

The 'City' as Text

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Abstract

This commentary develops a postcolonial critique of urban studies, which it distinguishes and delineates from Postcolonial Urban Studies. To do so it mobilizes tools from postcolonial literary theory, regional and area studies, and an older tradition of thinking in the new cultural geography from which the invocation of 'the city as text' stands as a methodological guidepost.

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In this brief commentary, I sketch the outlines of what I want to refer to as a postcolonial critique *of* urban studies by way of a provisional response to a classically urban question: 'what is the city?' In so doing, I seek to recuperate a refrain perhaps more familiar to cultural geographers than urban studies scholars by posing that there is some political and intellectual traction in considering 'the city', whatever else it may be, to be in some senses always textual. Though this commentary is inspired by a well-developed body of postcolonial urban theorization that I sketch in the first part of what follows, my argument is that this is not exactly the same as the postcolonial critique *of* urban studies to which I want to gesture.

From Postcolonial Urban Studies to a postcolonial critique of Urban Studies

In recent years, urban scholarship inspired by postcolonialism has generated an increasingly valuable body of work that has usefully, and no less urgently, interrogated Urban Studies' universalizing characterizations of cities the world over (for examples, see Robinson 2006, 2011; Roy 2009, 2011; Leitner and Sheppard 2016). Postcolonial urban studies has been variously insistent that cities small and large in the global south, as well as a globally diverse range of urban experiences and urbanization processes, be analysed on their own terms, that is to say without recourse to EuroAmerican urban master narratives. Whilst postcolonial urban studies has never denied the political economic realities of urban life the world over, the argument is that southern cities cannot simply be seen as empirical variation on a universally applicable narrative regarding what the city, the urban and urbanization are. The critical point, of course, is that historically the majority of urban theory has been generated by studies of a few key paradigmatic cities: Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, London, Paris, for example. As scholars like Jenny Robinson (2006, 2011) and Colin McFarlane (2010) have so effectively argued, this has given rise to what Robert Beauregard (2003, p.184) referred to as a kind of academic boosterism wherein, a few key 'superlative' cities come to represent "both the future of all other urban places *and* of urban theory".

In developing its critique, postcolonial urban studies has encouraged us to interrogate the implicit comparisons at work in urban research; to unmask the ways that theory culture in urban studies has mobilized particular concepts and epistemic regularities that taxonomize urban life. Urban concepts like 'Alienation', 'urban anomie', 'property', 'regeneration', 'city centre', 'suburb', are terms that work as abstractions, enjoining urban researchers to find these conceptual paradigms in the cities on which they work, often at the cost of trying to read on their own terms the different kinds of phenomena that occur in those cities (see McFarlane 2010; Robinson 2006, Myers 2014). The conceptual injunction thus for a distinctly postcolonial urban studies has been, riffing off Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), to *provincialize* urban modernity, and in so doing develop an urban studies attendant to historical difference in globally diverse post-colonial contexts (see Derickson 2015). Southern cities understood *on their own terms* offer back to the corpus of an historically Eurocentric urban theory what Jenny Robinson (2016) has referred to as a kind of 'conceptual revisability' full with the potential to make for a more cosmopolitan urban studies.

The contours of these arguments and the contexts in which they have emerged will be familiar to readers of this journal. Indeed, my comments here are inspired by the thrust of this postcolonially inflected urban studies. But they also depart from it in one key respect because, as Colin McFarlane (2010, p.726) usefully suggests, ‘the city’ itself is also an abstraction. The implications of this point for a more sustained postcolonial literary theoretical critique of urban studies are, I think, profound, if not yet properly worked through, and it is the development of such a critique that I focus on in the remainder of this commentary. I want to suggest that McFarlane’s assertion that ‘the city’ itself is an abstraction should give us pause for thought regarding what the city actually is. Indeed, if it is an abstraction, and I agree that it is, it follows that as much as the city is a material and political economic reality, it is also an epistemological object. It is a form of spatial categorization that exists in language. This provocation suggests there is some value in asking whether, by calling a city ‘a city’, we pull it into the orbit of all those forms of socio-spatial organization we reference via the very term? My point in posing this question is to remind that one of postcolonial theory’s imperatives is to move toward difference by critically engaging the politics of representation, by which I mean the textual production of meaning. From this perspective then, one answer to the question ‘what is ‘the postcolonial city?’’, or indeed ‘what is an ordinary city?’ (cf. Robinson 2006), is that it might in fact not be a ‘city’ at all.

