




The “Southern” as a Methodological Intrusion on Urbanism

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Abstract. Today we see new coalitions between developers, businesses, politicians and elites to reorient urbanicity through sustained practices of colonization resulting in the dispossession and dislocation of majorities through smart technologies, real estate valorization, futures finance, extractive expansionism and narratives of future survival making parsimony as well as expulsion of the vulnerable seem natural. The move of these coalitions is to remove urban majorities as well as racialized “minorities” from the urban commons and realigned of embedded and new power. There is a kind of emergency capitalism at play in which urban extractions of various sorts are at play. Yet the urban remains a “witch” of shape-shifting forms and spaces, if many sides of the track where residents repurpose what there is, to inhabit, build lives, make connections, and dream a future. The history of urban fabrics, with its pluralities, accretions from the past, relational emergences, and composites of time-space lends itself to a fugitivity in inhabitation. In other words, a capacity to move on across invented trajectories not ones prescribed by the most powerful. Always temporary, always evanescent, always experimental.

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1 A City Not Just for Us

For all of those engaged in the day-to-day management and development of so-called “Southern” cities and urban regions, much of the tasks involved entail the notion of “sufficient reason.” This is not the principle posited by Leibnitz: that in all true statements the predicate is always already contained in the conception of the subject, which embodies a primary forcefulness that makes it what it is—such that the urban tends to an essential manifestation of a super-arching order on its own terms. Rather, the notion of sufficiency here refers to the use of knowledge that is sufficient for a set of diverse actors and institutions being able to maintain functional relationships with each other to circumvent debilitating conflicts, and plod along to forestall crises. It also means an ability to register a multiplicity of small attainments that enable all of those who “sit at the table” to be able to claim that maintaining these relationships gets them somewhere.

While the discursive orientations and conversations that manage these relationships among politicians, technicians, bureaucrats, architects, activists, planners, entrepreneurs, and residents may be replete with an array of easily recognizable and normative terms—such as sustainability, transparency, resilience, and so forth—such terms act more as “cover” for trade-offs, deals, and promises that are more prosaic in their formulations. They are also specific to the more singular complexions of the problems and potentials to be addressed.

Sometimes such transactions are said to be based on a “local knowledge” that contrasts with more internationally standardized norms. While such local knowledge may be deemed effective and viable given the insufficient traction of those larger norms within specific urban governance and planning regimes, they often seem to merely signal the need and salience of a universal infrastructure or planning ideal. How many times are specific spatial development plans or built environment projects said to have underperformed due to their inability to live up to planning knowledges already established as best practice. How could the interweaving of knowledge about different actors, consumption tastes, financial problems, marital issues, community travails, and kinship ties possibly be relevant to the dispositions of land, the mobilization of material resources, or the application of specific regulatory mechanisms. Yet, these are often the constitutive components of a relational knowledge—or knowledge about managing relations—that proves to be the “sufficient reason” for enrolling and mobilizing the affordances of differentially situated persons who bring to the “table” something important, even if it is simply their silent compliance.

As urbanization spreads across diverse spaces and classificatory systems, the city can no longer be approached as a single, unified formation or internally consistent process. Instead, it emerges as a complex constellation of procedures, historical trajectories, interweavings, and material expressions. Within these conditions, developing a language that can describe urban life with both range and exactness becomes increasingly uncertain. Urban settings differ greatly in their composition and character, and the intensity of many circumstances places the very idea of generalization in doubt. Cities are inhabited by combatants and consumers, long-term residents and migrants, workers and members of the precariat, civil servants and casual laborers, service and domestic workers, freelancers and professionals, sex workers, diplomats, businesspeople, police officers and officials, hustlers, thieves, dealers, artists, musicians, unhoused people, children, casualties, physicians, nurses, the infirm, technicians, engineers, and many others.

