

Epistemological Practices of Southern Urbanism

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This paper offers a reflection upon the epistemological project that lives at the heart of the African Centre for Cities (ACC) at the University of Cape Town, a young interdisciplinary space dedicated to rethinking urban things. ACC was established almost seven years ago with the explicit intention of opening up interdisciplinary scholarship on cities of the global South, from an African vantage point, thus the emergent experiment is a constitutive part of the larger debates on southern urbanisms (Endensor and Jane 2011; Robinson 2006; Roy 2008; 2011; Tonkiss 2011; Varley 2013; Watson 2009). This reflection is centrally concerned with some fundamental questions: How best can meaningful knowledge about the urban be produced? What should we produce knowledge for? And what do these questions mean for the politics of knowledge production in the global South?

HOW BEST CAN MEANINGFUL URBAN KNOWLEDGE BE PRODUCED?

The purpose of knowledge production in a “traditional” university context is to fall into the steady flow of learning and thought through an accretive process of building on the canon through meticulous cross-referencing and arriving at new insights on the basis of novel data and interpretative concepts. This translates into an institutional model where senior scholars establish research groups populated with talented postgraduate students and built on research grant funding that flows from the research funding system at a national or regional (e.g. European Union) level. The founding assumption of this model is that good scholarship demands a rigorous grounding in the established literature, a capacity to embed one’s work in the broader meaning-making machine, and demonstrating the aptitude for original work in terms of the evaluative systems of that machine—i.e. international peer reviewed journals and of course disciplinary conferences such as the large annual jamborees that characterise most disciplines across the Euro-American territories. This model assumes that scholars devote all of their research time to some

combination of field work, staying abreast with the literature in their broader field and various sub-specialisations, being alive to current affairs, engaged with the painstaking process of writing, and being a ‘good citizen’ — i.e. actively engaged in public life in one form or another. In terms of this model, the purpose of knowledge production in an academic setting is to push forward the boundaries of established knowledge within the Kuhnian conception. Most importantly, even if a number of scholars do not necessarily believe in this system, institutional constraints within which they are entangled generally make them complicit in its reproduction.

This institutional framework and incentive system applies at the University of Cape Town as well. However, when we started ACC, we decided from the outset that the purpose of knowledge production had to be very different (Parnell, Pieterse and Watson 2009).¹ Our thinking was dominated by the severity of the urban context and the profound lack of institutional capability across societal domains — the state, university, media, business, civil society organisations, and so on — to deal with the context. Despite the numbing and flattening effects of aggregate statistics, it is irrefutable that routine everyday life in this context is effectively a permanent ‘state of emergency.’²

On this note, rehearsing a few material parameters of urbanisation in Africa is merited. We have little choice but to rely on what is available in spite of the profound imprecision that characterise data sets on urbanisation in Africa (Potts 2011; Satterthwaite 2007). In that, we also heed the cautionary analysis of Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2013) who suggest most of the ‘official’ definitions of urban poverty and deprivation profoundly underestimate the scale and severity of the problems across the global South. The latest available urbanisation trends data

¹ ACC was established through the efforts of a small informal network of scholars across faculties who were keen to revive an interdisciplinary urban studies tradition at UCT. Part of this history is set out in: Pieterse (2013).

² Traditionally, a state of emergency denotes an extraordinary context of threat and insecurity to the point that the state suspends the normal liberties until the threat has been dealt with (Armitage 2002). In contradistinction, my use of the term ‘state of emergency’ is to draw attention to the fact that urban majorities in most African cities experience lives characterized by an absence of the experience of socio-economic rights rooted in a long-term denial of humanity and identity (see Mbembe 2011). Most importantly, the extreme levels of deprivation are normalized and almost rendered invisible by the sheer scale of the problems. Against these tendencies, “state of emergency” is a rhetorical device to reference in shorthand this unjust condition.

suggest that the majority of urban Africans live in slum conditions and the severity of slum living is much more extreme compared to conditions in Asia and Latin America. Specifically, more households are likely to suffer up to three or four of the conditions attached to the definition of slum living. This statistic indicates the abject living environments that is routine and unlikely to change any time soon, not least because of the growth rate of many cities and towns, making a difficult problem increasingly more complex to address. Africa's urban population will swell in just 20 years by 330 million from its present count (in 2011) of 414 million people (UN-DESA 2012).

The majority of new urban dwellers will be under 24 years old and as they enter the labour force will be unable to find stable employment that can translate into a regular wage (AfDB 2011). A recent joint report by the Economic Commission for Africa and the African Union confirms that "[m]ore than 70 per cent of Africans earn their living from vulnerable employment as African economies continue to depend heavily on the production and export of primary commodities." The same report finds further that "only 17 per cent of working youth have full-time wage employment in the low-income countries. The proportion is 39 per cent in the lower middle-income countries and 52 per cent in the upper lower middle-income countries" (ECA and AU 2012: 13 & 14). Without a regular wage, and profoundly aspirational popular cultures in terms of consumer goods and lifestyle preferences, they will enlarge the heady intensity of the incessant deal-making that permeates everyday life spaces (Diouf 2003). Those under 24 years old will also add to the increased volatility and contestation that surround a peculiar brand of electoral politics across many African countries and cities.

