

— IT'S JUST THE CITY AFTER ALL!

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Abstract

Long a site for incessant worry, revision or redemption, it is unclear what the 'city' is today. Yet, in face of the near-apocalyptic readjustments potentiated by human-engineered global warming, there is an exigency about getting cities to function right. It is no wonder, then, that contemporary theories of cities and urbanization attempt to restore some common sense, to get to the heart of critical matters in a world where urbanization disrupts once-normative assumptions about the nature of territory, scale and politics. But what is the nature of that 'common sense'? How does one engage the very concrete efforts that constructed the city, with all the layers of physical and cultural memory that new regimes usually attempt to cover up, and all that the city does not show, either because its inhabitants are prohibited from paying attention or because whatever is considered normative or spectacular in city life has to get rid of the messy labor and politics that brought it about? Invoking blackness as an analytical method, these questions are addressed through thinking about how long histories of urban practices deployed by black residents of cities across the world might challenge and reinvent the sense of an urban commons.

'Living just enough, just enough for the city...'
Stevie Wonder (1973)

Compulsions for clarity

For over two decades I worked and lived in some of Africa's most rambunctious city districts. They were constantly shifting amalgamations of plenitude and poverty, with some residents implanted for the long term and others only provisionally settled. Whatever had been built reflected all kinds of temporalities and horizons—some residents were committed to making a life there no matter what, while others always hedged their bets opportunistically, even parasitically, taking whatever they could and quickly bailing out at the first sign of trouble. Everyone with ascertainable occupations always did something else to make ends meet and more, while those with no discernible jobs found ways to either live off the backs of others or accumulate money through the proliferating cracks in territorial and institutional networks.

It was often unclear who really had money, authority and plans and who didn't, and roles shifted all the time. Strong solidarities among residents could deliver the most remarkable and timely of results—new churches or mosques, fundraising that could leverage opportunities for sizeable acquisitions from afar, spirited defenses of residents' rights to do what they had to in order to protect the wide-open heterogeneity of their district. At the same time, such cohesion could dissipate overnight, proven incapable of generating the most modest improvements in the concrete infrastructure of the area. At times these districts seemed to lack nothing, at other moments they lacked everything. The intricacies of relational economies (i.e. the capacity to generate work and income through the synergistic effects of diverse backgrounds and ways of doing things operating in close proximity to each other) ensured a capacity for recalibration, for rolling with the punches of larger macroeconomic shocks and ineptness. But they could also resemble a house of cards, seemingly erasable at a moment's notice.

Residents relished these contradictions, yet were also exasperated by them. They exuded confidence in their capacity to tinker with things, undertaking small experiments to do something different with what they had at hand. For the most part, residents were both streetwise and well versed in the economic and political workings of

not only their cities but the wider world as well. The genealogies of how things got to be the way they were entailed rich tapestries of logics and argument. Nevertheless, such a repertoire of explanatory tools was rarely paraded in the everyday vernaculars of accounting for events and processes that made both complete and no sense. Few residents aspired to an analysis that attempted to mold the exuberant mess of their districts into an overarching theoretical explication. As a result, when all the things thus rendered inexplicable were accounted for, residents were usually inclined to simply say ‘well, what do you expect, it is just the city, after all, and who are we to judge otherwise’.

I want to consider this invocation of ‘we’ as a kind of lure for political imagination. It is a black ‘we’ that has been historically forced into existence and ravaged with little ontological substance, as the emptiness of racial terms is well documented. This ‘we’ can be witnessed in many different ways: making something else from the grounds of subjugation (Davis, 1972; McKittrick, 2006); a figuration of enduring, sometimes haunting, memory (Roach, 1996; Keeling, 2007); a singular and fluid social movement (Robinson, 1997); the constant struggles to build solidarity without dependency on collective identity (Shelby, 2001; Pattillo, 2007); autonomous renegade communities on land and sea (Price, 1979; Mackie, 2005); ontological struggles and strategic circumventions of the need to be something specific (Wynter, 2005); and engagements with amassed bodies in the workplace (Cockrel, 1971).

