beyond our designated stop or failed to get off at this highway exit; what would happen if we walked through all those back alleys and hidden trails, or left the pavement or even the ground to wander across rooftops or subterranean tunnels? What would happen if we had master keys or security codes and passes to cut through gates and barriers?

Still, the primary trajectory of infrastructure seems to “run away” from the intense simultaneity of multiple temporalities—the prospect that many things could and did happen somewhere. So the burden of bearing the weight of such intensity is displaced through the connective tissue of infrastructures. Pass, move things on, even when so many things are so tightly brought together. Concentration becomes the possibility of dispersal, even when things seem to be so well held in place. From infrastructure we come to know what the vast multiplicity of activity taking place concurrently and incipiently means for us in terms of its likely impact on our lives. But we are also constantly reminded of what we don't know. Our everyday routines

and itineraries constantly skirt on the interface between habituation and improvisation, where improvisation entails knowing from where we set off but also always raises that question about how to get “home.”

Imagine how it is possible to leave your house and set off and keep going without having any destination in mind other than the next step. If you are sufficiently funded, you can keep going indefinitely. Without map, plan, or anticipation, the emerging itinerary becomes an entanglement of memory, impulse, desire, and calculation. To continue constantly without a destination in mind is the implicit premise of infrastructure. Even as it orders and structures discernible courses of action and conveyances of cause and effect, it also seems to set things loose, pointing to how turbulent whatever seems stable actually is. How to occupy this turbulence—for a person cannot live *in* turbulence for very long—is the challenge posed by the surrounds. It is a challenge of pacing and rhythm: how to slow things down sufficiently to have opportunities to practice new ways of doing things or recuperate lost and cherished methods but without habituating to the particularities of the locale or worrying about what can be retained and applied to the next occupation; to find in that short-lived moment the ability to be an accompaniment to others on their way.

## Blackness as Urban Force

A critical objective of this book is also to find ways of incorporating the variegated corpus of contemporary Black critical thought as a resource to think through urbanization processes underway. This is not so much a reflection on ways in which various urban contexts treat Black residency or bend theorizations of the urban to consider the unacknowledged importance of blackness to the shaping of urban life. Rather, it is a reflection on ways to read the contemporary urban through the lens of such thought and to draw on the range of instruments of everyday practice and collective consciousness offered in specific formulations of the Black “social,” “political,” and “emancipatory” to identify spaces and times of the surrounds within the urban, particularly that of the Global South. Blackness here operates as method for experimental investigations, particularly aimed at the discovery of what *might be happening right now*, as specific propositions or prefiguring the abolition of not only the predicates of the carceral but also the urban reality as we know it.

It is important to emphasize that this is an exploratory, tentative deployment of Black thought to a project I have characterized as incumbent on



residents themselves. For many with whom I have worked and lived in Jakarta, there are always new attempts to bring the discrepant into momentary constellations of investigation, to look at things through new angles, to explore new terrain. It is an intensely restless city, and moving around is time consuming and often produces few rewards. But there is an increasingly widespread recognition that one takes wherever one is at the moment as a launching pad into something else. For what is to come is something that is being *prefigured* through one's very movements among different sets of contacts, temporary shelters, and improvised gatherings. My fellow residents look for suggestions, not definitions; they look to be pointed in directions they cannot yet see. So, too, in this book, the deployment of select strands of Black intellectual and political work is suggestive, heuristic. It is not interested in coherently defining a "Black contribution" and, as such, will "get things wrong." It may be impervious to the intricate architectures of thought and experience that have informed critical Black thought for generations. Who I am means that I will inevitably get things wrong, but the book seeks to live with this insufficiency while not being deterred from trying things out, given that countering the precarity and marginality of so many particularly Southern urban spaces and practices is now urgent.

As the subtitle of the Sheffield lectures cited in the preface, "From Extinction to Abolition," suggests, the concern was (and is) to reconsider abolition's essential proposition—*the changing of everything*—as a focus of a heuristic urban ethnography of *what has already been completely changed* even as the conditions for empirically verifying such transformation are not presently possible. This ethnography is not just a phantasmagoric redescription accomplished through an inventive poetics (although it is partially that). Rather, it is a way of thinking *incipience* not simply as sign of what is to become or could become but as an actual experience of unsettling, a moment of diffracted sense, where things could go many different ways, where life at the moment is staked on *the maybe*—where every available means of calculation goes no further than "maybe it will, or maybe it won't." At that moment, in that space, there is nothing beyond the *maybe*. This is where a sense of proportion breaks down; where it is not possible to tell what is one's own calculation, what is some diffuse *call* from somewhere beckoning one forward, or what is pure chance or fate.

*From extinction to abolition* does not then mark a definitive trajectory or process. After all, extinction would change everything too, leaving nothing in its wake. In a limited sense the "from" indicates how the prospect of human disappearance is wrapped up in the way in which the very proposition



of the human has been contingent on assigning specific bodies and lives to the categories outside the human or as the antithesis of the human. The “from” indicates the ways in which the prospects of unsustained human life can be directly attributed to the maneuver of dismissal and exclusion, and it indicates that any prospects for endurance require the abolition of that fundamental relation.