To be clear, these questions (and the speculative answers I offer) are heuristic devices for moving toward spatial difference; they are devices for understanding spaces on terms true to the singularity of their differences (see Jazeel 2019). Ananya Roy (2016, p.205) has pushed the potential of this kind of interrogation by suggesting that postcolonial theory poses “an epistemological problem” for urban studies insofar as it poses the thorny problem of how to narrate the (spatial) stories of the non-west without recourse to the master narratives produced by the west about the non-west. Drawing on the literary theorist Aamir Mufti’s (2005) critique of what he refers to as ‘global comparativism’, her point is that the very language and grammar of urban studies is Eurocentric, and the problem of Eurocentrism is that we are all Eurocentric now. This cuts to the very core of postcolonial literary theory because it is a problem of the textuality of theory, including urban theory; it is a problem of how we bring into representation forms of spatial difference that cannot be described through the concept-

metaphors and theoretical resources we routinely deploy in our accepted taxonomizations of space. *This* is the problem of postcolonial difference.

It is also a problem of (geographical) subalternity (see Jazeel and Legg 2019). To be more precise, this is the very problem revealed by Gayatri Spivak's (1988 [2010]) literary theoretical critique of the Subaltern Studies Collective's work. At stake for Spivak was the categorization of the subaltern as *subaltern* in the Collective's early scholarship, which she argued could not help but reproduce a colonial logic of Othering; of categorization in fact. When the subaltern is spoken for by the intellectual – authoritatively referred to as a *subaltern* – she emerges as a pre-scripted identity-in-difference (Birla 2010, pps.88-92), she is 'spoken for' by the agency of the well-meaning theorist. This precludes the subaltern coming into representation on her own terms, instead perpetuating a kind of taxonomization that may have little to do with the subject's own chains of signification and meaning. Elsewhere I have suggested that Spivak's critique of Subalternity should give geographers pause for thought about the ideological effects of spatial theory as a mode of signification (see Jazeel 2014). The point here is that our familiar spatial concepts work to representationally produce, and importantly naturalize, spatial objects. They are thus as epistemological as they are material and real. In the context of urban studies, I am suggesting here that the city is one such epistemological object, an abstraction in McFarlane's words.

The 'city' as text

The work of a postcolonial theoretical critique of urban studies then is to open up the very possibility that the city may well be a spatial concept that in fact dissimulates radically different forms of socio-spatial organization in post-colonial contexts. For example, in an article on Bangalore, Gayatri Spivak (2000) has posed just such a provocation by titling her essay '~~Mega~~city', the use of the struck through font indicating that Bangalore resembles a megacity, yet at the same time exhibits sufficient amounts of historical difference to not be pinned down by that textual referent. Bangalore is thus unique, entirely ordinary to use Robinson's (2006) terms, or as I would want to put it *singular* (see Jazeel 2019). The methodological point here is that the postcolonial city thought this way takes us elsewhere. It enjoins us to *learn* new forms of social and

spatial organization that may only be partially and inadequately translated as ‘city-ness’. Whereas postcolonial urban studies adheres to the city and the urban as terrains of debate just as it provincializes understandings of city life and urban experience, a postcolonial critique of urban studies instead moves toward different terrains not corralled by the abstractions of the urban, or the city. It moves toward forms of spatial difference, variety, and radically different lives for which we might not *yet* have the conceptual language. This is a difficult task to comprehend precisely because it invites creative forms of (would-be-urban) learning about domains hitherto untheorized, or unthought. It is in fact a kind of learning guided by an ethical imperative to *unlearn* that which we already know. Such unlearning precipitates the kind of epistemic violence that makes room for spatial difference; it moves toward “a rupture of the episteme of the Euro-American academy” (McFarlane 2006, p.1423).

