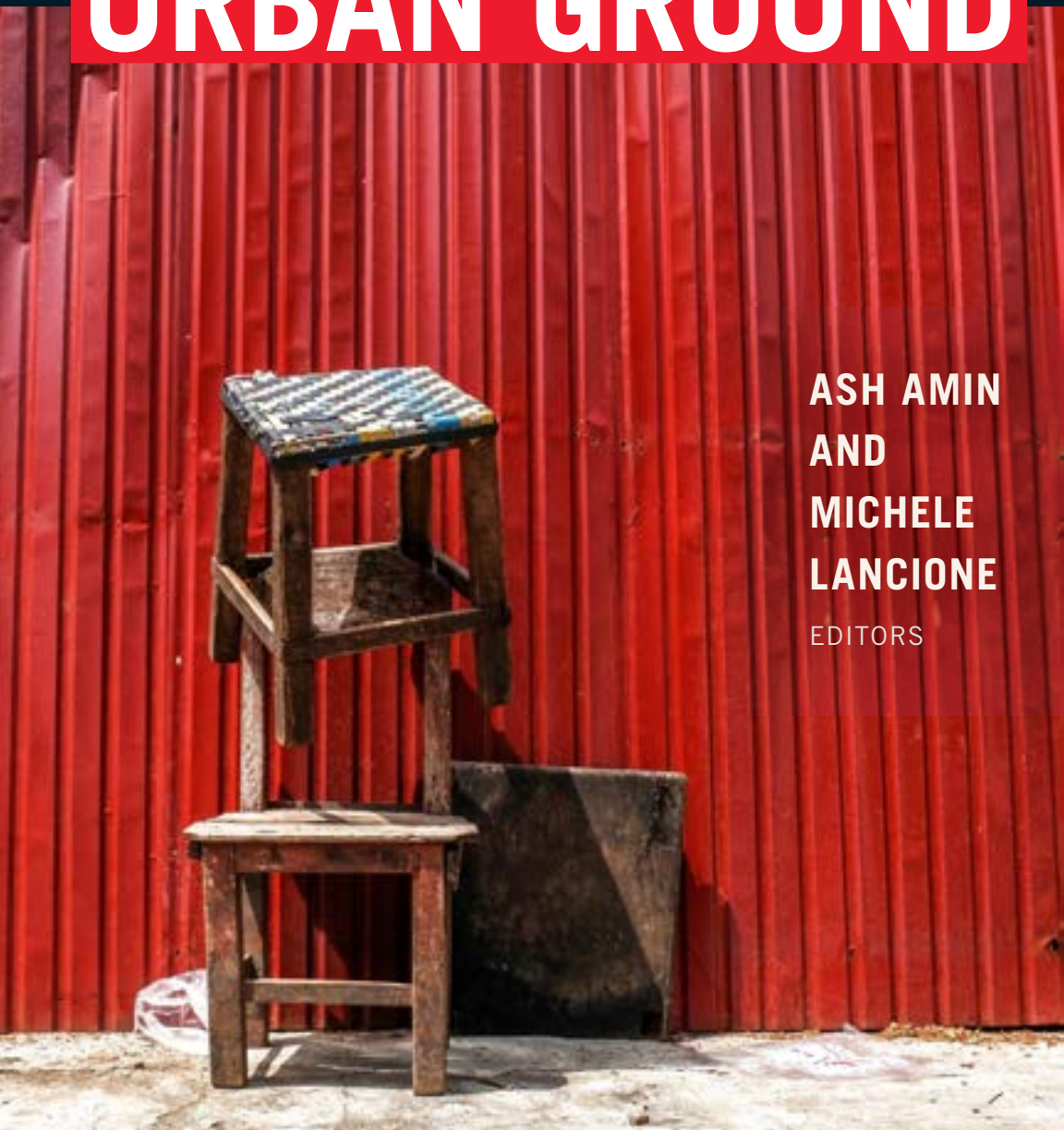
GRAMMARS OF THE URBAN GROUND



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THINKING CITIES FROM THE GROUND

Introduction

The twentieth-century urban grammar of abstraction, models, plans, and grand theory falls short of encapsulating and addressing contemporary urban complexity and agency. Like amalgams (De Boeck 2015), cities are entanglements of bodies, nature, things, technologies, infrastructures, and institutions, with the relations of assembly doing much of the work under the radar of the inherited language of urban analysis and planning. Cities have also become the gathering points of global networks of organization, flow, and connectivity, formed through the intersecting velocities, accelerations, and pause-points of transnational production, finance, migration, tourism, culture, climate, and political influence, all defying assumptions of urban territorial enclosure and integrity. If urban life is shaped and governed through these folds of time and space, if in this condition of relational co-presence and nodal connectivity the quintessentially "urban" comes to the fore, a nonbinary language capable of capturing this ontology is required.

For one, as repeatedly argued by decolonial scholars of cities in the South, this means rejecting the one-model-fits-all (Western) tradition of urban theorizing, which has for so long silenced other ways of thinking the urban and which lacks critical capability. When we say "critical" we mean an approach that refuses to take things for granted (Marcuse 2009), including *its way of thinking and theorizing*. Even the field of critical urban studies,

no longer a marginal voice, struggles with this precept, while cities continue to escape and defy the fixed categories of theory, entreating them to be constantly reexamined. Criticality in urban thinking requires working with plural analytics and concepts, placing them in continual dialogue with each other, then being prepared for their unsettlement by new ontological developments.