While the individual often appears as the standard bearer of the urban inhabitant, this figure stands in tension with the excess and indeterminacy that characterize urban life—even amid increasingly elaborate efforts to calculate every movement, maneuver, impact variable, and statistically legible relation. Beyond the biopolitical calculus that weighs which lives are rendered disposable and which are granted protection, the very idea of a cultivated “population” gives way to a fixation on individualized exceptions and pre-emptive assessments, in which particular bodies are evaluated according to their perceived capacity to generate disruption or produce value.

Some bodies are granted access to urban affordances without negotiation, while others must navigate relentless forms of negotiability to secure even minimal improvements. Even when such incremental gains define the lived condition of most urban residents, the biopolitical promise of healthy or “well” populations recedes in favor of persistent judgments of individual eligibility and worth. Urban productivity that exceeds its capture as surplus value—activity that escapes rational accounting—is instead folded into familiar narratives asserting that, regardless of the severity of one’s circumstances, determination alone can overcome constraint and materialize a more proper and viable life.

Instead of asking who qualifies as the urban inhabitant, it may be more urgent to ask where inhabitation itself occurs, understood both as a question of location and of constructedness, where every standpoint is inevitably incomplete and where falseness becomes the very condition for occupying a position at all. To move beyond inhabitation, therefore, is not to uncover a definitive truth about a situation, but to step outside epistemological certainty itself, letting go of the confidence that one can fully know where one stands, how one came to occupy that position, or which futures will unfold from it.

For as Fanon (1967) insists [1]:

The future to come makes visible an opening that has no arche, telos, or predestined end... Nothing is more deluded than the desire to reveal a truth whose essence, we assume, brings to an end all that deceives us, but only insofar as we follow it and take it as a model of an exemplarity that entralls or marks us, for as soon as we recognize its authority we know how we in turn have been deceived—by what?—by the truths by which we deceive ourselves (179)

To go beyond inhabitation is to recognize that the city is not made for us, or not made only for us, regardless of the material conditions or empirical evidence that demonstrate what we, as inhabitants, have contributed to its creation. We can neither reasonably claim exclusivity nor expect the urban to treat us justly, since any form of justice it offers remains shaped by a logic of proportionality that assigns greater worth to certain things and bodies than to others, even when the language of that justice invokes egalitarian ideals.

2 The Colonial Present

What is particularly salient to these questions in the context of a purported global south urbanity, is that one of the common precepts of urban colonial rule was to fragment inhabitants, and amplify ethnic, racial, and geographical differences as a means of undermining the possibilities of collective revolt [2]. The realignment of personal and household affect toward “doing the right thing”, as exemplified by modern education, moral discipline, expressions of individual interest and self-development, was contrasted to the rambunctious impulsiveness and frenzy of subaltern crowds and collectives, prone to live for immediate survival and pleasure rather than long-term objectives [3, 4].

The purported lassitude of so-called “original inhabitants” living off the “fruits” of their landholdings, such as the Betawi in Indonesia, was contrasted to the industriousness of “migrants” prepared to acquire and develop “property” whose value might be maximized through exchange. As postcolonial states inherited a fractured landscape not easily repairable through investments in collective consumption—such as the models that compensated for the extraction of labor with the provision of adequate built environments and urban services—they often attempted to offer locally inflected versions of what appeared to be universal ideals of the “just” city [5].

But these versions were rarely able to materialize any vision given the predatory nature of external economic investments, the political clout exerted by property developers acquiring ever larger volumes of urban land, and the disjuncture between the parochial character of supposedly universal ideals and the historical specificities of experienced urban conditions. Commonalities, or at least momentarily functional complicities, had to be engineered through vernaculars with easily accessible common denominators—those that appealed to the capacity of actors to “eat well” or “sleep well”, to attain status and respect, to respond to the demands of intimates, and to forge working relationships that need not be renegotiated constantly but which at the same time are always open to being renegotiated [6].