The kind of epistemic rupture to which I am referring has not been unprecedented in recent years in and across Geography and Urban Studies. For example, the literature on ‘desakota spaces’ (see McGee and Robinson 1995; Cairns 2002, pps.117-119) emerged through the 1990s as an attempt to identify and bring into representation extended metropolitan regions in Southeast Asia, around Jakarta, for example, that can neither be described as urban nor rural. The term itself conjoins the Indonesian words for ‘village’, *desa*, and ‘city’, *kota*, in an attempt to bring into representation the patterns of sprawl, extended spatial agglomeration, agricultural land use and high population density for which a conceptual language heretofore did not exist. Elsewhere and more recently, Claire Mercer (2017) has usefully developed the spatial trope of the ‘postcolonial suburb’ to explore the ways that Dar es Salaam’s growth at its fringes cannot just be characterized as urban overspill. She argues that these suburban growth patterns are driven by a relatively affluent middle class whose spatial orientation is toward their rural ancestral origins. Mercer’s argument makes sense not in the context of an Urban Studies lens that would prioritize urbanization processes, but instead in the context of “a long tradition of research in African Studies that demonstrates the continued significance of the rural for shaping contemporary urban African life” (ibid., pps.79-80). Likewise, Austin Zeiderman’s (2018) work on the Afro-Colombian geographical imaginations of coastal communities in the tidal lowlands of Buenaventura, Colombia, consciously aims to move beyond what he refers to as ‘the enclave of urban theory’. The networked geographies that he brings into representation

– expressed and mapped through music as well as more explicit forms of black activism in Colombia – speak of a diasporic spatial politics of global struggle stretching from Brazil to South Africa to Jamaica to the United States, that intervenes in an emerging but potent urban narrative regarding Buenaventura’s global, port city status and potential. As Zeiderman persuasively argues, it is only by creatively sidestepping the ‘city-ness’ always-already instantiated by urban theory that these other geographical imaginations are allowed conceptual space to breathe.

In all these examples, the point is not so much that the city does not exist. It does. And it would be churlish to imagine away cities like Jakarta, Dar es Salaam, and Buenaventura with some deconstructive sleight of hand. Nonetheless, *desakota* geographies, postcolonial suburbs and the diasporic Afro-Colombian geographical imaginations of Buenaventura’s tidal communities emerge into our spatial lexicon only as these places and their socio-spatial processes are read on terms true to the singularity of their differences. In the context of the aims of this journal, *the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, this I think is an especially salient point given the potential that the lens of the *regional* offers to intersect, overwrite and reach beyond the *urban* as epistemological abstraction. The role that area and regional studies has to play in this kind of work is, in other words, vital (see Jazeel 2016).

My broader point in this commentary though is that a postcolonial critique of urban studies shows that, as much as it is a material and political economic entity, the city is also an imaginative production. Like Said’s Orient, it is a textual object. It is a spatial categorization. To reemphasize, this is not to shy away from the importance and urgency of getting to grips with the political economy of urban life the world over. However, it is to suggest, as the new cultural geography has done, that one way of understanding ‘the city’ is as a text (see Duncan 1990). Whatever else the city is, it is also a spatial categorization, a scale of analysis, a taxonomization, and hence abstraction. To mobilize here a particular lineage of cultural geographical work is strategic insofar as it aims simply to stress that ‘the city’, thought through a particular register, is like landscape. It is “a way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings” (Daniels and Cosgrove 1988, p.1).

To this extent, and like landscape, the city is not just a category of analysis. We can think of it as a category of practice that can precipitate its own emergence. What this

implies is the *ideological* nature of urban studies, by which I mean to implicate, after Stuart Hall's reflections on ideology, the taken-as-given languages, concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and systems of representation whose routine deployment unwittingly stabilizes particular forms of power within that particular formation (Hall 1996, p.26). Urban Studies of course cannot do without 'the city', without 'the urban'. It would not be urban studies were it not for these concepts. The work of this commentary then has been to ask, first, what forms of socio-spatial and planetary difference are excluded by that subdisciplinary preoccupation with the city, the urban and indeed urbanization? Second, however, it has also been to suggest that conceiving of the city as text might open to us a rich seam of further investigation into the manifold ways that cities and urban imaginations are (re)produced representationally, not least *within* urban theory itself. As Brenda Yeoh (2001, p.462) emphasized nearly two decades ago now, "Pinning the postcolonial city down as an object of analysis has been a hitherto elusive task". It should remain so precisely in order to move us toward planetary differences in modernity at large.

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