So it is a ‘we’ that is always fuzzy, shaky, hard to pin down, always broken, but also resounding. So the entanglement of emptiness and seemingly never-ending sedimentation—of blackness once again being deployed as some diffuse and never-ending threat—raises possibilities for experiments with what is left out of analyses of collective urban life, of what could have happened, what could happen still.

In today’s uncertain, even febrile, urban conditions, it is not easy to determine what cities are, let alone predict where they are headed. In the profusion of quick turn-overs, underemployment, demographic shifts, urban management by algorithm, the contiguity of standardized spectacular and low-grade built environments, the city carries too many expectations for what it can actually deliver. Well accustomed to being the site and excuse for incessant worry and revision, it is unclear as to what is being referred to whenever reference to the ‘city’ comes up. Particularly in face of the near-apocalyptic readjustments potentiated by human-engineered global warming, there is an added sense of exigency about getting cities to function right. It is no wonder, then, that the prevalent mood in terms of theorizing cities and urbanization is to restore some common sense, to get to the heart of critical matters in a world where urbanization disrupts once normative assumptions about the nature of territory, scale and politics.

One key maneuver engendering such common sense is to reposition the city in terms of urbanization, where the city no longer embodies the urban and is simply one (even an anachronistic) formation among a multiplicity of articulations through which coordinated vehicles of capital accumulation, creative destructions, commodity circulation, cultural meaning and political authority are consolidated and distributed. As the entirety of the earth is affected by, drawn into and remade by the need to continuously rearticulate discrete geopolitical, geomorphological and atmospheric domains into the nexus of resource accumulation and the circulation of exchange value, the urban exists in a plural field of multi-layered patchworks, a component in an extensive regionalization of both coordinated and disjointed production, inhabitation and governance (Brenner and Schmid, 2013; Brenner, 2014). It is both nothing and everything, an ever-generating force-field of actual and potential encounters and collaborations (Merrifield, 2013).

If the city remains important at all, it is as an ideological object, a repository of aspiration and cultivator of subjectivities, where individuals become ‘cities’ themselves through internalizing the values and capacities that the city was thought to represent

(Wachsmuth, 2013). In a more incisive rendition, cities become singular crystallizations of an ‘urban now’ that folds in affects, imaginaries, tools and practices from across diverse historical periods and spatial instantiations, thus pointing to multiple articulations among diverse urban formations (Robinson, 2013).

The other predominant maneuver is to return to the ‘core’ dimensions of the city. Here, as Scott and Storper (2015: 6–7) indicate, the most basic reason for the existence of cities in the modern era is to be found in their role as coordinators of economic production and exchange in successively larger circuits of trade: ‘Agglomeration is the basic glue that holds the city together as a complex congeries of human activities, and that underlies—via the endemic common pool resources and social conflicts of urban areas—a highly distinctive form of urban politics’. The urban land nexus supplements agglomeration—dense internally variegated webs of interacting land uses, locations and allied institutional/political arrangements. While conceding that cities are diverse and informed by variegated histories, agendas and complexions, Scott and Storper are adamant that it is important to retain the notion of the city and, in order to do so, it is important and possible to identify the core functions that cut across these diversities.

Brenner (2014) insists that urbanization remains a critical tool in theorizing the ongoing creative destruction of political-economic space. Black collective life, continuously reinvented in cities, also remains a target of creative destruction, as evidenced in the rapid disappearance of ‘black communities’ across northern US cities and by the dispersal of poorer black residents across deteriorating suburban landscapes, where they are much less visible and have fewer long-honed solidarities to draw upon (Street, 2007; Jaret *et al.*, 2009; Logan and Stults, 2011). It is evidenced in the concerted attempt to target inwards financial investment in Africa towards the reterritorialization of premium urban functions and populations away from the supposedly impenetrable and ungovernable districts of opaque urban majorities (French, 2013). It is evidenced in the multiplicity of defense systems put in place to cut off the movement of black migrants to Europe, the Middle East and the Asia Pacific. It is evidenced in the efforts to undermine both problematic and cherished practices of urban inhabitation in the black districts of Brazilian cities, often forcibly occupied by the military to restore order (Rolnick, 2011; Meske, 2013), and curtail the circulation of black bodies across the larger metropolitan spaces (Caldeira, 2013). Still, the determination of many black residents to hang on, even transmogrify into that which is despised in order to keep from disappearing, as well as continuously recalibrate practices of household and community accumulation, all implant different perspectives onto the city (Austen, 2013; Jovchelovitch and Priego Hernández, 2013). Later in this essay, I call for a creative reconstruction of accounts of collective black life as a means to get a different angle on city life and urban theorization.

