

From Margins to Centres...
City Editorial 21.4
Dr Andrea Gibbons

These are journeys enabled by trust with the ever-present possibility of distrust and epistemic violence; journeys of hope that must continuously recognize hopelessness and fears; and journeys that insist on crossing borders even as each person on the journey learns of borders that they cannot cross – either because it is impossible to cross them, or because it does not make sense to invest in dreams and sweat in these border crossings. (Nagar 2014, 5-6 quoted in Ramakrishnan, this issue).

In our journeys through the city undertaken in hope of better understanding it, perhaps even of changing it, how do we grapple with the complexities of its spaces, its formations overlaid by our experience of it in the every day? How do we recognise the centres and the margins, sound out our own limits? *City* 21.4 is full of *how* we know *what* we know about the city, how we investigate it, what knowledge we overlay on top of the embodied experience of living in it, walking through it, being forced out of it, being imprisoned in it. How the colour of our skin and the content of our character stand among a host of things determining where and how we can safely traverse the urban, where that journey might begin, what paths are permitted us. Beginnings themselves are often denied. Our positionalities shape the lessons that we take away from these experiences, the ways in which we speak, and the people who are listening.

This issue was put together in the late hours in the midst of my own fieldwork around homelessness in a city that felt bereft of hope, embodying the despair of deindustrialisation and austerity. My own journey—that seemed one of futility and heartbreak both—had an odd resonance with the special feature at the centre of this issue, *The city and its margins: Ethnographic challenges across makeshift urbanism*. It raised many questions as I worked through the articles collected here.

The special feature highlights practices of reflexivity in undertaking urban ethnography, and how a focus on methodological questions reveals the ongoing discomfort with issues of voice and power that remain in tension, never resolved. This is particularly true of any study of the ‘margins’, places and peoples pushed to the fringes of economic, social and political power. Editors Michele Lancione, Elisabetta Rosa and Tatiana Thieme strive in their introduction to balance the need for unpicking the specific, the complex, the splintered, without losing sight the structural forces at play. It is a question forever unresolved within any number of disciplines, much less in combination or conversation among several of them. Some of the authors they call upon as representative—Amin and Thrift (2002) and Graham and Marvin (2001) on the one hand, Wacquant (2008) on the other—are familiar voices in the pages of *City*. So too is the multifaceted question of how to read and how to write the city, perhaps discussed most memorably in *City* 10 (2) on the subject of London. Bob Catterall wrote in the editorial ‘Such hope as there is will in part depend on how we write about cities’ (2006, 122). Is there hope to be found here over a decade on?

The articles collected here question representation, reflexivity and subjectivity through journeys across space—whether across the globe or down the street—but also in time. A powerful process of learning is involved in the temporality of being present elsewhere, and this is a learning that cannot be hastened. They are complemented and challenged by Matthew Thompson’s ‘LIFE in a ZOO: Henri Lefebvre and the (social) production of (abstract) space in Liverpool’, which grapples with these same questions in a very different way. He uses Lefebvre to unpick how lived ‘social’ space has articulated with abstract space over several decades, represented by residents on the one side, and developers and planners on the other. The two book reviews—of Rashad Shabazz’s *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago*, and *Walking in Cities: Quotidian Mobility as Urban Theory, Method, and Practice* edited by Evrick Brown and Timothy Shortell—engage more deeply in an exploration of embodied positionality. They show both its centrality to understanding geographies of mobility and exploration, as well as geographies of entrapment and incarceration. Several challenging questions can be engaged with through all of them: what happens in the space of encounter, how we tell these stories, and where, in the end, are the ‘margins’ and the ‘centre’ actually to be found?