The field of critical urban studies has sought to stay close to the urban ground from diverse perspectives, ranging from political economy and political ecology to post-structuralist, feminist, queer, black, and decolonial thought. In this effort over the last three decades, baseline concepts capturing formative processes and powers have been mobilized to read the twists and turns of urban life as it unfolds and accretes, in an attempt to acknowledge and examine the entanglements and relations that make cities and city life. A conscious effort has been made to hold in view the complex relationship between scales, structural formation and everyday praxis, human as well as nonhuman agency, and the varied power dynamics undergirding these relations. Any inclination to force the empirical into the precepts of an abstract model or explanatory paradigm has ceded to the desire to bring it to the surface of theoretical enquiry, and of political praxis. If the call within critical urbanism for a complex understanding of the city was inclined in early years to silence relations and histories in search of the baseline, today it looks to write the multiplicity of the urban into its theorization.

The scope of our collective intervention with this book, then, is to take stock of at least some of the multiplicity, and to offer a potential reading of its ongoing journey. This is not an attempt to renew or revise what we might call critical urban studies, but instead to present a reflection at the *crossroads* (Simone 2010), around a particular modality of "thinking cities" that has emerged in recent years, renewing the language of critical urban thinking. A new generation of scholars is coming up, strengthened by calls for more-nuanced and more-political urban epistemologies (Oswin 2018; Roy 2020), founded on the double move that the canons of urban theory need jostling from below, and that the agentic power of cities demands an evolving, yet deeply grounded and relational, account and politics of the urban (Lancione and McFarlane 2021).

This to us seems a common orientation across the diverse strands of contemporary critical urbanism, including the "ontological turn" (see below) in which we locate our own thinking and work more explicitly indebted to Marxian political economy, political ecology, and feminist, queer, and critical-race thought. What cuts across these approaches is an increased

attention to relational thinking, to situated and yet always translocal formations, and to processes involving nonhuman agencies. Far from offering theoretical homogeneity and methodological clarity, such inclinations signal at a minimum the vitality of an entire field of enquiry ("the urban") trying both to challenge its past assumptions and, crucially for us, *to look for a language of complex formations*. The shared double move of rewording urban theory and reworlding the urban ground raises important questions about the meaning of "critical" enquiry: What constitutes the "political" in forms of urban enquiry that both center a critique of urban knowledge-production and are committed to the multiplicity of city lives? Are there traces, across the strands and their locations, of a common grammar of at least shared, or sharable, intents? And, crucially, on what basis can distillations of process and project be made, without falling back into the trap of twentieth-century essentialist taxonomies that often generalized the Western, white, and male gaze, with effects that go well beyond the remit of "urban scholarship" (de Sousa Santos 2016; Bhambra et al. 2018)?

Rather than any search for unifying theory, the shared impulse behind these questions seems to be a desire to stay close to the grounds of urban life, through its various scales and relations, and to experiment with conceptual lexicons that allow for a richer, and more profoundly critical, exploration of city-making and urban struggles. This openness is more than a desire to work with and through the simple fetish of "everyday life" or to map the phenomenological as seen. It is to find ways of getting at immanent processes and tendencies, open to how knowledge about the ground is produced and also to the possibility that the political economies and ecologies of cities as composites are interactively formed and chronologically accreted, requiring a relational and excavational critique of essentialist thinking (Stengers 2005). For example, if cities are envisaged as amalgams of financial, informational, and human flow, of the more-than-human, of multiple sources of authority, then how this assemblage makes social and material life becomes the matter of political attention and its sites become the passage points of political action. The challenges of urban address are wrested from the language of urban deliberation and territorial control and placed in the language of opportunities presented by urban process, bending toward a politics of making its practices visible and alterable through sustained ontological interventions.

This book is an attempt to sketch the elements of a grammar of the urban ground, building both on critical traditions of thought and on the ontological turn in urban studies so as to identify formative impulses and mechanisms

that could also be altered for reparative action and just outcomes. It aims to move beyond siloed categories such as urban "economy," "society," and "politics," which ignore the horizontal, connective, and aggregative forces of city-making that efforts to improve urban lives, agencies, and environments must negotiate. For this task, we have selected voices who in recent years have done much of the work of thinking from the ground and interpreting its grammars, attempting to work at the precise juncture of immanent force and expressible manifestation. Before summarizing their contributions, however, we briefly recall the genealogy of the turn in critical urbanism that this book encapsulates, to then reflect on why the choice of motifs from the urban ground is of conceptual and practical value.

Ontological Turns and Political Grounds

"The city is a *mediation* among mediations," "an *oeuvre,*" wrote Henri Lefebvre, aiming to emphasize the manufactured nature of the city (2008, 101). This includes its scripting. In writing about the city, in (re)presenting it, urban scholars contribute to its creation and reproduction, which is why the question of *critical grammars for the city* is so important. In adopting, explicitly or implicitly, a particular urban lexicon, scholars become part of that "mediation among mediations," opening up as well as foreclosing opportunities for engaging, appropriating, and experimenting with what's at stake in the city. Indeed, the large number of journals, books, and articles dedicated to urban policy analysis and intervention is a clear sign of the will to power over the urban oeuvre. Policies are ranked, benchmarked, bought, sold, and implemented without much thought given to questions of validity, applicability, and reach (McCann 2013). And this work sustains a lucrative industry of academic knowledge-production (Flyvbjerg 2001; McCann 2008; Allen and Imrie 2010). Another consequence is the tendency to search for those core urban structures and processes that are decipherable from a singular theorization of the urban.

