

Dwelling in liminalities, thinking beyond inhabitation

*Original*

Dwelling in liminalities, thinking beyond inhabitation / Lancione, Michele; Simone, Abdoumalig. - In: ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING D-SOCIETY & SPACE. - ISSN 0263-7758. - 39:6(2021), pp. 969-975. [10.1177/02637758211062283]

*Availability:*

This version is available at: 11583/2941316 since: 2021-11-29T18:55:45Z

*Publisher:*

Sage

*Published*

DOI:10.1177/02637758211062283

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## **Dwelling in Liminalities, Thinking Beyond Inhabitation**

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Our interest in liminalities follows two analytics. One has to do with what we might call the 'urban transversal', that is, those rhythms emerging from disparate (pre)occupations cutting through practices, intentions, projectualities and powers, as an affective and material economy not only holding things together but also generating modes of life and becoming-urban that defy what conventional approaches to the 'economy', the 'social', the 'cultural' make of them (Simone 2010; 2018). The other being interested in how those same rhythms, in the unfolding of lives at the receiving end of dispossession, extreme poverty and destitution, articulate a tempo beyond their resilience, indicating their design for their politics of inhabitation (Lancione 2016; 2019). At the intersection of these concerns arise our shared interest in the lively lexicon of the urban liminal. Looking for this lexicon means looking for what it has to say in the ways it has to say it. It is about tracing the emerge of its politics by staying with the trouble, and its ontologies (Haraway 2016), or, from our privileged standpoint, to follow the storylines of those that have to stay with their troubles, as the only possible way to dwell on this planet, positing careful attention to how that *staying with* can be affirmative and anticipatory, not only of itself but of urbanity as such.

At a minimum, as Lauren Berlant (2011) discussed, finding ways to narrate these extended endurances beyond the metanarratives of sustainable salvation is necessary because the 'crisis' has no other side. The "crisis" exceeds being a matter of repair or recalibration, transcends being the legitimation of transgressive action undertaken to preserve the salience of institutional forms and settled arrangements. The act of 'moving on', in an ordinary emergency, is about prosaic movements within grounds where extractive forms of belonging and becoming interlace in pluriversal ways, where the clear delineation of who extracts what blurs when the sheer volatility of settling and taking things wedges open glimmers, shadows, and dissimulated forms of different ways of being (Escobar 2018). Dwelling in liminalities is the performative inhabitation of those terrains that are charted as much as they are made and received, often very violently, as much as reworked through.

The blurriness of language here does not mean to confound apparently clear processes of extraction, dispossession and annihilation through which lives are made expendable in racialized, gendered and classist ways as the baseline functioning of cities across the planet. It simply means to account for that which exceeds clarity and what is built on top of clarity by institutional discourse and practice. Our limited linguistic capacities try to hold on to multiple affective and material ontologies going on through these processes. The effort lies in staying with the arrangement of how one inhabits dispossession (second concern) and how that inhabitation brings to the fore rhythms of endurance that are pointing beyond the status quo of inhabitation, of how it's currently accepted done, theorized, spoken of (first concern). The liminal here is the method, not only of an investigation of storylines in their making attentive to their contextual histories, but also the method of a way of being urban, of performing the in-between of spaces that are taken away and of bodies that are marked as foreclosed.

The driving question of our exploration with this special issue - and of the workshops that preceded and the Lab that will follow it<sup>1</sup> - is therefore around the propositions of the liminal urban body, being those uttered and atmospheric, shouted and whistled, disruptive and repeated. In light of the relegation of the marginalized, impoverished, and racialized to both objects of extraction and purveyors of liminality, what constitute viable performances of generativity beyond production? What goes beyond the crisis, if not staying close to interstices through which one has perhaps the only chance to prefigure inhabitation beyond itself? What kind of urban geographical narration - in the literal sense of writing form and style - can convey the tensioned politics of dwelling in, across and through liminalities?