Encounter

This is something foundational for any ethnographic encounter: we are talking about sharing, about giving and taking, about trusting and being trusted — about going in, out and through different stages of a continuous positioning and (re)positioning related to an entanglement of expectations, trust, political and intellectual commitment to a group, a process or a ‘cause’.
(Lancione and Rosa, this issue)

This encounter is a deeply personal thing, a moment often described, structured and theorised in ethnography. This special feature points to the need to do more (self) analysis and reflection – for those from outside ethnography it must be said this kind of introspection is perhaps even less common even amongst the array of qualitative methodologies. In this moment of encounter, too, the temporal intersects with the spatial in a process explored across the whole of the issue.

For example Yimin Zhao’s study of Sunhe and Dahongmen, two ‘greenbelts’ on the outskirts of Beijing, draws on Doreen Massey’s concept of *throwntogetherness* to try and theorise the process of attempting to ethnographically document a process of village destruction already accomplished, its residents scattered even as the vision decreed by the city’s masterplans remains reality only on paper. Zhao writes ‘Here, we can see not only “a history and geography of *thens and theres*” (space), but also “negotiating a *here-and-now*” (the event of place) (Massey 2005, 140, Zhao’s emphases)’. She describes the ability of new technologies to help her encounter those she seeks, those involved in this destruction of the village and those suffering from it through the construction of the green belt. Most useful to her was *DiDi* (or *DiDi Chuxing*, 滴滴出行), a mobile app for taxi-hailing and hitchhiking, which created a literal *throwntogetherness* for the time and in the space of a ride at low cost to a struggling grad student.

The situation of being thrown together, in the field, should hence be defined as an ever-shifting constellation of different trajectories and stories to tell, whose inevitable contingency cannot be fully captured but only revealed in particular moments. (Zhao, this issue)

Where once many village centres stood there is now only a single margin traced in rubble, traversed by private cars creating a new kind of space. At the end of the issue, Donald McNeill raises a different set of questions about the growing centrality of such technologies in the city's political economy as part of debates on 'Start-ups and the Entrepreneurial City'. They add another layer to Zhao's foundation on the position of *DiDi* and *DiDi Hitch* in the Chinese and global economy, and the spaces of encounter the ride-sharing app has made possible. This intimate, fragile, brief space within the confines of a car where the driver feels in control and both are made to feel safe by the mediation of an app, seems ideally suited in some ways to mediate some of the power differentials between academic and 'subject', allowing these life trajectories to come together on a different kind of ground. For the period of a ride, it is hard to see where margin and centre are situated.

A very different kind of mobility and encounter is described by Shanshan Lan in the edited collection reviewed here, *Walking in Cities: Quotidian Mobility as Urban Theory, Method, and Practice* (Brown and Shortell eds, 2016). As a young Chinese woman, she was unable to move through Chicago city spaces the way others might -- she notes the differences between herself and the detached gentleman *flâneur*, the impossibility of herself remaining so detached. The very real tensions between and within the communities she was studying circumscribed the space and temporality of her movements in ways that gave her a much richer understanding of the residents of Chicago's Chinatown as they shared life experience with her just to keep her safe. Yet of course this also brought its own limits. For her, the movement through the city created an opportunity for what she described as 'racial learning... the development and accumulation of knowledge about racial differences and racial hierarchies through daily life experiences...' (Lan 2016, 45).

The necessity of being somewhere, of making a journey, to walk, to interact, to relate to the city and its inhabitants, becomes a central practice of urban knowing. One that is thus *viscerally* shaped by the ways we are seen (or not seen) by others, in which our identities fold into the historical, political, social and economic processes that have shaped that particular place.

For Lancione and Rosa, ethnography needs to be broken down into its constituent parts: 'ethno - meaningful sharing and practice - before the *graphy* - representation and diffusion...'. While the power dynamics at play in the overall practice cannot be avoided, they suggest it can be mediated and 'tamed' by a practice of ego- or auto-ethnography. Still, they call on us to remember that it is not always possible to remain in control.

'You have told my story truly'

"We describe different worlds we live in to each other as those worlds move apart. More and more people try to span these worlds. Observation is no

longer enough; immersion is no longer enough. As the gaps between our experiences grow it becomes even more necessary to hear largely first-hand, unadulterated accounts, the descriptions from the inside” (Dorling 2015, xi, quoted by Thieme, this issue).