Centering the urban ground in ways of talking, writing, and theorizing about cities offers no easy answer to the conceptual (and political) limitations of extant thinking, nor does doing so mean to elude the question of "mediations." It is, on the contrary, a way to get closer to what "mediations" actually are in the immanent life of our global urban world, whether they be they matters of financial circulation or of everyday affective orientations. Centering the "ground" of city life in critical urban thinking means,

in other words, to stay close to the instantiation of urban processes, the nexuses where modalities of life (including its suppression in diverse ways) take form, unfold, and irradiate well beyond their immediate topographical limits. Given that nexuses are always multifaceted—in that they can be matter existing of bodies, places, and relational spaces—looking for *grammars of the urban ground* means expanding the conceptual vocabulary to incorporate a situated and heterodox lexicon of and for the "city." The "political," in such an enterprise, lies not only in finding a language for complex formations, but also in looking for the generative possibilities of such a grammar to promote emancipatory ways of managing urban life.

Crucially, a certain attentiveness to what we might call the "urban ground" has always been present in critical urban scholarship. Urban land is one of these grounds, as the work of David Harvey or, more recently, Raquel Rolnik has clearly shown (Harvey 1985; Rolnik 2019). Here the land itself is shown to turn into a nodal point—a fix, to use Harvey's words—through which a particular modality of urban development (estate-based, financially wired, and profit-oriented) has not only been made possible but even encouraged to flourish. Its political economy has seen the flattening of state and independent regulation of the urban estate, to make for corporatist and financial translocal speculation. Extensive commodification in this way has created "mundane" terrains for capital profiteering—for example, technocratic rent management to ensure new levels of immediate extraction of financialized value, and the systematic removal of land from the long-term housing market in the name of short-term and high-return profit-making (which has latterly escalated to the extensive Airbnbization of dwellings in tourist cities worldwide).

Marxian political economy has done much to reveal the urban estate and all that it sustains as both the agent and the effect of diverse modalities of capitalist extraction and regulation. In the same way, a cognate political ecology has shown how the metabolic infrastructures and natures of cities have succumbed to the logic of capital (Heynen et al. 2006; Bulkeley et al. 2014; Castán Broto 2019), subsuming an ever-expanding material environment on which huge concentrations of people depend for survival, and producing class, racial, and other forms of dispossession and violence (Perry 2013; Shabazz 2015; Gibbons 2018; Roy 2019). In a similar vein, feminist urban thinking has always taken the grounds—of patriarchal homes and planning—as the prime locus to build a critique and to craft a progressive political language of and for the "city" (Massey 1994; Katz 1996;

Kern 2020). These tendencies alone show that an optic from the "ground" of urban life is not a recent discovery, and owes much to materialist analysis of the city maturing since the 1970s. Yet, recent years have also seen the arrival of other theorizations of the urban ground—less economistic, more situated, and erring toward immanent forces and dialectic relations rather than structural impositions. One prominent development has been the interpretation of the ground of cities as being "ordinarily" differentiated, thereby challenging assumptions about how urbanity (and capital) work across geographies and scales (Robinson 2005; Roy and Ong 2011). There is now a conspicuous literature on comparative urbanism advocating also a "southern" knowledge attentive to contextual histories and local processes and wary of totalizing theory from the experience of (some) northern cities (Roy and Crane 2015; Bhan 2016; Oswin 2020).

If this turn began to acknowledge the variegations and complexities of urban life—across scale and place (Massey 1993)—and to signal a "compositional" approach that should "not take things for granted" (Marcuse 2009), it also produced a foray into diverse bodies of post-structuralist thought that can only be gathered as plural voices in critical urbanism, rather than as a coherent body of theory. But, as indicated above, we would claim for them a common interest to make visible and speak from compositional arrangements close to the urban surface. We see the turn toward words such as "assemblage," "complexity," or "relationality" as being united in stressing the importance of getting closer to the entanglements (re)producing the urban and in understanding their ontological status: if not as all-powerful "structures" then as forces-in-relation and sociomaterial mediations (Gibson-Graham 2014; Amin and Thrift 2016) with considerable political agency across the spectrum of urban life (McFarlane 2011; Lancione 2016; Datta 2012; Simone and Pieterse 2017). In this ontological turn the "political" neither evaporates nor evades a critique of capital, as its critics from political economy are wont to claim. Instead, it is tacked from a "minor" and "molecular" perspective, which looks to the machinery of everyday orderings that make people, things, and nature subjects of, and subjugated to, capitalism, and from which change could be organized. As two often misinterpreted philosophers of this ontological turn put it, "molecular escapes and movements would be nothing if they did not return to the molar organizations to reshuffle their segments, their binary distributions of sexes, classes, and parties" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 219).

The ontological turn looks to "social theory in an altogether different way," proposing "horizontality versus verticality, self-organization versus

structuration, emergence versus transcendence, attention to ontology as opposed to epistemology" (Escobar 2007, 106). Three traits are worth recalling to situate the critical thinking and grammars of the urban ground that this book seeks to encapsulate. The first is a reading of the social that is open to immanence, uneasy about enclosing relational developments into specific ontological categories or treating them as matters of cause and effect (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Massumi 1992; Buchanan 1997; Bonta and Protevi 2004). In urban analysis, this implies focusing on how the city, in its many entanglements, emerges in their makings and always in excess of the givens of social categorization (Amin and Thrift 2002; Latour 2005). The second trait is a "post-human" sensibility of seeing the "social" as the yield of humans and non-humans in interaction, with neither being prominent over the other but only affecting each other (Ahmed 2007; Stewart 2007; Anderson 2014). This is close to what Graham Harman has called an object-oriented ontology, asserting that objects have an autonomous existence vis-à-vis human thought, which itself must be considered as one of the "objects" making up the world (Harman 2009), and it adds to Arturo Escobar's appeal to work with multiple ontological possibilities to design and inhabit a plural world (Escobar 2018). The third trait is an interest in a politics-of-becoming based on the terms of assemblage and encounter (Foucault 1980), thus repositioning, for example, traditionally understood a priori abstractions of class, gender, and race as infractions meted out and contested in the melee of their lived intersections both with each other and with more-than-human material (Grosz 1993; Stengers 2010).

