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The Troubles of Sharing Grammars in a World of Cities

Urban studies is changing: from the burgeoning theorisation of global south cities to explicit attention to multi-scalar ecologies to shifting norms underpinning inquiries of race, sex and gender in the city, scholars are developing new insights and language for describing our urbanising world. What do such changes mean, what do they add up to (if, that is, they even should be added up)?

While ongoing debates centre words like theory, method and positionality, Lancione and Amin's edited volume calls, instead, for us to consider our urban grammar. This, of course, is a bit unusual, a bit of a provocation: what might it mean to develop a new 'rules for how we speak' as we work to explain urban scholarship to urban to new and old audiences? For grammar is more than vocabulary, more than concepts-- it rules, rules meant to help us understand each other.

It was with these kinds of questions that I approached the book and this review. Rich as many of the chapters are with offering new terms and teasing out narratives of everyday urban life, in what follows I work to reflect on what they say about the grammars of the urban, and particularly our expectations around shared understandings.

In the first lines of the book, Amin and Lancione (2022, p. 1) tell us "the twentieth-century urban grammar of abstraction, models, plans, and grand theory falls short". Here is the old grammar, described by its contents rather than its rules. Usefully, I think, given volumes spent explicating this broader approach and its weaknesses, the authors swiftly move on towards an affirmative version, towards grammars — plural — that work differently. Distinction and relations between new grammars, concepts and terms are, however, not always clear. The editors suggest that the new grammars in the book and beyond are informed by assemblage thinking, including relationality and drawing in the non-human, no surprises to readers familiar with their work. They push for 'lexical openings', though this is not synonymous with new grammar, for grammatical innovation can also come from old words and symbols configured in unconventional ways. Building on this, my effort here is to draw out what some of these different chapters might mean for emergent 'rules of writing urban studies', pointing towards the implications of particular grammars, attending to ongoing uncertainties, and recognizing the difficulties of shared understandings of the urban amidst growing efforts to write about a world of cities for a global audience. I do this in particular through reflecting on categories, and the role of 'grammar' in enabling us to communicate as well as obscuring complexity.

The editors' introduction urges us towards the 'post-categorical', and clarifies that they mean a critique of received categories rather than an effort to write beyond the categorical. Yet the editors' categorization of categories-- received vs new-- is surely insufficient: some received categories are useful, and some new ones are problematic. Here, 'anti-essentialist' provides us with a slightly different distinction: the shared understanding I seek with my reader is that *all* categories (new or old, autochthonous or heterochthonous, top-down or bottom-up) are problematic when we treat them as *essential*. There is no essence to, say, gender or nationality, nor to the category 'southern cities'. These categories are simultaneously necessary for us to communicate with each other, and necessary for us to trouble. But we

are left with the eternal dilemma of poststructuralism if we stop here: what do we do with, and after, the troubling?

We can see an attempt to balance troubling of categories with a political agenda, for example, McFarlane's chapter on density or Pieterse and Thieme's chapter on work. Both see value in retaining a category, and in making its contents more capacious. What does and does not count as work/density is not given, nor is what does (not) count as 'good' work/density. These words have fuzzy and contested meanings, and part of our job as scholars is to guide such meanings. What this means for grammar is not necessarily that we need a new vocabulary but that attending to 'other' people and places with other practices can help us to (un)make (some) meanings-- and the normative claims entangled with the inclusion and exclusion of particular meanings.

Oswin's chapter is particularly germane here. She pushes back against the prompt given to her by the book's editors, to write about queer urban theory. Queer, Oswin reminds us, is not new; it has always been there. What has changed in urban studies is not so much a shift from absent to present as the 'rules' for engagement and the normative judgments made through urban theorising. Queer, here, is simultaneously about gender and sexuality *and* a troubling of categories, an insistence on their construction *and* a normative insistence to speak otherwise about difference.