This argument closely aligns with Marilyn Strathern’s (2020) view that relationships are not simply expressions of underlying structural arrangements but are instead the outcomes of aesthetic practices that assemble appropriate terms and images through which disparate elements and people can be connected [7]. Relations may emerge without overarching purposes or justifications, and they may expand to include a wide range of actors and situations. However, for relations to be activated and recognized as operative within the everyday lives of particular individuals and societies, there must be a means by which they become perceptible. This occurs only when relations take on a specific form or aesthetic that allows them to properly appear and to be acknowledged as such. While Western economies tend to make explicit the criteria by which the properties of objects are recognized, among the Melanesian communities Strathern studied, objects were understood to possess their own animate capacities and their own ways of personifying relationships. As a result, engagements had to be carefully crafted and elicited so that people could perceive who they were in relation to one another, and so that something could be exchanged, namely perspectives on things that emerged from the relationship itself. Relationships, then, must be visible rather than merely inhabited, and such visibility depends on particular forms. This is the work of *figuring*.

Everyday lives of instability regardless of their geographical or political location are embedded in practices of *figuring*. That is, a process of inscribing a territorialization on the complex flows of forces and entities that are not essentially bounded in any operation of self-sufficiency. Territories are figures that extract from the chaos a workable domain for apprehending relations, for situating entities, human and non-human, in discernible ecologies, functions, and positions [8]. The South writ large has been “figured” in many ways, figures that attribute and enable specific acts of agency and availability to structures of power [9].

The figure of the South as incessantly unstable is the intersection of multiple assumptions, views, and agendas. It is a domain of underdevelopment actively cultivated

by the persistence of coloniality; it is the incapacities of postcolonial political dispositions to effectively and judiciously mobilize the resourceful and consent of populations under various forms of jurisdiction. In many situations of the figurations of national territories themselves are inapplicable to the purportedly “real” imaginations and practices of belonging proffered by heterogeneous “citizens.”

Figuration can instantiate orientations that persist for a long time, directing our attention and affect to specific things and not others. Figures can become compensations for the reification of other figures, such as the valorization of the creative resilience of the oppressed in face of intensive subjugation, or the generative logics embodied in informal economies. It can be an attempted inversion of dominant figurings such as the contemporary proclivity to see the backwardness of indigenous peoples as the most perspicacious vision of a viable future. Whatever figures are at work, where instability can be the normative mode of stabilization whose Euro-American antecedents require incessant unsettling or, alternatively a by now nearly infinite exigency to do something to sustain people in constant precarity, they conceal as much as they reveal, both enable and foreclose, always positing the need to identify some impossible “middle passage”, some interstices where multiple sensibilities and interpretations can simultaneously function unimpeded by contradiction. Realities are *both/and* and *neither/nor*, as new articulations are always possible and detachment an interminable characteristic of the very means through which the “human” has been conceptualized for centuries [10].

Human striving has since the Middle Ages been preoccupied with *figuring*. To come up with figures that would constitute and populate relations with that which was encountered directly and indirectly. The figure of man, the figure of the world, the figure of the home, the figure of a terrain. The force of figures seizes and molds who we are prior to our ability to understand or anticipate their meaning, interrupting the given reality and converting what appears to be a predetermined historical moment into an open realm of possibility [11]. Figuring reinvents thought, imagination, sensation, imagination.

It has also been the purview of philology, eschatology, aesthetics, physics and theology. And black scholarship in recent decades has acquired inordinate expertise in exploring these archives. From this work emerges the notion that blackness is that for which no figure exists, and in which neither law nor power can be figuratively grounded. Yet it must be made to appear as the “emblem” of non-being [12–14]. In other words, while a figureless blackness may come into the world having nothing intrinsically to do with so-called “black people”, it must be territorialized in certain bodies in order to domesticate its appearance, its occasion of identification—rendering it something to be controlled and fungible so that its realities are put at the service of curating hegemonic modalities of being human. In this way the South may be considered a “territory of blackness” as it is presented as something unable to develop a viable figuration of the urban on its own.