This approach has been taken up with some vigor in urban scholarship troubled by the gap between the actual and pretheorized city (derived for the most part from Western cities deemed to be paradigmatic). An initial thrust came from readings of cities as relational topologies, rather than as topographies contained within their administrative boundaries. Doreen Massey (1994) and Saskia Sassen (2002), expanding on contributions that showed the urban-land nexus to be shaped remotely as well as structurally (Harvey 1985; Castells 1990), opened urban scholarship to the plural geographies—local, global, interregional, historical—shaping city life. Then, in 2002 one of us (Amin) and Nigel Thrift explored the potential of the ontological turn by interpreting cities as a "mechanosphere" of intersecting infrastructures, later followed by writing conjecturing cities as assemblages, atmospheres, and more-than-human entities (Whatmore 2002; Farías and Bender 2010; McFarlane 2011). In more recent years, new lines of thinking have emerged, sharing a similar interest in post-human

articulations and processes. They delve into the everyday makeshift conditions of neighborhoods by urbanites to inhabit seemingly underregulated cities (Simone 2004; Simone and Pieterse 2017), into the intricacies of urban infrastructures shaping social subjectivity and experience in differentiated ways (Chattopadhyay 2012; Larkin 2013; Amin and Thrift 2016), and into urban marginality refracted through the lens of history, material occupancy, and political organization (Vasudevan 2015; Lancione 2016; Roy 2017; Thieme 2017; Truelove 2018).

The amassing body of assemblage thinking in urban studies has not escaped tokenistic uses of its concepts to deliver descriptive, ahistoric, and power-free accounts of the urban. At other times, enthusiasm for the more-than-human has tended to neglect questions related to entrenched social inequalities and injustices, not to mention the critical insights of long-established traditions in political economic, feminist, critical-race, and queer thinking. Yet, combined with the latter, the ontological turn reinforces a genuinely critical urbanism of the sort outlined at the start of this chapter, attending to the relational and material structuration of everyday urban life, disclosing the discriminations and power asymmetries of the urban "mechanosphere," and opening a ground for a politics of renegotiation of the urban through the circuits that constitute it, with the understanding that these circuits are never purely technical. We are not suggesting a carefree merger of conceptual positions, but instead some trade of ideas between them. The insights, for example, of a conceptual toolkit honed to untangle racial dispossession in the contemporary urban cannot be folded into the language of "assemblages." Yet, the latter's interest in material infrastructures, multiple ontologies of everyday life, and sites of affective labor can help to widen understanding of racialized exclusions of interest also to the former (Amin 2012). Similarly, while work on the political economy of urban land grab might not look into the embodied experience of housing precarity, without understanding the latter there can be no test of the lived effects of diverse models of political economy (Lancione 2018; Weheliye 2014).

We are interested in showing how disparate grammars can—and very productively—be held together in their shared commitment to the immanent urban ground, taken as a space of not one but many performative logics, played out in the workings of sociotechnologies and infrastructures, markets and institutions, land and real estate, environmental processes, and bodily encounters, to name just a few sites. Thus, we would expect, as in this book, a situated critique of capital, of gender, race, sexual and colonial violence,

and of material and environmental arrangements. We would expect an eschewal of theoretical unity, abstraction, and overconfidence, and an openness to conceptual pluralism, experimentation, and renewal. We would expect a sensibility of more than words and humans, of the "make+shift" (Vasudevan 2015), acknowledging the nonverbal, provisional, and experimental nature of city life.

Ultimately, acknowledging the polivocality of urban sociomaterial processes is key to the *grammars* we are signaling in this book, and it requires a double move. First, it means "writing the city into the urban." We borrow this expression from Pushpa Arabindoo, who, in introducing an event that took place at Institut d'Études Avancées de Paris to celebrate the fifty years of Lefevbre's *La Révolution Urbaine,* invited scholars to get closer to the city in order to be able to write about it. Arabindoo's invitation is to harness the "theoretical potential of the urban" through an attentiveness to the "ethnographic insights of the city" (Arabindoo 2018). It gets us once again to get "out there," in the way of the Chicago School (Park 1936; Lindner 2006), but this time with a firmer grasp of the place of political economy, epistemic framing, scholarship of the "margins," and assemblage thinking. Such writing cannot retrofit the city into an image of the urban, but can only find clarity in the messiness of interconnections, junctures, and those friction points making up life in different places. It must be attentive to local specificities and processes, it must use theory as a compass, and it must be careful in making urban comparisons across geographies (Lancione and McFarlane 2016). Writing the city into the urban in this way requires being attentive to the "multiplicity of story lines" (Simone and Pieterse 2017) that fold together machinic tendencies and lived practices. The authors here exemplify this kind of attentiveness to the urban ground, questioning what urban theory does and how, and staying close to the particularities of situated city life.