At this point in global time, as Achille Mbembe (2021) argues, the questions to be asked are of "habitability and biosymbiosis, of sustainability and durability, of the interlacing of human history and the earth's history" (11). This is a task at the forefront of much critical contemporary thought, to which we aim to contribute, but from the side, from the minor storyline, the apparently insignificant detail of how things are reworked and adjusted rather than solved. Such concern, articulated within a range of lexicons and practices, is a central part of dwelling in spaces of relations that we call 'liminal', but only in the sense of their ceaseless providing fringes of disposability. But that disposability is not just annihilation, and its endurance is not to be reduced to capacities discourse. The 'liminal' as much as a space of constant extraction in which one dwells, also becomes the method through which dwelling itself is learned and performed (McFarlane 2011). For there are times when things come to light only when being removed or where the consignment to waste illuminates material affordances that otherwise remain invisible. Or where the apparent dormancy or captured practices of "popular" economy or sociality refuse to come to life, yet also never go away. In these contexts, liminality is the given condition, but also the question around what it means to be 'at home in the world'. A question that is never solved but dealt with retaining a fundamental ambivalence, reflecting the pragmatic need to both become familiar with a terrain but at the same time refuse any tendency to stabilize it too firmly.

Dwelling in liminalities, as a form of doing the liminal: of avoiding with lateral moves the fate of being subject-to, yet without attaining full liberation (Hartman 2018). To us, liminal movements chart terrains that are still largely unexplored in urban scholarship because subsumed into clear cut narratives that are unable to grasp how the liminal is the praxis of the many and the only way of assembling life for those living through the maximum intensifications of current forms of extractive inhabitation. For we want to draw attention to urban territories and atmospheres that have been constrained, if not insulted, by an impoverished imagination regarding the technical. Whilst urban studies, and the social sciences in general, have undergone a necessary "infrastructural turn" and a preoccupation with the profusion of smart cities and the encapsulation of urban decision-making within the protocols of artificial intelligence, so-called popular urban domains—or those whose plural marginalization amplifies some uncanny and embodied intelligence geared toward hanging on—seem to be replete with the assurance of a will to survive, which often ends up counting for little in varied body counts. Liminality for us is not some magic act of conversion, not some spiritual currency, but a malleable, mutating ensemble of methodological technics. We don't mean metabolic functions, crystallization, framed decision, or even negentropy, but rather a dance of lures, traps, bluffs, scenography, dissimulation, incantations, syntheses, injections, mimetics, and so forth. All that which is piled on, brought together to generate an empty lot; all of that which is subtracted in order to produce a skyscraper; for plentitude disrupts the Euclidean arithmetic as urban life is not a matter of adding things up,

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<sup>1</sup> We started our joint study on these themes at the University of Sheffield, where we run a three-year seminar series on Dwelling in Liminalities and the Urban Human at the Urban Institute. We will now expand this, in the form of a Beyond Inhabitation Lab based at the Polytechnic of Turin, to be launched in 2022 (supported by Michele ERC grant on Inhabiting Radical Housing)

putting more elements into the mix but rather how to keep matters on a precipice open to whatever comes along. Techniques and methods to make one's presence felt but in a way that everything and everyone else doesn't have to explicitly acknowledge it because the whole manages to be working—in the sense of both having function but also finding what it could be within any new arrangement. The power of the urban as some kind of object that is too big and too complicated to grasp as any whole (black hole) is the panoply of tricks (technics) at the disposal of an instant. Whatever clarion calls, whatever the toll of casualties, the sheer capacity of the apparently disparate to sit next to each other no matter how wildly they are unable to get along is a technical (liminal) moment.