Perhaps figuration’s most important maneuver is the determination of an *edge*—whether stable, mutable or mobile. That which has been left out uninhabitable; the point of incessant re-figuration. That which cannot be figured, or rather whose incessant figuring provokes uncertainty, is subsumed within the rationales of addition and subtraction. That which is lesser or more—less human, inhuman and so forth. But, at the

same time, the edge is an indeterminable decision, an abyss, a dawn. For this reason, I have long pursued a heuristic exercise of deploying blackness as a method for figuring the everyday instability, the name of an incessant intrusion upon the apparent coherence of urban modernity. While some have viewed global instantiations of blackness as the most salient marker of division [15–17], the interest here less an empirical or ontological account of the South’s purported instability and more what blackness might point to as a way of inhabiting the middle of the dominant figurations of that instability; what the considerations of its own complexity might open up in the way of orientations to an always fast moving field where the South repeatedly “announces” itself in often strangely heterogeneous ways.

3 Seeing beyond seeing

In urban settings, residents often initiate particular practices, such as organizing markets, enhancing the built environment, coordinating festivals, or engaging in small-scale entrepreneurial efforts, as a way of signaling and making visible a readiness to explore forms of collaboration that exceed the immediate purposes of those activities. These practices function as devices for discovering appropriate forms through which an exchange of perspectives can be elicited. They experiment with ways of being together that depend on rendering relationships visible in the present, allowing connections to take shape through concrete and situated action.

At the same time, these practices also provide a platform through which residents can sense and test possibilities of collaboration that are not yet apparent and may never fully materialize. What they share, then, is an ongoing interplay between what can be seen and what remains unseen. It is not vision alone that is operative, but also affective atmospheres and intuitive forms of experimentation with relational devices and interfaces that often lack permanence or solidity. The most consequential knowledge produced in these contexts may therefore not be empirical or verifiable but instead consists of ways of speaking about and imagining shared situations that implicitly allow different kinds of people to be in the same space and to act with one another.

In one sense, all knowledge can be understood as local knowledge, shaped by particular histories, forms, and situated practices. Yet, as Bernard Stiegler (2018) points out, a specific localized mode of knowledge has been generalized to the scale of biospheric locality [18]. This generalization becomes possible through the reduction of knowledge to data that can be rendered computational, alongside the elimination of that which cannot. A further paradox follows, in which dominant knowledge no longer functions as knowledge but as information. When circulated and imposed, information reduces the capacities of local contexts by transforming them into comparable points or identities aligned along a single continuum, subject to measures of proportion and equivalence and marked by continual contestation over becoming more than what is deemed lesser. Understanding one’s place in the world thus proceeds through constant reference to what one is not. At the same time, because identities operate merely as information, they ultimately collapse into sameness, articulated as not-A, not-B, and so on, a calculus that depreciates substantive difference. This erosion of difference not

only renders everything increasingly interoperable but also subsumes difference within a figure of humanity imagined as perpetually under threat, a figure mobilized to justify the abandonment of expendable populations in the name of preserving “humanity” itself and defining it within ever narrower terms [19].

Following Fanon, a possible “Southern” method may be understood as an intrusion into the urban, one that is less concerned with asserting or becoming a particular truth than with engaging in ways that unsettle dominant truths. Just as blackness intrudes upon established orders and empirical claims, the city itself, having been largely produced through anti-blackness, is structured around exclusions in which blackness signifies what exceeds fixed valuations, stabilized identities, and determinations of what counts and what does not. From this perspective, a “Southern” approach can be seen as composed of those elements that must be excluded for categories such as zones, sectors, property, households, territory, public, and private to exercise their governing force in the management of urban life.