Secondly, "writing the city into the urban" means informing urban praxis without pretensions of oversight. The language of urban intervention is cast out of the mold of working the grain, making fine adjustments, finding epistemic collaborators, avoiding grand designs, and, above all, exposing policy fashions such as neoliberal techno-driven entrepreneurialism (as is clear in much of the "smart city" charade) that sharpen inequalities and exclusions. A grammar of the urban ground, as the authors in this volume show, commits to the opportunities of "make+shift," while at the same time is concerned about the situated and transversal forms of violence that demand more than prosaic alterations. Light years away from

a nontemporal, nongeographical, and "fuzzy" language of capitalist subjections (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), it offers a nonprescriptive lexicon that can be appropriated, explored, and adapted by actors who try daily to alter city workings and dynamics. Some of the authors of this book are already doing this kind of work, and we hope that the style and ethos of their work herein will invite further interlocutors: urban scholars and activists looking for ways of sensitively intervening in the weft and warp of urban functioning, provisioning, living, belonging, and survival, using those as the access points for a molecular and molar politics of justice and sustainability (Katz 2017).

Post-categorical Urbanism

Staying close to the ground requires a form of what we might call "post-categorical thinking," so as to open a space to "think the city" beyond the categories of received wisdom (Lancione 2016). There can be little point in engaging in the intersectional, transversal, ethnographic, and vernacular—the composite and the experienced—if the rich material yielded is then flattened by limiting categorizations. This is not to reject the latter in absolute terms. Categories are often appropriated and filled with new meaning, as subaltern groups have been doing for some time (think, for instance, how meanings of the notion "queer" have evolved). The post-categorical thinking that we have in mind has more to do with what can emerge when the norm is interrupted, and when experiments are free to flow. This is a form of a posteriori thinking: an opening that exceeds and surpasses standardized definitions, which may well be enclosed into new definitions, but that is about the event of an opening in the first place. This means suspending the urge to compartmentalize evidence, and instead to make for a degree of lexical ambiguity or pluralism.

A first step might be to commit to urban detailing, listing what goes on within the meshwork of urban-making and unmaking and being guided by the enforcements of the sociotechnical networks. This form of tracing seeks rigor, detail, and orientation, not comprehensive statement, building the elements of a lexicon to speak about urban complexity in ways that provide the bare marking of immanent urban processes. Such bare marking then permits urban detailing to enter into dialogue with the precepts of a critical urbanism interested in the asymmetries of political economy, bodily differentiation, and more-than-human assembly. This form of ground-up

theorizing indexed to certain precepts of power opens conceptual and political possibilities, rather than reducing them to paradigmatic givens. Seemingly mundane and "neutral" things such as infrastructures, affective atmospheres, material arrangements, but also sociocultural practices, are set free to speak and, when filtered through the precepts of power, permit unseen or silenced political machinations and propositions to come to the fore (McFarlane and Silver 2017; Thieme et al. 2017; Lancione 2019). Thinking post-categorically—of allowing oneself to inhabit the space of multiple grammars of the urban ground—is about intervening in the writing and speaking of "the city" so as to alter assumed ways of *containing* it. Let us, for example, examine how the categories of urban economy, welfare, and governance can be reimagined.

Consider how the received categories of urban economy are forced open by the ground material of urban value generation, distribution, and reproduction together with the making of the everyday economy in between political economy, makeshift practices, and infrastructural provision. Staple categories such as urban "supply" and "demand," "scale and scope," "competitive advantage," and "formality and informality" cede to a narrative of value generation that would recognize the interdependencies of sociality, organization, infrastructures, and urban property. Accordingly, new value circuits press for recognition in the urban economic calculus, as do unrecognized interdependencies of value creation. A different kind of supply-side economics emerges, one attending to the powers of infrastructure, the performances of technology, the circulations of passion, the differentials of social performativity, and the heavy weight of legal and property relations: all nuances of how the city works as a sociotechnical and cultural arrangement that both enables and disables economic life, unevenly shaping its allocations and rewards. A politics of infrastructure, sentiments, tenure, and conduct inserts itself into the calculus of urban economic management, and of struggles for economic justice informed by grassroots organization manifest in all but the most corporatized segments of an urban economy (from the makeshift and informal to the cooperative and circular).

A similar disruption of the given categories of urban welfare is forced by attending to actual dwelling practices: to how humans and nonhumans in interaction make and meet the everyday ends. This is not to deny the categories of class, gender, race, or any other form of classification that typically correlates with inequalities of social provisioning and recognition. Instead, it is to interrogate these classifications through an analysis of the lived material practices of urban inhabitation, subtly shifting

the focus toward the urban constitution of well-being and its differentials through the dwelling of urban material—the interdependencies of technology, biology, habitat, infrastructure, and their contextual histories. Such a grammar of the urban social based on the composites of dwelling opens the ground for an associated *politics of the composites*. Over and above interventions around the quantities and qualities of housing, schooling, health care, jobs, and green spaces, a politics of the composites might attend to topological influences on welfare such as urban size, sprawl, and density, to the mediations of supply, service, and housing infrastructures, to the many informal curative practices of city dwellers toward each other and their environments, to the myriad micro-fascisms that spoil social life, and, in general, to delving into the daily matter of welfare.

In the grammars of this book, urban politics finds itself sandwiched between top-down efforts to manage urban complexity and bottom-up efforts to claim the city on the behalf of particular interests, between varieties of managerialism and varieties of interest politics. Both bend toward altering conduct by adjusting the frames of governance, representation, and participation—that is, the "rules" of political power and responsibility in the city. An attention to the grammars of the urban ground bends toward a politics of adjustment of the lively agencies-in-relation that produce the distortions and discriminations of everyday life and reward in the repetitions of instituted routine. Its interventions veer toward altering the terms and means by which the powers of the urban mechanosphere operate, recursively, to discriminatory ends. Its language becomes that of intervening in the pinch points and strategic nodes of critical urban networks, enabling the public and popular control of infrastructures, habitats, and neighborhoods, drawing on law and political assemblies to reorder city material workings, and acknowledging the agency of manifold actants involved in a city's constitutive fabric (Easterling 2014; Amin and Thrift 2016).