In the contributions to this special issue, this double acception of the liminal - as the fringe of extraction and the technical navigation in the midst of the extracting whole - come to the fore by tracing storylines that are intimate and universal, but only in a situated non-universalizing ways (de Sousa Santos 2016; Oswin 2020). The authors of this collection show how at moments throughout these makings, a rapture of sort comes through, or the tension accrues a particular direction toward liberation, and that movement is registered in its capacity to produce charged affective reverberations that will endure beyond themselves if only heard and registered. Such going beyond is not the revolutionary program we have been educated to expect from the XIX century 'political'. It's a tensioned endurance that 'moves along' by contesting the ground of its given capacities and in fragmented circulations that are never just of one's own or of 'their' own control. The 'contestation', here, is technics of displacements and re-arrangements, scattered, often without formulation, unnoticed. To us, what makes a certain inhabitation of the liminal 'political' is not the adherence to a defined form of redemption, but the capacity to interlace forms of concerns and to use them as a gateway to set loose a position, to elaborate an affirmation. Sometimes this interlacing gains rhythm and coalesces in a tide capable of announcing and organizing its mobilization against dis/possession. But most often, the 'liminal other' is a momentary elaboration: generating a gap within the given gap, a facing that is also a staying on the side, where circulations are continuously spun with one hand while equilibrium is sought with the other. Such is undertaken to sustain social reproductions and aspire to personal and collective emancipations (tenuous forms of what Cubellis and Lester call 'caring otherwise', (Forthcoming)).

Staying with that liminal understanding of a technical moment is, for us, a way of thinking beyond inhabitation, of trying to grasp what it means to inhabit the planet staying within the incessant calls to be resilient, to sustainably endure and reach the other side of the latest iteration of 'a' crisis. The authors in this issue explore this theme through three interconnected themes.

First, there is a focus on material conditions of dwelling, which have a lot to do with colonial racialized formations of the nexus homing/caring, in its global formations through settler-colonial enterprises, policy travel, forced migrations, and the business of matter and culture. How do situated expressions of that nexus interlace with trans-local stories and projects? How is this interlacing reformulated, beyond linear narrations of neoliberal homogeneity, paying attention to the multiple and yet diverging intersections playing at the level of bodies, biology, technologies and old-fashioned beliefs? How do racialized homing architectures upend the relationships of locality, proximity, intimacy, and touch and become re-affirmed through new baselines? Here, Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon examines how the piecemeal assault on the improvised housing arrangements of the urban poor living in the core of Johannesburg constitutes dispossession of potentiality, an undermining of the rough-hewn capacities of the otherwise homeless to work out viable if temporary relations of dwelling and care. Amara Maqsood and Fizzah Sajjad explore how attempts to secure the ongoingness of emplacement within trajectories of unsettlement and eviction necessitate the ability to manoeuvre across different modalities of power and vernaculars

of authorization. A nimble, provisional, and multifaceted toolbox of engagements is required in order to hold on, entailing at least a momentary relinquishing of the familiar tropes of community coherence. Yaffa Truelove establishes gendered socio-technical assemblages as the predominant means through which residents across Delhi's unauthorized colonies negotiate the liminality inherent in their always partial stabilities, reflected in access to water. While it falls to women to incessantly negotiate the piecemeal provision of water, they ensure the sustenance of an existence that is both dynamic and precarious. Yet, these assemblages deepen gender marginality while also positing potentially generative forms of urban governance.

The second concern, given the importance of the ground in the exploration of liminal experiences and politics, is around generating a more textured sensibility of locality and its choreographies. Here we advance an understanding of locality not as a coherent enclosure, not the trope of the neighbourhood or of the house. Rather, it is a modality of acting in concert, an ensemble of interrelated improvisation that abides by and provides for each component in an atmosphere of mutual care and radical solidarity, as ephemeral as it might be. Locality is not a specific territorial position but an affection that has to do with territories that are shifting according to the ongoing struggle to inhabit them, with the multiple ontologies this entails. Here we are interested in exploring the geographical grammar of thinking the politics of inhabitation from the ground: a matter of topologies, but also of affective capacities that are still to be narrated beyond what does not fit in the box. In this regard, Sharad Chari traces an intricate genealogy of how mixed black populations of Durban developed marginal yet viable infrastructures in the peripheries to live through various instantiations of racial capitalism, which at the same time, substantiated tremulous, captive, yet somehow partially autonomous urban fabrics and peripheralized seemingly hegemonic white imaginaries of city life. Jaime Alves, in a piece centred on Cali, Columbia, elaborates the endurance of coloniality not only as a modality of subjugation but also a black refusal to be killed, to defer a "settled life" in the interest of propagating total disorder as an enunciation of liveliness.