The difficulty of shared communication about such categories might be usefully considered through Roy's chapter, which draws on work in the United States and relationships between drugs, gangs, laws and urban space. Roy pushes us to acknowledge the links between race and dispossession through deploying the term 'racial banishment'. What does it mean to take an urban process (a spatial political rule about gang members) and call this 'racial banishment'? I emphatically do not contest that there are associations here. Instead, I want to tease out the silent rules of how we connect and construct such framings, and the category-making that is happening. I worry here that the implicit rules deployed by Roy in this chapter, paralleling much contemporary scholarship— that race is constructed through such associations — are invisible, not always shared, with many readers. Who is being banished is, indeed, disproportionately and not coincidentally (but not exclusively) people of particular races. But banning particular associations (practised by people of all races) is not the same as the explicitly racial exclusion and dispossession that happened in, say, apartheid South Africa (as well as the U.S.). This shorthand might work for those who get the 'rules' of race-writing from the 1990s racial formation literature. But what of, say, our students born in the 1990s, or those reading from South Africa, who might be unfamiliar with the social construction of race, or 'racial formation' as a concept? Might we be *reinscribing* associations when we skip past the long form explanation — the qualifiers that identify much more tentative linkages — that says this is a policy about gangs which disproportionately effects/is disproportionately enforced? My point here is not to erase race but instead to be mindful of the grammar, the 'how' we write about such connections and the assumptions that make us able (or not) to build shared understandings.

Further, what is invisibilized-- say, gender and norms about appropriate work and what kinds of substances are permitted by whom and respectability politics -- when we highlight some but not all categories of the various injustices at play? Under what conditions is the proper grammar to list these (as Oswin attempts), and to what extent does listing reinforce that *this*

list is *the* properly named categories? Terms have been ceded before-- Third World largely displaced by developing and then the global south-- and some urge us to leave this category behind, instead making space for plural ways of being, plural urbanisms. What categories ought we emphasise, when, and what might make them have declining political and analytic power? How do we balance a focus on the categories through which power manifests— even an intersectional one — with a focus on kyriarchy itself?

Here, McFarlane's and Pieterse and Thieme's chapters provide useful grounds for exploring possibilities in thinking about the capaciousness of categories and their contents. Again, neither density nor work is presumed to be a stable category, and both chapters emphasise plurality and construction. Yet we can also see some of the struggles with the politics and norms of malleability in Caldeira's reflections on urban change over the last forty years. Writing from Sao Paulo in ways that likely resonate with readers globally, she emphasises the centrality of 'transitoriness' to the lives of urban youth. Rather than building deep roots and connections, she suggests lives are increasingly characterised by impermanence and movement. Here, paralleled in several other chapters, we can read Caldeira grappling with what is desired and what is pressured, what is imminent and what is agentic. As urban scholars, we want to not only know what has caused this shift, but also, is it liberatory or confining, and for whom, in what ways?

Our language-- not just our vocabulary but the construction of terms (in English, at least) presents challenges here. In many chapters, especially when talking of the global south, scholars name with binary terms through what is not: homes are *impermanent*, jobs are *informal*. Even transitory as a state of being is not an affirmative word but rooted in a qualifying prefix, a "trans" that tells us "not this". Here, then, at least, is a grammatical shift we might consciously push for in our efforts to think more capaciously about the urban: to require terms that affirm what is not in reference to what used to be thought of as what ought to be.

In calling for us to attend to our urban grammar, Amin and Lancione have given us reason to think more about our shared rules, when and why we might break them, and who might misunderstand what when we do. In attempting to think through our urban grammar, I find myself stuck in many of the same old poststructuralist debates, but also needing to think more about what assumptions we can reasonably share with our no-longer-so-much-the-same readers. I am mindful of a shared hope to *advance* our understanding by building on past knowledges, yet also of the difficulties of doing so with the passing of time (new generations of readers who may be less familiar with old shorthands), the range of disciplines we draw from (which challenges our shared understandings) and the widening of sites of study (we all are meant to be reading more about places we know less about). Perhaps in the widening of our field, we need to slow some things down, question how what we write might be read by diverse audiences, and what is embedded in our so easily deployed categories. Language can do much, but always only so much, to develop shared understandings. It is perhaps not overly helpful to say we will not ever find perfect answers. Yet as we write more and for new and old audiences, texts such as this help us to pause and more clearly grapple with the questions of what we share, what we can and should hope to share, and how that shapes our writing-- and our politics.