Against this backdrop, it is difficult to argue with much of the lament of Mike Davis (2006) regarding routinized social violence that material deprivation represents. Slum living is clearly pervasive, brutal, gendered in its effects, patently unjust and most importantly, unlikely to disappear anytime soon. In this sense, it is theoretically useful to invoke the idea a permanent state of emergency; on the one hand as a form of shorthand to denote the polycrisis facing slum-dominated cities (Davis 2010) and on the other, to draw attention to the need for responses that would have to be systemic.

Yet, equally important to recognizing the depth, scale, severity and systemic nature of the permanent “state of emergency”, is the necessity of validating the fullness and autonomy of ordinary people doing conventional things in extreme and mundane circumstances. In other words, the rich vein of postcolonial theorization that has been opened up by Filip de Boeck, Mamadou Diouf, Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall, AbdouMaliq Simone (2004, 2010) and many others, reminds us of the imperative to take care to know what is going on before proceeding to make assumptions about how people understand, experience, navigate, transcend, resist, admit, or reinterpret the psychosocial experiences that are effected by tough material conditions (Biehl and McKay 2012). This body of work holds powerful echoes of similar theoretical insights from other contexts that have sought to foreground the importance of affective consciousness for understanding agency, technologies of rule and social-cultural horizons of becoming (Amin and Thrift 2013; Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007). The methodological implication of this work is a reaffirmation of painstaking, careful and reflexive ethnographic research into the mundane and the absurd, often tied together invisibly by the spectral (de Boeck and Plissard 2004). It represents a research practice that can resist the demands for definite conclusions and solutions, resist the temptation for generalized abstraction about “the poors” or the subalterns, and rather settle for a careful elucidation of the many folds and intimacies regarding processes of subjectification.

Reading across the literature dealing with cities of the South, a powerful tension is clear between those who would like to foreground “the emergency” versus those who are arguing for a more grounded form of theorization that implies a politics of openness, multiple possibilities, rhizomatic power, contestation, resignification and relative cultural autonomy rooted in a capacity to make meaning and act (Appadurai 2011). This tension goes to the heart of the next question: for what should knowledge be produced?

FOR WHAT SHOULD KNOWLEDGE BE PRODUCED?

The central purpose of ACC at its establishment was defined around producing knowledge that can enable key urban actors to act with greater clarity of intent

and self-awareness about the consequences of their actions. We were as founders simultaneously steeped in key tenets of postcolonial urbanism and political ecology, both of which foreground the capillary dynamics of neoliberal governmentality (Lawhon et al 2012; Pieterse 2011a; Watson 2009). Yet, we decided to figure out how states, as one key urban actor, could be engaged purposively so that meaningful knowledge can be produced to inform and critique the imperative “to act”. This bias was adopted despite the deep theoretical scepticism about the capacity and willingness of contemporary (local) states to act in any progressive way, and more importantly to rather act in exclusionary and oppressive ways.

The conceptual basis of this confidence immediately comes into question. Our instinct during ACC's establishment was to put aside for a moment the reflex assertion that (local) states are fundamentally caught up in executing and/or facilitating the vested interests of dominant capitalist classes even when, or especially when, they pay lip service to a variety of empty signifiers or “buzz words” like democracy, empowerment, participation, and so forth (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Miraftab 2004). Instead, we posed the question: What is our alternative, amidst emergency? What exactly do we think local democratic states should be doing to ensure greater social justice and environmental care? How should local states arbitrate between competing priorities, temporalities, exogenous pressures and potentialities? What is it that we assume should be inherent to local states to even possess the self-awareness and institutional desire to understand alternative practices and effect them in a pragmatic sense? We grappled about whether this challenge was simply a matter of demonstrating how to decommodify public goods and then ensure that such a stance could be translated into universal programmes that are institutionally possible, fiscally sound and culturally embedded. Clearly that was not the answer — but should this prevent us from delineating in rather fine detail what such imagined states could look like and possibly be brought into the world by the scruff of their necks?