The third focus is around the need to circumvent the tyranny of the systematic, the resilient, the humanitarian, and the metabolic (the predominant metaphors of inhabitation), and to focus on the propositional politics emerging from the grounds from which inhabitation is contested, in its embodied everyday assemblage (what one of us has referred to as the politics of 'radical housing', (Lancione 2020) and the other of the uninhabitable (Simone 2016)). As the entire project, the circumvention is propositional too: in favour of relational improvisations, the generatively indeterminate—the process where practices, orientations emerge from an improvisatory reworking of the past, the mutual intra-action of matters (bodies, performances, concepts, materials) with themselves. Alliances are based not on negotiated settlements but on the mutual unsettling of provisional anchorage. We are interested in inhabitation as a process: roads, buildings, pipes, wires, animals, viruses, humans feeling each other out, and the ways their alliances are conjoined as more than one and less than two—each folding the other in without being completely subsumed. Each occasion of sensing, of apprehension, always proposes for the world a surplus of patterned potential, a surplus of sensibility, a way of taking the combinations of the past and finding within them the potential of the recombinant—for sociality is always a matter of recomposing, recombining, and sometimes becomes also a matter of bringing to the fore its own politics, for its own life. Moreover, starting from our students, our interlocutors, and whatever audience we have for our writing, we propose a space refusing linear equations between scholarly and activist work as the pre-requisite from which grounded accompaniment/accomplices might take place (Vilenica 2019). In this regard then, Nadia Gaber elaborates a notion of "blues infrastructure" to amplify the ways in which black residents of Detroit "make a way out of no way", deployed to radically reframe the terms of settlement in the face of their being made expendable by the need to ensure the proper management of water. Here, the apparent

unruliness of the supply and flows of water that must be officially tamed is instead translated as the mobile force of explorations of residency beyond property. Asha Best and Margaret Ramírez, in taking up the works of several black women artists, posit the ways in which the blackness so infused and inscribed into the functionality of urban spaces haunts its prepositions, its ability to simply move on into more intricate calculations of exchange. Tatiana Thieme adopts a multi-city examination of forms of breakdown and how the refusal of the exigency of reparation allows for moments of reorientation, where brokenness might suggest its own new potentialities. Neferti X.M Tadiar, in acknowledging the ways in which the liquidity of surplus people's disposable lifetimes has been the enabling condition of the expansion of city everywhere, also points to the thresholds of "remaindered" lives. These are lives that rendered both leftovers, scraps of limited usefulness, but also the obdurate remainders of practices and sensibilities that cannot be framed or appropriated. Their persistence is a limiting condition to the seamless interoperability of media, politics, and real estate, even as it seems to deal with the problem of managing that which cannot be expeditiously normalized.

Scholars in this issue are aware of the risk of inflating the capacities of the urban liminal, but we are also collectively wary of the silencing operated by the sociology of technocrats offering policy fixes while reducing experience to management problems. Such problems often pivot around colonial pasts and represent industrial (also knowledge-production) interests. Here, there is undo celebration of the practices of dwelling as 'other'; of discourses articulating unapparent capacities as prosaic formulations of a 'right'. In doing so, we join those who are rethinking inhabitation, situating our collective work through the urban interstices, tracing how storylines allow for their own affirmation through expropriated forms of dwellings and within their banishment (Roy 2017). We build on a multifarious, nervous, and sensuous terrain of investigation to look at the politics of inhabitation as a pragmatic, a process, a way of tracing where the multiple forms that it takes do take, usually provisionally, as a platform to extend, undo, and regroup. Ours is a methodological attempt at theorizing structural change from the multiple ontologies of the everyday counter-political; that is, from those propositions that are conventionally infantilized by governance, set aside with a shrug by the Westernised (white) 'radical', and silenced by scholarship (Oswin 2020). Our forthcoming *Beyond Inhabitation Lab* will serve a trans-local space of collective study in this sense, building on the grounds of the powerful contributions presented in this special issue.

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