For part of the emphasis on ‘common sense’ is to start talking again about the urban commons. Here, the commons is a form of orchestration that interweaves the tendencies of residents to differentiate themselves from each other, articulate specialized and particular aspirations and ways of doing things, and compete with each other for access to resources. But it also entails finding ways of coexisting, melding differences into complementary objectives and practices. Blackness has historically been a vehicle to deny what is common, or at least to locate the criteria of what is to be seen and held possible as common firmly within white hands. But since many cities were largely built by black hands, and black bodies often served as the raw materials for generating the new urbanisms of the North, the denial of commonality or its reiteration only in very limited terms leaves out a significant swath of urban experience. That which is left out is not easily recuperated in readily available languages, sensorium or subjectivity. Just as blackness itself is a fabrication, that which is underneath the common, to use Fred Moten and Stefan Harney’s (2013) words, needs to be invented as well. So no matter how much the city might be ‘finished’ as a locus of urbanization, it is ‘just the city’, i.e. the possibility of reinvention.

– Excessive force

In his work, Michael Storper has often emphasized the importance of direct interpersonal interactions among various inhabitants. But these interactions are important not just in the service of knowledge production put to work in maximizing economic efficiencies as pre-existent operations. What is also important is the capacity of such interactions to invent unanticipated realities that can be folded into these operations, or exist autonomously in spawning different kinds of economic activity as a process of ongoing experimentation. Rather than cities being the concretization of specific core factors, ‘approaching urbanism and urbanization through the lens of planetarity keeps alterity open. It asserts the possibility of a plurality of worlded, if not global urbanisms, as well as the possibility that the world is not simply dominated by the urban’ (Sheppard *et al.*, 2013: 899). All the different kinds of intersections among densities, land use and agglomerated economic activities that occur within and between cities retain the ability to continuously shift the contours of urbanization.

While the resurgence of sentiments for precision, for tying together the proliferating theorizations of city life, largely occasioned by the growing impetus to consider city life from all corners of the globe, is certainly understandable, such sentiments also seem to reiterate longstanding fears about the ways in which cities reflect the dangers of things ‘getting out of hand’. To simplify the dimensions of urban life remains an almost magical means to extrude any potential threat. At a different scale, Salman Rushdie (2002: 79) pointed out: I’m not anything you need to bother about ... not the fellow who voted against the government, not the woman who is looking to smoke a little dope with her friends tonight, not the person you fear, whose shoe may be about to explode. I am truly one-dimensional’.

For city life has long raised the prospect of dangerous circulations of all kinds, from disease, panics, social contagion and crowds. The city, far from being simply the structural underpinning of sufficient reason—of a relationship between the logic of production and a mode of social living—is also a force in itself, a force that takes on lifelike processes and is folded into the body politic in order to animate it in such a way as to cull from it new vitalities, ideas and potential (Thacker, 2009). If you consider the voluminous weight of many of the world’s metropolitan areas, canvass their every nook and cranny, record the to and fro of millions, and all the often idiosyncratic wears and tears on fabrics, machinery and nervous systems of all kinds, no matter how analysts might explain what is going on, there is a forcefulness whose relative containment, its ability to mostly toe some kind of line, is remarkable and, ultimately, fragile.

For nearly one year I walked through Jakarta, both empty-handed and loaded down with smartphone-saturated tagged locational data, archival information, over-eager informants and mapping systems. There is no shortage of tools to assist in helping explain how things in a given place got to be the way they are. But nothing really assists with accounting for either the sheer obduracy of particular buildings, waste or practice and the almost tectonic shifts that could emerge if, say, a few thousand people and other things altered their routines, impetuously decided to act ‘off the plantation’, do the completely unanticipated.

