

AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse 2017: *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press

‘To inhabit the urban is to inhabit a paradox’, say Simone and Pieterse (p. 95). This is because inhabiting the urban means more than just being in the city: it requires the navigation of conflicting planes made up of infrastructural arrangements, financial logics and everyday encounters with *l’autre*. Simultaneously, the act of inhabiting makes the urban, bringing the city to the fore, breathing life into it, giving it the substance and form that render it tangible and malleable. Such is the paradox of inhabiting the urban: staying in it means making it, and inhabiting it changes the status of both the urban and oneself.

New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times is a paradoxical guide to this urban paradox. At a time in which grandiose claims to truth abound, it does not provide reassurance or explanation. It is best described as a set of splinters; a game of Mikado with colourful sticks thrown onto the table where each indicates a possible direction to follow, a strategy for dwelling in the city in a way that makes sense of it, allowing one to study it. The directions given by the sticks are multiple and confusing if one tries to read them vectorally—if one searches for established paths and solutions. Instead, the trick is to let oneself be carried away, to be nudged by one orientation and then by the next; to allow the fragmentary, splintered nature of the urban to unfold; to read it as something made up of challenges, orientations, multiplicities. What comes out of such a reading is the opposite of vectoral directionalities, which are about foreclosing meaning and potentialities. The invitation here is to stay within the paradox, to remain close to it, to approach it and to allow oneself to be approached by it. Simone and Pieterse do not provide neatly packaged explanations or escapes, since what they want is for us to stay with the messiness of the urban; and to acknowledge that understanding it involves unceasingly inhabiting it from within.

Is this therefore a book without hope, a wild post-structuralist conundrum offering no beginnings and no endings? Two decades after Amin and Thrift’s seminal *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, scholars are more divided than ever on the methodological question of how to approach the urban: while some have engaged in a relentless search for generalizations that can function at a planetary scale, others have retreated to the safety of contextual specificity and the highly bounded case study. Journals keep expanding their publishing rotas, and more and more scholarship exists in a frenzy of closed-circle citations, canonical radicalism and generalizing theory. In the midst of this, Simone and Pieterse are unapologetic: they know that they are going to disappoint many by offering no solution, no grand theory, with their layered, dense, patterned style. Yet they also believe that this is what is needed in urban theory today, that only such a method can grapple with our ‘dissonant times’—times when the urban South emerges with all its multitude of challenges and opportunities; times also when the urban North increasingly requires Southern approaches in order to be grasped and (re)understood.

The book provides a number of situated orientations to facilitate engagement with the contemporary urban paradox. These are invitations, illustrated through a number of encounters with cities scattered across Africa and Asia, to look for secretions, or permeation of life; resonances, or pre-conscious affective capacities; signposts, or signs of everyday governance; and other mundane infrastructures of urban life. The key contribution lies, for me, in the authors’ notion of re-description, which encapsulates the ethic-aesthetic paradigm of this project (in a Guattarian sense, its political cartography). Re-description, for Simone and Pieterse, is about composing an urban knowledge that accounts for what can be as well as what is. The authors invite the reader to recognize everyday urban experimentation (beyond, but not in opposition to or detached from, socioeconomic structuration) and consider what might occur if possible lines of escape and fluctuation were to be followed. The book argues that these can tell a story of their own, if only one is attentive: re-describing is a call to a scholarship committed to tracing the potential of urban life beyond analytical regimentation.

One major re-description explored by the book is that associated with the ‘uninhabitable’, where environments do not provide that which is normally considered necessary for human sustenance, thus rendering their inhabitants less than fully human in the eyes of the dominant culture. Here the book relies upon Simone’s recent work on the interstices of black life (also the subject of his forthcoming book, published by Polity). As a concept, the uninhabitable is conceivable only because one does not pay attention to details, to the cartography of the here and the now. If one gets closer and delves into the messy reality of the city, if one inhabits the paradox by paying attention to affective atmospheres, and to material and immaterial modulations and their becomings, the uninhabitable can be re-described as something more than a simple negation of home. This allows it to assume new dimensions, showing the ways in which the uninhabitable is actually inhabited and inscribed with a politics of life. It offers an alternative to the language of resilience and of policy ‘best practice’ that dogs much research on homelessness and precarity, opening instead a politics of alternative propositions that can also be relevant for other settings (p. 63; see also my forthcoming paper in *IJURR* on ‘propositional politics’). Re-description expands concerns raised by other urban critics (Roy, McFarlane, Amin, Robinson, etc.), but here it is the detailing that becomes key. The book offers a way of generating knowledge about the urban through a process of detailing and abstracting, or rather detailing through abstraction, where abstraction is possible only through a constant process of exploring the tiny minutiae of urban life.

In short, this work orients readers towards what is at stake, and towards what is needed to grasp the shifting nature of everyday life in the emerging urban worlds of the global North and South. It is an experimental book about the politics of urban experimentation, a work that explores how experimentation can open up and close down city life, going deep down into what Vasudevan calls ‘make+shift’. This process of experimenting also orients the subject and provides a direction for research, suggesting multi-directional trajectories for urban thinking that offer a radical departure from the dozens of neat, established theories, policy analyses and case studies that currently dominate the field. What Simone and Pieterse offer is a new grammar for the paradoxical urban that is attentive to the politics of everyday life at the urban margins, a grammar that promises to be useful for anyone engaged in detailed ethnographic work aimed at maintaining a ‘multiplicity of story lines’ (p. 197) which resonate. For these reasons, despite and because of its messy character, I invite every critical urban thinker to read this book and be contaminated by it.

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Winifred Curran 2018: *Gender and Gentrification*. New York: Routledge

What does it mean for a process of spatial change to be ‘gendered’? As one might expect from the title, Winifred Curran’s new book examines how an influx of wealthier households displacing lower-income residents affects women. Gender mediates the ways in which gentrification throws up challenges for low-income people, seniors, people with disabilities, people of color and queer people, reinforcing urban inequalities. When places in sought-after schools are reserved for the tutored children of in-movers, when retailers cater to the preferences and budgets of wealthier residents and when low-income housing is demolished, it is primarily women who suffer. When the majority of public housing residents, public sector workers and the social services-dependent elderly are female, profit-maximizing development and enabling policies disproportionately affect women. Gentrification-induced displacement and economic hardship threaten women’s social commitments, livelihoods and place attachments across the world.