Lexical Openings

In assembling this book, we asked our authors to start from these broader entry points of urban economy, welfare, and governance, and then to show what a nondogmatic, open, and critical urban epistemology might look like. We invited colleagues who, we believe, have decisively contributed in the past decades to push the boundaries of urban theory along the lines we have identified in this introduction. We asked them to vivify the

meanings of value creation, well-being, and agency. And from such reinsertion of the city both as a *topology* (for example, its scale or density) and *from below* (detailing city-making) into various domains of urban life, we asked them to propose a new way of thinking and dealing with the city *from within* (reimagining city-politics). The variety of styles, settings, geographies, and urban assemblages analyzed in the book were chosen purposefully to offer a number of orientations and opportunities for scholars, practitioners, policy-makers, and activists intrigued by the chance of rethinking the way cities can be studied ground-up and organized plurally, beyond what is still taught in many urban theory courses around the globe. Their propositions are very much about writing the urban political, where the language used to encapsulate what it is to be done by whom constitutes an operational opening. The language itself is key in keeping urban politics on the move, pressing to recognize and attain more, reach out further, and close the gap between the real and the desired.

In this spirit, we open the book with Natalie Oswin's reflections on the relationship between queer thinking and urban theory. Exploring the treatment of sexuality in Burgess and Park's foundational work on the city of Chicago, Oswin reminds us that no grammar is really ever "new": the gravitational pull of "old" debates and frames is always there, cutting through or feeding back, even when that takes a contested form. In looking through this history, one can see how the relationship between (hetero)normative (and categorical) urban thought and queer thinking is more than a simple matter of oppositions. Perhaps what is needed is not *yet another* theory: that is, not a Queer Urban Theory naming a radical queer urban sensibility. This is because what Oswin, following but also reworking Park and Burgess, calls "social junk"—a "capitalist surplus composed of gendered, sexualized, racialized, and classed . . . waste" that traditionally is contained, silenced by, and sanitized within the canon of urban studies—does not require a new theory in its name, but instead needs a "queering" move that makes space for lateral, nonpresumptive ways of thinking the urban. As we note in this introduction, such a move is about fostering forms of post-categorical thinking that suspend *explanation* in favor of a lexicon carved out from the grounds, to crack the ceiling of overly ordered theory and practice. Oswin signals that the *queering* of urban thinking requires an ear not only to the post-categorical but also to the "multi-modal," which is situated in a transversal "urban undercommons."

In chapter 2, Ananya Roy brings to the fore a foundational aspect of thinking cities from the ground of "social junk." Building on the turn

toward "southern" urban theorizing, in which she has had a prominent role, Roy addresses the methods of "reworlding" urban inquiry. If it must include the fundamental work of foregrounding colonial lineages, it also must engage in "the task of resituating the cities of the global North in the long history of racial capitalism, including slavery, settler-colonialism, and imperialism," she suggests. To this end, Roy introduces the notion of "racial banishment" so as to foreground the "structuring processes of racial capitalist and settler logics of spatial settlement and expulsion" in explaining urban displacement using the language of gentrification or eviction. In adopting the language of "banishment" and its underpinnings in racial capitalism, she proposes a contrasting grammar to understand—and act on—enduring forms of urban dispossession. This shift is deeply political. It is about exposing the epistemic violence of concepts and methodologies "that persistently obscure the forms of racialized dispossession through which the American metropolis has been built." It is about showing how the way in which concepts are built reflects the kind of urban political they can both reveal and deal with (de Sousa Santos 2016): in today's context, exposing how the consequences of racial banishment are occluded yet exacerbated by grammars of austerity management and large-scale biological threat such as COVID-19 (Lancione and Simone 2020).

In the third chapter, Colin McFarlane unpacks the political economy of another keyword, *density*—widely understood as a foundational urban principle. He proposes a double move so as to recenter urban density from a decolonial, processual, and comparative perspective. He argues the need to decouple *density* from celebratory staples derived from emblematic (northern) forms of urban agglomeration, so that "an alternative archive of knowledge about urban density" can be produced from multiple lived experiences revealing how densities are "at once vital for remaking the city, and increasingly at risk all over the urban world." This *force of density* is proposed by McFarlane as a key component of making the urban political, shifting "density" away from being an a posteriori phenomenon to register and replicate, toward attending to "density's knowledge politics" and its situated possibilities in specific historic settings, citing evidence from his extensive fieldwork in cities such as Mumbai and Hong Kong. From the ground of experience, density returns as a heterogeneous category activated in the efforts of various urban subjects in contested ways, offering yet another example of the valence of writing the city back into urban theory *in order to* open new avenues of practice. Here, policy is not called to "act upon" but rather "to learn from, in a concerted and ongoing way, the heterogeneity

of dense lived urbanisms that already exist in the city, and to attempt to augment those."

In a similar vein, in chapter 4 Nigel Thrift refashions the contours of another urban keyword—*size*—steering us clear of magical formulations of possibility or disablement arising out of "bigness" in contemporary city life. Cities around the globe, he observes, have seen not only ballooning populations but also amplifications arising from their insertion in a myriad of larger and larger world-spanning communication networks. Size has become ontological and formative, but in far from clear or straightforward ways. Thrift delves into the cultural paradoxes of urban scaling up and out, one being the challenge of standing out "from the urban crowd in an era in which standing out from the crowd has become an insistent predicate to action." He notes how the pursuit of originality has now become a mass pursuit by urbanites with the means of "making life into a series of peak experiences . . . something close to a sacred mission," with cities being expected to feed and be measured by the experience of "intensity." These cultural shifts, for Thrift, challenge conventional understandings of urban innovation premised on the amassment of culture and creativity, since originality is "the result of heavily contingent and contextual interactions, the outcomes of which are often decided only in the moment." In-the-moment fashioning, with significant repercussions, requires "other words for processes that unfold in cities that will always—always—be partially unknowable," and necessitates an urban vocabulary with words reaching out into the unknown and the uncertain.