What I emphasize in this book is a sense that thinking through an already extant extinction, an exploration of spaces and times where the human is simply not regarded as present or particularly significant may be part and parcel of identifying a surrounds—in the sense of a space beyond capture within capture. Again, authors such as Katherine McKittrick (2013, 2021), Neferti X. M. Tadiar (2022), Tiffany Lethabo King (2019), Deborah Thomas (2019), and Sylvia Wynter (2003) have all written about spaces that have operated as a surrounds to specific sites and historical periods, and their work has been absolutely critical to the formulations offered here. Long histories of grand marronage are also salient here because they point to the ongoing conundrum entailed in moving from confinement to freedom. The flight from captivity was not only an attempt to extricate oneself from the plantation system but a means to unsettle its hegemony, to demonstrate the viability of possible outsides. Yet, any unsettling had to be complemented by the exigencies and practicalities of resettling.

At times, the destinations involved could attain a measure of self-sufficiency, settlements outside the scope of retribution or recapture. But many maroon communities could be established only in territories that necessitated being folded, at least partially, into the sovereignty of that plantation system. This could take the form of regulating the mobility of new generations of runaway slaves or indentured workers or of serving as a supplementary force intervening in internecine conflicts among disparate colonial interests. At still other times, marronage took the form of partial incorporation into other groups that existed at the margins of colonial regimes, such as one of the various indigenous groups often occupying seemingly uninhabitable terrain, which also limited the mobility and maneuverability of the maroon (Diouf 2014; Roberts 2015). Whatever the disposition, this transition “from” indicates the dilemmas of a fugitivity, where sometimes there were simply no places to run to, to hide at, to begin anew from, or if there were, they were often situated within inhospitable terrain, problematic partial connections to that which was left behind. All necessitated various ways of becoming imperceptible (Deleuze and Guattari 2013).

Throughout this book, my concern is exclusively *urban*. I do not intend to weigh in on contemporary theorizations or political struggles about abolition. Rather the objective is to consider how abolitionist ontologies are inscribed in the very extensivity of urbanization. Even in the interest of continuous accumulation and extraction of surplus value, the extension of the urban entails offering a particular working out of dilemmas faced by human settlements. This working out entails various equations of subsumption, adaptation, erasure, remaking, conciliation, and improvisation. Urbanization is not only something that spreads out as a function of its own internal operations but something that is contributed to through an intensely differentiated process of encounter that enables it to change gears and operate through a wider range of appearances and instantiations. If urbanization is extensive, it is so not only in the sense that it covers more ground or becomes an increasingly hegemonic modality of spatial and social production but also in the sense that it “shows up” as a key facet in the operations of institutions and sectors not previously considered urban.

These encounters, beyond simple metaphors of algorithmic combination, entail a fundamental aspect of the incomputable, or what Luciana Parisi (2013, 92) calls “incompressible data.” It concerns how dispositions veer off into something unintelligible, or ungraspable, with the available interpretive tools. If urbanization is not then simply the rollout of some overarching macroeconomic dynamic or the operations of the axiomatics of capital, it is also replete with rhythms of articulation that stutter, that act as if possessed by some divinatory force, that veer off only to reverberate somewhere unexpected. This book, then, is an attempted geography of those rhythms, apertures, detours, and interstitial layerings that seem to come from nowhere, that might appear as exceptions, exemptions, or eventually incorporable singularities but that are “coded” into the very propulsion of the urban itself.

In many respects the narrative voice here is conversational. I make frequent use of a generic “we”—for example, “we face this”; this is “our situation.” Who is the “we” here? Because this is an urban book, I am addressing urban residents, as if, in terms of prevailing conditions, “we are all in this together.” And “we” know well that “we” are not; that the urban is the embodiment of difference and the machinic production of difference, and that the characteristics of those differences are different themselves. They are a constant recalibration of whose lives count for what; who can be used and acknowledged for what. Residents are always situated within the urban differently,

and those differences are made to count in ways that exceed the desires and controls of those who bear them.

Adam Bledsoe and Willie Wright (2018) emphasize the ways in which Black geographies are rendered *aspatial*—incapable of acquiring genealogical substantiation, continuous and incremental histories of development—as a way of making them available to new projects of capital accumulation and extraction, as if nothing happens in those spaces. Urban residency knows no common default position, and here Black inhabitation amplifies the need to pay attention to how urban spaces are actually used, the ways in which usage comes to exceed the impositions of formatting, and how the positionality of Black residency identifies the necessity of maximizing the disruptions of such formatting that involve all of “us.”