A second real tension that runs throughout the work collected here is what happens at the end of fieldwork, what is the endpoint of the journey and the encounter? As Thieme notes, this is especially true for those who cannot give the kind of first-hand, unadulterated accounts of the margins that Dorling urges. This is a tension unresolved; and one with shifting boundaries.

Ramakrishnan is open in her politics of opposition to the deep injustices of resettlement, which she joined to that of the families fighting their relocation. Over time this opposition never wavered, yet struggle over space had to shift and change with the passage of time and the particular need of women to find stability, to make do, to survive with what they could pull together where they were. They could not always be looking back to where they had been.

It is in the temporal development of this work that a point of departure from my previous writing arises, where marginalization by the state is only a partial story. Rather, the focus has transitioned to ways of describing, observing and participating in the trajectories of various people ... This reflects much of the ‘we’: namely, the different forms that subaltern difference takes and how a researcher can achieve a practice (or at least as close as possible) of ‘speaking with’. (Ramakrishnan, this issue)

This clear ‘we’ and ‘speaking with’ in the face of oppression rises a whole host of questions – how that is managed well in terms of power relations and positionality, how this relationship between activism and academia is managed, how this works (or doesn’t) to achieve the transformative change desired. These questions are not small, but are almost dwarfed by the larger often-ambiguous question of what is the ultimate purpose of urban research. In studying communities embedded within histories and structures of oppression that operate violently at multiple scales, there are ongoing ethical questions that must be grappled with. Monteith calls upon Duneier et al. (2014: 269) for an answer: ‘the greatest and often only recompense the ethnographer can give the informant is to try, to the extent of his or her limited ability, to get the story right’. But is that enough?

Thieme emphasises the importance of relationships between researcher and researched, and the role of the researcher in one sense as simply correcting a problem – of ‘experiences... either under-recorded or misrepresented in some way’. Likewise in their introduction, Thieme, Lancione and Rosa describe the need for a research methodology that can explore and understand ‘[t]heir subjectivities and agency ... so that these experiences are not read as technical problems to be fixed (Li 2007; Ferguson 1994) but rather as important composites of meaningful urban struggle to make a life in the city’. Yet the question remains, who is this speaking to, and who is it for? What ultimately is the value of writing for an academic audience the content of what the community studied already knows?

This is a perennial question, not to be answered lightly or ever perhaps fully. It is interesting to take a step back from ethnography here to draw upon Thompson's work in a working-class neighbourhood in Liverpool. It brings political economy together with an understanding of lived spatial experience through interviews, exploration of a neighbourhood, and an historical perspective, to illuminate the interweaving of agency and structure. In trying to untangle how social, lived space and the abstract spaces of planning and development interact in a single place over time, he accomplishes the placement of subjectivities in meaningful urban struggle, while exploring how these have shaped and been shaped by larger structural forces driving redevelopment in the UK. This brings resident voices to the fore in the processes of development:

I think it shows that you actually despise the people who are living there, that you don't even rate them as fully human; because it's what you'd do if there was nobody there isn't it? It's what you'd do if it was like an old military site say, or somewhere that nobody lived (Interview, 2014).

These are the homes from where journeys begin and where they ended. Thompson documents 'densely woven networks of families, friends, and neighbours, and the rich social spaces they have created in the ruins of abstract space. Their agency comes to the fore in unexpected and complex ways, such as when the cooperative built through the struggle to save some of the old terraces also worked to close off through-streets, thus improving the neighbourhood's safety. Yet this community victory also had some negative impacts as it cut the neighbourhood off from the larger area. This commitment to understand the interplay between agency and structure over time yields a richness to Thompson's analysis, as the exploration of lived experience reveals how the processes of development and redevelopment intertwine with neighbourhood struggle and – crucially indicates what those involved in such struggles might learn from it. Arguably this illustrates an aspect of what Thieme, Lancione and Rosa posit that an engaged urban ethnography possibly should be:

a politically committed form of research that seeks to reflect on broader systems that both reproduce marginality but also become stages on which 'marginalised subjects' continuously contest and renegotiate their place in the city. (Thieme, Lancione and Rosa, this issue)

The margins are where?