But because such force is always in excess of what we are able to make of it, because it exceeds its concrete manifestations, there is the need to define and regulate it, to exclude it from the domain of the properly human. For the inhuman—all of the forces at work in the flows among fluids, bodies, discourses, materials and atmospheres in the city—is fundamentally indifferent to us; these forces help animate what we are able to collectively become but they are never invested in the results (Thacker, 2011).

Knowledge about the city—its spaces, populations and dynamics—was grounded largely in measures taken to allow some circulations of urban bodies and to disallow others. In face of the impact of infectious diseases, for example, the impetus was to enclose, survey and prevent. Attempts to shape the vectors of disease, cultivate

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normative attitudes towards bodily conduct and then put activities in their proper place reiterated the reality of ‘demonic’ circulations. These circulations pass across boundaries that had separated the human and inhuman, the living and non-living, the reasonable and unreasonable. They marked the limits of the integrity of the individual body, which would have to be buttressed with a sense of its subject power.

As Thacker (2010) reminds us, the threat was less agents of infection, the microbes and viruses, but rather the conduits of transgressive circulation themselves—i.e. the ways in which things in the city could reach, affect and move through each other in ways that could slip through the available tools of apprehension and monitoring. So there are aspects of city life that exceed whatever may be the cause of its existence. Like the residents of the African districts I referred to earlier, with all their circulations that could be construed as dangerous, the city is, in a critical sense, just the city.

What is this ‘justness’? When residents decide to say, ‘well, after all, it is just the city’, what is this decision? Derrida (2006: 219) helps to illustrate this as an act that goes beyond justice when he talks about how the instant of decision making ‘must remain heterogeneous to all knowledge as such, to all theoretical or reportive determination, even if it may and must be preceded by all possible science and conscience’. For Derrida, the city is the summoning of a singular other in an event calling for unconditional hospitality to a figure that will not be asked to sign up to any of the trappings of family, state, nation, territory, blood, culture or even humanity (Leitch, 2007).

As such, the city always resists a particular kind of specification that makes proliferating injustices visible and, at the same time, highlights the incalculable ways in which relations between inhabitants are continuously repaired and remade. This remaking is not only addressed to what has gone wrong, not to make the city more productive, but is also oriented to an ‘impossible future’, an impossible welcoming of a form of inhabitation that goes beyond any contract or identification.

– Blackness as urban method

So how does one get at a city that is more than its multiple manifestations, that exceeds any definitive attempt to pin it down and that yet remains something specific, and not simply a potential-making machine? How does one engage the very concrete efforts that constructed the city with all the layers of physical and cultural memory that new regimes usually attempt to cover up, and all that the city does not show, either because its inhabitants are prohibited from paying attention or because whatever is considered normative or spectacular in city life has to get rid of the messy labor and politics that brought it about.

The long, and by no means systematic, history of black inhabitation of cities could be a critical method through which to engage such a conundrum. After all, at least throughout the ‘new world’ of the Americas, blacks assumed a singular position in the construction and inhabitation of cities. Their specific strategies and trajectories of penetration into the metropole, as well as the circuits of engagement with cities across Asia, replete with various repulsions and mostly silent advantages, are a vastly undermined resource in exploring a city that remains not only the object of mostly unrealistic dreams and aspirations, but a domain full of crevices, interstices, hidden chambers and unused plenitude in plain sight (Kusmer, 1991; Nash, 1991; Trotter *et al.*, 2004).

Blackness is that which stands for a way of addressing and accounting for things that need not take into consideration any specificity but the surface. No need for depth or anchorage, even if the particular ways which blackness is worn by people would not tolerate such a role. But as a surface, it is slippery; it does not stand still and, as such, points to a vast range of irrecoverable secrets. For the surface of things, as a pulsating interface continuously shifting the relations between the asymmetries of inside and outside, acts as a trickster of orientation that both shapes figure and ground, and at the same time

confounds any clear sense of what is here or there, then or now. The difference between figure and ground can be maintained, but their relations are continuously deformed and remade. As such, the surface twists and turns, shape-shifting its way in and out of realities which it secretly impels, unaware of its own capacities and contradictions. It need not be what it is; there is always something else it could be in order to do what it in the end does anyway (Lury, 2012). So, for example, American cities on the surface are fully black and white, but there still persists a seeming determination to get rid of collective black life from the surface of cities, to remove anything distinctive of all that blacks as a collective people attempted to make in and from the city.