In chapter 5, Mariana Valverde unpacks both the power and the contingency of law, which too often is viewed in urban studies as being remote and fixed in the arena of urban governance. She argues that the legal forms chosen by actors in specific situations—"property forms, land tenure forms, contracts, municipal legal tools, national laws—encourage certain ways of living and acting together, often in invisible and/or unintended ways, while discouraging others." These are ways that are never "wholly predictable or inevitable" both because of the variety of legal pathways that could be chosen and because of the politics of consensus and conflict surrounding a legal course of action. Valverde examines a diverse set of legal forms enacted by private and public interests to show how the detail of action and sociopolitical enrollment shapes outcomes in unpredictable directions (one example being a gated community using a contractual option to tax itself to build a swimming pool that will also benefit neighboring communities, serving "the same purpose as a municipal swimming

pool, even if it is privately owned and privately built"). Valverde's chapter underscores the value of seeing how "legal structures and legal tools have a 'constitutive effect' on social life including civic habits of urban citizenship."

These first five chapters refine and expand our earlier entreaty for grammars of the ground by reimagining some of the staples of contemporary urbanism and the urban canon. The remaining chapters take this thinking further, more explicitly foregrounding detailed ethnographic material. In choosing to present our authors' contributions this way, we editors obviously do not intend to create a distinction between more "theoretical" and more "empirical" material. All the accounts presented here are focused on the dynamic compositions of the urban grounds: some authors decided to center their reflections and theorizations spurring from the latter, while others preferred to stay closer to narrating the unfolding of everyday assemblages. Both these strategies (and many others, we are sure!) are valid ways of experimenting with grammars of the urban ground that are attentive both to a foundational critique of urban knowledge-production and to the multiplicitous and contested nature of the assemblage we call "urban."

The authors' accounts, based in most cases on their decades of direct engagement with urban formations and struggles around the world, are rooted in composite—atmospheric, materialist, processual, and "lively"—readings of urban infrastructures, histories, and entrenched inequalities. The conceptual language exceeds that of "critical urban theory" and assemblage urbanism. Yet, like the latter, in bringing together and tracing the everyday formations of more-than-human urban life *in order to* better understand and oppose embedded and contingent power unbalances, each chapter with its own signature words offers a prime example of how thinking with the language of the ground opens "queer" insights and motivations.

Teresa Caldeira's chapter on everyday life in the peripheries of São Paulo, Brazil, is informed by her more than forty years of fieldwork in the city on practices of autoconstruction, the gender politics of LGBTQ+ activists, and youth art and digital expression. Her resulting text foregrounds the concept of *transitoriness* to encapsulate the social dynamic of time, everyday rhythm, and aspiration in that enormous city. According to Caldeira, the new social dynamic—particularly among the youth—is less oriented toward a "certain desired and anticipated future that is supposed to be better or more advanced or developed," or toward "settling down"

and investing in "fixed spaces." Like the subjects in AbdouMaliq Simone in chapter 10, the youth in São Paulo seem to be living *through* their city, in constant circulation, deploying a series of "lateral moves" to get along in an environment that has lost the capacity to propose a clear pathway. These movements are a strategy (against institutionalized repression) but they also signal "a certain relationship to the city: a relationship of exploration, conquest and possession, even if only temporary"—in short, a refusal to stay put. Crucially, Caldeira's chapter shows how *transitoriness* has now become the "organizing logic of the everyday" whose grammar is in dire need of being wrested from that of the authoritarian forces looming large in the Brazilian political landscape.

In chapter 7 Filip De Boeck, again based on his decades of work in the streets of Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, presents how the simple word and object *hole* (as in a hole in a pockmarked street) vies for analytical and political attention, used commonly by residents to describe infrastructural degradation but also new openings amid the closures and ruinations of that postcolonial city. The city, as De Boeck it, is "no longer the steady, stable, impenetrable, and leveled horizontality of the modernist urban ground but instead opens up a much more bumpy and even incoherent landscape in which the underground of the hole literally becomes foreground and surface, the very center of the vortex that the city is." In this situation, the language of the "hole" describes the "shady deals" that residents have to make to survive, the sideways moves into "often uncharted spatial, social, and mental territory that the city obliges them to make," and the literal opportunities presented to make a transaction (such as makeshift market stalls around potholes to offer goods to slowed down and diverted traffic). So much for so many hangs around the literal and figurative topography of the "hole," which is barely noticed in urban writing but is so essential to grasp, according to De Boeck, so as to encapsulate life lived on the street and to bring it to public attention with the help of texts, photographs, and art projects making the invisibilities tangible.

In another novel slant on the affordances of infrastructure, Caroline Knowles in chapter 8 takes a street view to look into how finance capital and its plutocracy, so central to many primary cities, are materially sustained in central London. Adopting an "operational approach" involving a ground ethnography of walking around and getting close up to people and things, Knowles covets "a grainier and more practical grasp of infrastructure for its human, algorithmic, and material textures, operations and micro-mechanisms" so as to expose "some of its less obvious compositional

mechanisms as they unfold empirically in the everyday heave of city life." In the case of London's money machine and its subjects, this approach brings into view "a slightly ragged female labor force in cheap clothes eating hasty lunches," "the human and technological security operations that contain, regulate, and exclude the atmospheres of quiet entitlement exchanged over lavish lunches or practiced in a daytime yoga class," even the "elaborate domestic operations supporting wealthy lifestyles." Complex entanglements are revealed, as is the enjoined and *fragile* labor of the assemblage of software, buildings, cultural practices, and many more elements that are involved in maintaining what Knowles calls London's plutocratic life and its excesses. If the fine grain of such exposure can be extracted, according to her, a resulting politics denormalizing the assemblages "places their construction in question, exposes them to the public gaze, suggests things could have been otherwise, shows that particular political decisions and actions, rather than others, were in play, that things need not be as they are, they could, in fact be quite different."