If, as Mbembe suggests in his notion of the “becoming black of the world” (2019), we are all now potentially expendable, then the question becomes what, precisely, it is necessary for us to know. If our capacity to modify our behavior depends on attending to our surroundings and actions in new ways, how do we determine what deserves attention, which elements most directly shape how we feel and act, and where we draw the boundary between events that matter to our capacities to act and those that do not. The apparent erosion of political liberalism, with its performative commitments to diversity and tolerance and its implicit demand that citizens remain attentive to one another’s needs, unfolds in part because it produces incessant comparison, shrinking entitlements, and an enduring anxiety that both the self and the place one occupies are never sufficient.

This raises a further question regarding the role of relationality in an emerging economy of care. To what extent does relationality form the foundation of a sustainable politics of care, and to what extent does it function as a mechanism that seeks to render everything fixed, measurable, and mutually accountable, folding all aspects of life into an implicit calculus of implication and obligation. Do the physics of locality, which disrupt conventional understandings of proximity, causality, and spatial intimacy, translate into workable administrative arrangements and effective provisions for basic needs, or do they resist such instrumentalization altogether [20].

If what operates at a distance comes to matter more to the conditions of one’s life than what exists nearby, then the meaning of proximity itself must be reconsidered. As what is close appears increasingly remote and what is distant takes on greater intimacy, a series of inversions becomes possible. In reflecting on such conditions, Tina Campt (2019) turns to the affective labor of adjacency, understood as the work of forming relations despite, and because of, differences in experience and power [21]. This is not a call for empathy, nor an attempt to imagine oneself fully in another’s position, but rather an acknowledgment that no adequate words or feelings exist to complete such a translation. The task instead lies in confronting divergence, recognizing the extensiveness of unacknowledged suffering, and reworking the terms through which proximity and togetherness are made possible.

I previously worked on a social housing initiative in Tanah Tinggi, a neighborhood in Jakarta, where residents incrementally altered their surroundings in ways that moved well beyond the intentions of the original architectural plans. Over time, balconies were lengthened and sealed off, entryways were reworked, and pulley mechanisms and bamboo frameworks were added to create extra space for drying clothes or passing small objects between apartments. At ground level, entrances were continually adapted through makeshift shelters, temporary extensions, and awnings that supported small-scale commerce as well as informal sites of social interaction. The building's unusually wide corridors were gradually repurposed as storage zones and workspaces, hosting activities and objects such as birdcages, herbal remedies in preparation, card games, improvised workshops assembled from salvaged materials, digitally edited backdrops for children's TikTok videos, small weaving looms, tape players, ducks, and ad hoc kitchens used for producing snacks, all of which technically contravened housing regulations.

These corridors functioned not only as routes of movement but as spaces where ideas about what space could become were tested in practice. They carried suggestions about alternative ways of assembling things and organizing daily life. Many of these suggestions were never clearly articulated or named; instead, they took shape as provisional arrangements of materials, gestures, and intentions. The everyday problem was therefore not merely one of regulating circulation, but of coexisting with a growing accumulation of spatial proposals that resisted agreement or closure. Rather than demanding formal acknowledgment, these proposals blended into other temporary configurations and shifting assemblages. This was not an expression of disorder for its own sake, but an opening that encouraged residents to reconsider how they understood their own lives.

What took shape was an ongoing strain between aspirations to conform to middle-class ideals of order and respectability and the shared awareness that adhering strictly to such norms could only achieve limited results. From this friction emerged unlikely combinations of useful and unusable materials, careful observation mixed with exaggerated claims, and playful forms of labor stretched across long hours. These combinations produced effects that were neither designed in advance nor easily anticipated. It was within these unstable mixtures that something unexpected and potentially transformative began to surface.