Throughout history, blackness carried the freight of all that must be dredged and evacuated in order for a sense of stillness and sufficiency to hang as atmosphere on the infrastructures of the urban. As was evident in the sheer labor, ingenuity and spiritual resourcefulness obliged from black bodies in the building of Havana, Port of Spain, Philadelphia, New York, Cartagena and Salvador, to cite a few, so much was asked of blackness as something which will deliver the no-matter-what, be indifferent to any demand, indiscriminately absorb and convey the most discordant ambitions. At the same time, blackness was nothing but the hinge which adjusted the apertures of frontiers, which modulated the opening and closing of bounded domains, just as the historical trajectories of black people were the lines that both demarcated and mediated the disjunctions between cities and hinterlands, between insides and peripheries (Kelley, 1994; Cañizares-Esguerra *et al.*, 2013).

Later on, American cities became sites of experimentation where blacks tried to be both ordinary citizens and a singular people whose history of oppression would not let go of the exigency to pursue divergent forms of inhabiting cities. Certainly, the between-the-wars black metropolis of Chicago, with its efforts to meld a distinctive process of thought to an economy that tended to the stylization and operations of physical bodies, was one of the most realized American efforts to use urbanization as a means to create new forms of collective life (Drake and Clayton, 1993; Baldwin, 2003). It developed modes of inhabitation not dependent upon faith in the value of labor and the private family.

Such a project did not ask for recognition; it did not seek to constitute itself as counter to the larger urban processes in which it was embedded; it knew it could not stand alone, out in the cold, but rather operated in the midst of things, as an interface between the oscillating pressures of exclusion and integration. It would use all of the 'anchorage points' of individuated territories, lives, businesses, households, stratification and institutions, but also reach across them, intersect them in ways which indeed the city was built for, made possible, but nevertheless kept apart. The lines between inside and out, between street and home, church and bar, salon and school, neighbor and neighbor were continuously recomposed, re-enacted across different (musical) scales.

What bothered the managers of cities in the North having their numbers swelled with black immigrants was the matter of trying to count who belonged where, who belonged to whom. How would a population be managed if not corralled into clear alignments of affiliation? The implicit deal of Fordism in Detroit was to avail jobs in the automobile manufacturing industry as long as black social life was sufficiently domesticated into identifiable and countable household units. Employment was to be predicated on the black assumption of particular modes of making themselves visible and accountable (Sugrue, 1996; Boyle and Getis, 1997; Farley *et al.*, 2000). Long-honed sensibilities of space and affiliations premised on covering the different angles, and on seemingly amorphous collectives spanning oceans, were to be tempered or associated with various forms of being dysfunctional (Cephas, 2014). At the same time, when black residents showed just how proficient they could be at doing what everyone else was doing to become successful in the city, this proficiency also turned them

into competitors in the eyes of large segments of white society. This society could not criticize blacks for doing what they themselves relied upon and took pride in doing, so it had to invent other dangers associated specifically with being black. This cleavage was reinforced by federal housing policies that provided public housing for blacks and publically supported private homeownership finance for whites (Sugrue, 1996).

Black urban settlements and the proficient economies that grew up around them (having mobilized black skills and collective aspirations, and coordinated entrepreneurial effort) were also seized upon for reterritorializing the ‘undersides’ of a largely white urban economy, with illicit businesses and practices, that served as the occasion for both the heightened surveillance and criminalization of black life in cities (Muhammad, 2011). Whether assembled in various experimental forms of collective effort subsequently corralled into conventional household forms or forging a hard-won capacity to live as families in cities then made vulnerable to the manipulations of dirty urban politics, black life was situated between a rock and a hard place, continuously forced to ‘crossover’ continuously redrawn lines for marking out places of safety, discovery, solidarity and contentment.