In chapter 9, Tatiana Thieme and Edgar Pieterse propose a critical reflection on everyday economies in urban Africa, in particular what counts as "work." They show how "the notions and everyday practices of work in African cities have consistently countered ideals of large-scale industrial wage employment," especially among the youth, now defying staple outlines for labor market entry and engagement. Looking beyond silencing mainstream economic categories opens the possibility of narrating *how* the economy there is felt and lived, and how it could be better sustained rather than subsumed. Thieme and Pieterse propose an *affirmative vocabulary,* able to encompass actual logics and knowledges of making a living, but they also recognize everyday struggles of *"doing business"* and *"tending to matters of social justice."* In conducting extensive ethnographic work with Mathare youths in Nairobi, the authors propose an idea of a just economy that is based on *radical social enterprise*, exemplified by progressive youth projects combining income generation with a social mission. Such acknowledgments alert us to affirmative capacity in everyday economic arrangements in a raft of cities as involving far more than mere survival. They speak to "the imperative to phase out an industrial and linear economic approach, recognize the prevalence of a post-wage era, and become the driving force (for better or worse) of digital platforms."

Similarly, AbdouMaliq Simone in chapter 10 builds on his long-standing lexicon of everyday negotiations and improvisations in cities of the Global South, to name the pathways—both ubiquitous and necessary—taken by

dwellers engaging in nonlinear navigation of their cities, livelihoods, and aspirations. Simone draws from his archive of ethnographic evidence to trace the fugitive *lateral moves* and circulations through which residents in various cities make ends meet, with the "growing sense that livelihood is not secured through a continuous, incremental 'upward' trajectory." Citing tactics in Jakarta, Simone notes that a key disposition is that of comparison, based on "maximum exposure" to one's own increasingly complex and volatile surroundings. Residents elect not to pin things down and refuse "to provide accounts, either to oneself or to others, about how one's life course at any particular moment connects to those of others." Comparison, especially among the competing middle classes, stems less from having a fixed point of reference than from keeping things in circulation, *deforming*, as Simone puts it, the temporalities and spatialities of one's own life in attunement with those of Jakarta at large. With this turn he brings into view an urban praxis of "maximum exposure" to other circulations in order to seize opportunities of living and inhabiting the city that would not be otherwise possible: a behavioral version of the sociotechnologies that support London plutocrats, as Knowles details in chapter 8.

All the contributions in this collection recover the neglected or occluded "edge" as the urban heartland, proposed explicitly as a term in the last chapter by Suzanne Hall as a relation to power from which the everyday and its subjects can push back. Based on her extensive research on migrant businesses operating in the streets of South London, though regularly ignored by local authorities always looking to large retail for urban regeneration, Hall argues that "from the street we learn of different vocabularies of making work and repurposing space," requiring an "engagement with the edge as neither a peripheral nor minority condition, but as a space from which to push back, refute, and reconfigure." In such "edge territories," we see how "the combined systemic violations of state and market have disproportionate impact, and where intersections of 'race,' class, and locale surface the discriminatory impacts of dispossession." But she also shows how occupants "acquire improvisational repertoires to contend with the permanence of inequality and uncertainty," their "densely invested interiors . . . a form of everyday politics, sustained in the frictions and promises of social interaction and the wide array of cultural expression." While London—and, for that matter, many other large cities in the world—languish under austerity, having been abandoned by the "high capital" that once served them, microbusinesses improvise to sustain livelihoods and ways of life: shunned by the formal powers, people are calling out for recognition.

Conclusion

The lexicon of this book—made of junk, racial banishment, densities and scales, legal forms, transitoriness, saturations, infrastructures, deformations, edges, and affirmatory vocabularies—comes out of an effort, on the part of theorists and activists alike, to write back the grounds of the city into the *urban* in ways that are committed to social justice and radical change. The "political" here lies both in the subtle conceptual work of displacing policy-redundant "city buzz" (and related "theory") and in the effort to narrate how the ecologies and biopolitics making up the ground of urban life "become political": not simply in the sense of being matters of collective concern but in the sense of being part of, and therefore of shaping, everyday praxis of urban contestation. We believe the commitment to these two points, reflected also in a more discursive style of writing, is what characterizes innovative urban thinking today.

We have chosen to fashion a post-categorical vocabulary attuned to material practices and lived cultures in the city. Its concepts bring us closer to junctures and intersections, rework master concepts such as density and size, and begin to point at an urbanism worked in and through the assemblages of everyday experience. They point at a politics of radical adjustment, in the dual sense of being rooted and subaltern. We believe these efforts—of pushing established boundaries and ways of doing urban scholarship—are more important now than ever. The challenges and deep restructurings brought forward by COVID-19 around the globe, along with the likely austerity-mode to which many urban and national agencies will turn in years to come (RHJ Editorial Collective 2020), require our giving close attention to ground processes: both those annihilated by this and future crises, and those that will fight back, silently, from the enmeshments of the lived city. We see this book as offering a space to engage with some of the grammars needed to rethink urban process and the grounded politics of urban change.

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