4 A Play of Eventualities

Everyday life has, for a long time, operated through patterned logics that resemble algorithmic processes, producing effects for which no settled vocabulary or stable forms of meaning are readily available. These effects frequently move beyond recognizable semantic patterns and instead point to a kind of shared intelligence that arises through both deliberate and unspoken cooperation among overlapping actors, practices, and improvisational acts. Tanah Tinggi may be read as a representative "majority" district, bringing together working-poor residents, working-class households, and those situated just within the margins of middle-class life. Its density cannot be reduced to

headcounts or spatial closeness alone. It is equally shaped by the multiplication of informal economic arrangements, divergent aesthetic approaches to dwelling and building surfaces, and varied modes of asserting local influence and authority, alongside more familiar differences such as ethnic background.

Those who live in such conditions must manage more than the sheer movement and concentration of bodies in limited space. They also contend with a wide range of practical know-how, informal strategies, and everyday tactics used to gain small advantages, foster cooperation or complicity, and persuade others to act in ways they might otherwise avoid. Longstanding practices of mutual support and reciprocity do remain important, and districts like Tanah Tinggi could not function without them. Still, the dominant sense is that sustaining life and livelihood depends less on predictable forms of neighborly exchange than on the uncertain consequences that emerge when multiple densities interact and collide. These consequences are not always clearly beneficial or harmful, yet they often become the moments that reshape lives, allow households to move beyond mere subsistence, and define what comes to matter most.

Such moments are collectively generated by the district itself and carry weight comparable to the combined efforts of street vendors, couriers, repair workers, construction laborers, childcare providers, cooks, cleaners, metalworkers, transport workers, and many others. Residents of Tanah Tinggi frequently observe that while their own situations may seem relatively unchanged, they know of neighbors close by whose circumstances have shifted dramatically, even when these changes are kept discreet. There is a shared expectation that their own lives, too, may one day transform in unforeseen and welcome ways, precisely because these possibilities are produced by the concentrated intensity of activity and interaction within the district.

The urban work taking place in Tanah Tinggi can also be understood through institutions that have developed gradually over extended periods. Rather than serving primarily as tools of formal governance, these institutions operate as spaces for experimentation, adjustment, and collective figuring-out. Shrines, burial associations, ethnic organizations, and guilds are among the forms that perform this role. Alongside them exist more transient modes of collective engagement that circulate experiences and viewpoints through networks of neighbors without locking individuals into fixed roles or responsibilities. It is through these shifting circuits of movement and exchange that space is continually reconfigured, sometimes through slow recalibration and at other times through abrupt and difficult-to-explain changes.

Across many contexts, states have demonstrated limited commitment and allocated few resources toward the durable settlement of majority populations. Yet the continued presence of large, unsettled urban populations creates unease for regimes whose political and economic futures rest on maintaining creditworthiness and expanding investments in logistical systems that link land, labor, and production across regional and global scales. These systems include transport corridors, ports and storage facilities, export-processing zones, administrative centers, and elite districts oriented toward international consumption. In many metropolitan areas, earlier implicit social agreements allowed majority populations to occupy cities largely through self-management, often relying on regulatory ambiguity and informal practices, so long as they did not present a fundamental political threat. Within this arrangement, sporadic unrest or disorder was tolerated [22].

Today, this unspoken arrangement is steadily disintegrating. While forced evictions do occur, the process more often unfolds through the accumulation of multiple pressures. Rising land values, growing conflict between residential and commercial land use, congestion within small-scale trade and service sectors, expanding youth populations facing persistent unemployment, and infrastructures that have fallen into irreversible decay all contribute to this strain. Urban residents remain embedded in dense patterns of interaction, observation, and gathering, developing ways of being together that shape how they encounter and understand the broader world.

These collective practices solidify into shared sensibilities of encounter that are specific to the immediate settings in which they take form. Territorial boundaries continually shift, moving between bureaucratic classifications, zones of social closeness and emotional attachment, everyday routes of mobility, and changing configurations of authority [23]. As many inhabitants of popular districts illustrate, endurance often involves remaining alongside promises of improvement that may never be fulfilled. Even so, these promises continue to structure a political terrain that is sometimes taken up and at other times deliberately set aside.

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