Cities need to be full of diverse things. Regardless of the particular political reality of any city, there must be a way for these diversities to exist (at least partially) without differentials of force or value. In order to keep pace with the volatility of their continuous recombinant associations, nothing could become too indebted, too dependent upon specific characteristics or composed relations. Of course there were orders of things; things could only be comprehended through their incorporation, being held in place, kept in line. Blackness has become the pre-eminent political vernacular for this holding down and letting go of things, of both enforcement and freedom. This is a kind of double inhabitation, in that blackness represents the solidity of what is commonly referred to as ‘community’ and the possibility of ‘being anything anywhere’. This doubled inhabitation, very different from the notion of double consciousness later elaborated by DuBois, was at the heart of the beginning of the modern metropolis in the new world (Inikori, 2007; Manning, 2009).

As the bearer of freight and culler of infinite reverberations at the surface of things, blackness conveys a voluminous nothingness, of suffering without redemption, of potentiality impeded at every turn and an interminable contingency (Moten and Harney, 2013). All of the attributions that something was wrong with black people converging with the insistence that there was ‘nothing wrong with us’ generate a space where no norms exist. This is because all of the attributions are both embraced and rejected in a turbulent unsettling that cannot be enclosed or colonized, as black people continue to ‘refuse to give up the secret of thieving with their theft, the secret of their thieving of their theft’ (*ibid.*: 58). If urban governance is largely about promoting the gregariousness of talk everywhere, where everyone talks to each other, has interests to convey and represent, then the figure of the black criminal is one without interests, without anything to defend. It is a figure without something specific to say, something that has nothing in common with those who are continuously talking. Rather commonality, as Moten and Harney (*ibid.*) point out, is the attainment of study of those long dispossessed not only of their capacity to be heard (those accused of always destroying themselves when they do speak) but also having no need for the conceit of having something specific to say.

And so blackness has learned to live in the implosion of old orders grinding to a halt, of being the example that teaches a populace how to watch what happens when a portion of its citizenry is unmoored from the basic supports of life. It has learned to live with incessant transience, quickly deciding how to recoup opportunity from sudden detours and foreclosures. It has learned to mine the city for beats and polyphony that reverberate across generations and nations, so as to attune bodies to each other from Rio to New Orleans to Luanda. It has learned to traverse the built environment in ways

the infrastructure would normally prevent. It has learned to cultivate rich demeanors of celebrating solidarity and love even as bullets may fly in great numbers from black hands, even in the excessiveness of an insistence on the part of many young blacks to not 'come correct'. All of these capacities are not the property of blacks, for blackness—in its perpetual struggle not to be property, not to be the object of theft—gives up on the usual trappings of subject power. Research on blackness as a techno-cultural assemblage certainly demonstrates the blackness does not belong exclusively to black persons, that it potentiates a deterritorializing crowd (Sharma, 2013).

But while blacks may not have special purchase on a singular urban life, they have largely pioneered the possibility of such singularities. They have long earned the right to say something about the city that nobody else can, and if we are really prepared to listen, we could not rest at ease with the theories of the city being put into play today. Much of city history has been a desperate long-term attempt to foreclose popular rule, for the 'popular' as a reconfiguration of knowledge, economy, politics and subjectivity has always rumbled as a near-irruptive substrate of urban life and, more than anything, black collective life is a part of this substrate (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000).

A black urbanism becomes not so much a culmination or destination of clearly delineated city-making processes, but more what Glissant (1999: **) would call 'a place you pass through, not yet a country'. As Allewaert (2013) points out in her discussion on African-American identity, this absence of destination, far from being an insufficiency, rather reiterates the city as full of twist and turns, plural genealogies and 'strange' gatherings of fragments, efforts and forces. Black people have long demonstrated an abiding faith in the city, even when the city seemed to do little for them. A welcoming without reservation and a more committed engagement with the twists and turns of how black people took on the city just as it was, and both succumbed to and exceeded its supposedly determinant functions, could reveal new concepts of how to live in the city from now on.

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