A third theme lies in the slippery nature of the 'marginal' itself. There is a level of clarity in the way that the marginal is understood as an imbalance of power, a social, political and economic exclusion from the centre to the periphery that brings with it a stigma. In describing the market in Kampala, Uganda, Monteith writes 'its inhabitants were excluded from formal systems of employment, infrastructure, healthcare and education, and stigmatised as a result of these exclusions'. This is also, of course, a geographical exclusion. Yet for most of the authors, the margins were a space to travel to, and then left to return home. Was that home then the 'centre'?

We know how to feel dirty, tired, smelly and sick -- we may even seek out these experiences as they leave us with a sense of having been there. But we know

that soon we will get home, take a shower, and have a good and healthy meal, rendering the fieldwork by definition ephemeral in every respect. (Lancione and Rosa, this issue)

Of course, for those who live in these ‘marginal’ areas, this is their centre. Aru, Memoli, Puttilli in their research describe the strong sense of belonging that emerged through the words of residents, a love of and connection to the physical landscape, an anger at the municipal neglect of public spaces. Marginality was only felt at the interface with others from elsewhere. There is a sense of anthropological discovery by the authors here, echoed in the piece by Kho, who describes the need for wandering on foot over long periods of time to find the narrow ways that will take you to the places never mentioned or celebrated in official city literature.

Where was I? It seems the obscure pavement had led me to a vibrant hub of no-frills, locally-flavoured social, cultural, and economic activity.

Kho had wandered into an urban village, a *chengzhongcun* (城中村). Its vibrance and population of 260,000 seems to challenge what marginality might mean. Likewise the hustle of Nairobi’s waste workers who take in their stride a strange European wishing to join them for a while, or the rush and the bustle of the Kampala market that enfold a new ethnographer into its complex network of business and working relationships, taking advantage of the new opportunity for business even as he wonders at this ‘site of considerable complexity and diversity’ (Monteith, this issue). These experiences confuse centre and margin as they describe the ways in which lived experience forms its own centre, even as they return us to the question of who knowledge production is for, and who we are telling stories to.

Most interesting are the complexities of this concept of marginality offered up by Ramakrishnan as she describes the changing relationship of people to geography and power over time. She writes:

residents had started to express another form of in-betweenness – specifically on whether to hold close the anger and desperation caused by forced migration, with the hope of returning to the ‘center’, or to find encouragement in the incremental improvements seen in the colony and look to it as ‘home’.
(Ramakrishnan, this issue)

Just as this passage in itself decentres the centre and periphery, Ramakrishnan continues to theorise this process of ‘re-centering the margins’ as people settle and begin to recreate their homes and lives. This brings alive an interplay between a centre of lived experience and a place of political-economic marginality structured by deep injustices in space, and over time. This tension is also central to *Spatializing Blackness*. The book explores spaces of incarceration and enforced exclusion, both in terms of the structural oppression at play, but also of the rich community and history of resistance that have grown there. These communities produce different kind of centres, in many ways becoming spaces of hope, full of lessons for resistance. Moreover, there is a call to remember that such economically and politically devastated spaces are in fact central to the political economy of cities, as the privilege of one set of spaces requires the devastation of others. At the same time the contradictions of the Black experience – both in its enforced mobilities through the

slave trade and its enforced incarcerations in projects and prisons - challenge a two-dimensional understanding of space, and demand a more planar understanding. The journey takes on new significance: ability and choice to travel on the one hand, forced abductions and migrations on the other. The movements of millions are surely transforming centre and margin? This is an additional, necessary complexity that remains to be fully engaged with.