So the frequent invocation of “we” is not to elide this fact but rather to emphasize those dimensions of urban spatiality and practice that demand us to be disrupted, albeit in different directions and orientations. Because as the exact nature of the surrounds—its shapes, timings, and approaches—may indeed differ for different kinds of residents, the surrounds is a reality for all residents, but to different degrees and with different implications. For the surrounds is perhaps a key spatializing of the rescaled, paraphrased question issued by Achille Mbembe in numerous lectures: Who does the city belong to? This is a question answerable only through the inclusion of all its inhabitants. If the city, or as Mbembe explicitly says, the earth, belongs to all its inhabitants, then the critical challenge is how to compose the “we,” which must sustain a radical openness to the world through negotiations and compromise. It is a “we,” then, that is continuously experimental. So the use of “we” here is as if these thoughts were being delivered on a street corner, in passing, and on the move, and as if in the midst of the surrounds themselves, which would then demand a colloquial usage of “we.”

### Space, Time, Practice

This book has a simple organization: three chapters and a brief coda focusing on spaces, temporalities, and practice. The first chapter on spaces situates the problematics around capture and liberation within *this* world and not in the becoming of alternative, new worlds. The intent of this emphasis is to focus less on what is to come and rather on what might be here, present, right now, amidst the interregnums, crevices, and no-man’s-lands produced by the way in which urbanization stitches and weaves, sutures and distends, a wide array

of inclinations, practices, and territories. Articulations never hold for sure, as arrangements fall apart, attention spans waver, and strange complicities ensue in order to buttress collapsing built and social infrastructures. What is it in these moments of disarray that enables momentarily uncontainable seepage, cracks in authority, and attention to spaces that permit different kinds of rehearsals and possibilities from the materials and situations at hand?

The second chapter on temporality is anchored in the proposition of a time when it is possible to forget being forgotten. When the memory of being a victim, of not being fully recognized as one would want or is due, is cast aside in favor of materializing a sense of adequacy without comparison. Here, there is an indifference to the ways in which being abandoned is always marshalled as a threat, and in which any subsequent abandonment is, as Frantz Fanon (2008) holds, a tenuous proposition of invention.

The third chapter is on practice and centers on the position of the *maybe* mentioned earlier, whereby one refutes the prevailing sense of things and the aspiration for guarantees and strategic planning in order to push through a particular “crossing.” It is about going where one doesn’t belong; showing up without eligibility; taking a chance on everything—all without the prospect of redemption. It is a practice that entails a particular way of seeing, of seeing past the individualized cognitive orientation to see in the surrounds another cognition at work, a constantly mutating array of *calls* emanating from anything and for which there is no clear expectation or right answer. Rather, these calls are invitations to different ways of paying attention, where, again, the surrounds is an accompaniment to everything the resident must do to consolidate a coherent or normative performance, to establish themselves in place. At times, the stakes are enormous, particularly as the costs of failure run higher and higher, as does the capacity for cruelty, particularly on the outskirts of what counts as viable urban life, and yet it is an outskirts to which larger numbers of residents are pushed.

Rebellion without redemption, then, is less railing against the windmills or existential struggles than making commitments to engender something specific. It is the building of an environment replete with propositions not translatable into anything other than themselves; the formation of materials whose compositions and use resist definitive narration. At the same time, the aim of such resistance is less a refusal of integration than carving out a time-limited experiment to configure relations between place, things, and bodies outside of assessment and judgment. Something that takes its place right here and right now, that needs not have anything to do with anything

else, that does not seek to defend itself from the outside world but rather seeks to reach it in a different way.

The reflections on rebellion in this chapter are not meant to detract in any way from the long histories of struggle and rebellion by the oppressed. It doesn't steer away from that rebellion's objective of freedom as an invented and valorized way of dealing with the dread of domination and the absolute need to extricate oneself from it (Patterson 2018). It attempts to complement McKittrick's (2021) notions of rebellion without measure, as well as Saidiya Hartman's (n.d., 15) efforts to "exhume open rebellion from the case file," where wayward lives are "liberated from the judgment and classification that subjected young black women to surveillance, arrest, punishment." The chapter seeks to accompany this work with an emphasis on the unanticipated specificities that rebellion can open up as *just* rebellion, sometimes undertaken with a surfeit of irony, indifference, a sense of interminable vulnerability or the insufficiency of any response (Joronen and Rose 2020), or just plain fun.

Amiri Baraka allegedly would remark that the favorite saying of the great Black classical saxophonist Albert Ayler regarding his music was, "It isn't about you," which meant that Ayler was implicitly talking about himself. At the peak of his powers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ayler's music was regarded either as an unbearable panoply of squawks, belches, and screams or as the embodiment of revolutionary sensibility, the definitive howl of unrelenting rebellion. Ayler was never that interested in clarifying countervailing interpretations and insisted that musical notation, the system of any inscription prescribing the progression of music, needed to be *accompanied* by sounds that pierced the distinctions between the joyful and wretched. After all, it wasn't about "you" or "him" but about a voice from elsewhere free to say anything "they" want. Despite being haunted by all kinds of demons that shortened his life—in contrast to the pantheon of elders, like Taylor, Roach, Rollins, Shorter, Mitchell, and Allen, who played or are still playing late into their eighties and nineties—Ayler attempted to be his own accompaniment, a companion species from beyond the pale, even though in all this he insisted that what he was doing was just having fun.

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