So where lies the hope?

I wanted to find active people that wanted to promote a new start. Like a ball of wool with an end to start from, I thought there could be things to do and people willing to help. (R. F.). (Aru, Memoli, Puttilli, this issue)

Like rolling up this ball of wool, there is much hope among these people, whose stories are told and words repeated and struggles contextualised and amplified here in the pages of *City*. Still, it was hard to find hope at first, as I worked through papers in this town that I was researching. This town abandoned by industry, reeling under an epidemic of spice—a new drug, an ever-changing and often deadly form of synthetic cannabis that is nothing like cannabis, which leaves people moving yet senseless.

This miserable town. Boredom, hopelessness, despair drip as condensation down its every surface to deaden the skin and the eyes, light up a thousand cigarettes. Defeat's miasma curls wood, strips paint, shatters windows, repairs them again with superglue and uneven squares of plexiglass ... Ensures anger and violence always simmer just beneath the surface, marks couples by angry words, makes bodies spread wide or condense into hardened addict knots of wasted flesh. Faces too old. (Gibbons, 2017)

Is this the margin? This place was so hard to bear, so hard to do fieldwork in precisely because it felt like a place that was impossible to escape, a place with its own centre that could hold you fast. One evening I tried to get out, tried to walk to the edge of the moors not far away. I came to an underpass with an overpowering sickly-sweet smell, and underneath it the reek of human waste. Two fires had been lit, I guessed they had consumed the sum of someone's possessions. This was a border I could not cross.

The papers here open up a rich way of exploring the ways that the dominant political and economic centre and these places pushed to their economic edges come together in both the researcher's movement, and lack of movement through them. Their structural relationship in which the one requires the other—where multiple lines of race, class, gender, region and nationality intersect—means that the faltering economy is made visible in very visceral ways in certain places. Marginal in some ways, they remain central to the experience and sense of self for those who live there. For some such places, the phrase *carceral landscapes* seems to ring most true—just as prison is the fate for too many born and raised here. At the same time, this very oppression means that the mechanisms of getting by, of getting through, and of resistance, may be strongest here. There is much to learn, but humility is needed in that learning – and all of these authors trouble definitions of expert.

In many ways it feels as though we are reaching the end of times, that in the face of so much death, war, police brutality, climate change, camps, migrations many of these questions are academic in more ways than one. But above all this issue points to the need for a willingness to explore how we as critical intellectuals engage with this world in order to change it, where we are willing to go, the ways in which we are willing to listen. It points a way for this journey towards better-engaged scholarship that can make some impact on the injustices of the world. Self-reflection is required as we continue our journeys through cities in order to better understand them, our journeys towards and with others and acknowledgment of the borders that we cannot always cross. It does not mean that they cannot be challenged, along with our own limitations.

Acknowledgments: This editorial benefitted greatly from the perceptive comments of Bob Catterall, Debbie Humphrey and Anna Richter.

Bibliography:

Amin, A., and N. Thrift. 2002. *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*. London: Polity Press.

Catterall, B. 2006. Editorial, *City*, 10:2, 121-122.

Dorling, D. 2015. Forward to McKensie, L. (2015) *Getting by: Estates, class and culture in austerity Britain*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

Gibbons, A. 2017. 'A Terrible Walk'. <http://writingcities.com/2017/06/21/a-terrible-walk/>, 21 June 2017, accessed 2 August 2017.

Graham, S., and S. Marvin. 2001. *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities, and the Urban Condition*. London, New York: Routledge.

Nagar, R. 2014. *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms across Scholarship and Activism*. Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Wacquant, L. 2008. *Urban Outcast: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Andrea Gibbons is a researcher in the Sustainable Housing and Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford. Her first book, *City of Segregation: One Hundred Years of Struggle for Housing in Los Angeles* is forthcoming from Verso. A.R.Gibbons1@salford.ac.uk