This debate leads to larger questions about the bases for urban transformation that can produce systemic material change in lock-step with socio-cultural shifts, reinforced by deep changes within dominant political-cultural values, attitudes

and expectations. A systemic perspective foregrounds the relational dynamics of local urban arenas in material, discursive and symbolic terms, which raises questions about temporalities of change and how these intersect with scales of organization and institutional coherence (Pieterse 2011b). Differently put, it is not possible to delink or decontextualize local state actors, for example, from much larger forces of meaning-making; nor is it conceivable to expect that long-term practices do not leave indelible histories of doing what can only, by definition, be altered through extended periods of agonistic learning, experimentation, search, discovery and ritualization (McFarlane 2011). What this spiralling flow of questions intimates is the importance of paying simultaneous attention to “meta” and “molecular” dimensions of urban transformation.

A recent provocation by Ash Amin captures powerfully the need for a propositional discourse about meta change in contradistinction to the over-emphasis on democratic deliberative processes. Amin laments:

The strategic role of the planner is not [any longer] to draw up a plan for implementation, but to offer a vision, to map alternatives. I wonder, however, if something has been lost of the knowing tradition in this otherwise laudable attentiveness to urban complexity and multiplicity; a certain *programmatically clarity* over the overall aims and priorities of urban living, made all the more necessary in a context of radical uncertainty. [...] Has the attentiveness of deliberative planners to procedures of decision-making compromised the necessity to know about substantive matters of urban change and wellbeing? (Amin 2011: 637-8, emphasis added)

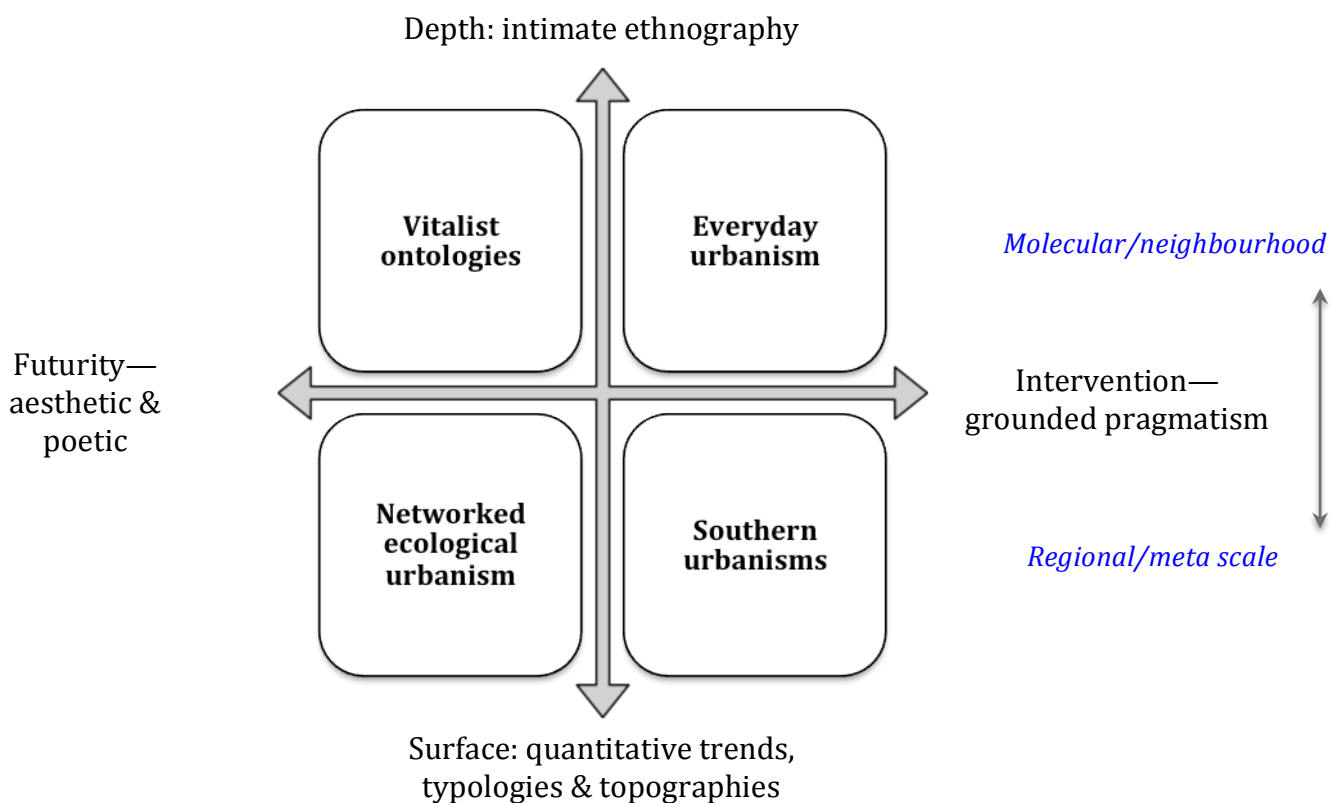
In our reading of the times, and the truncated futures of African cities in particular, it seems self-evident that we must take responsibility for elaborating alternative forms of wellbeing that can be attained through systemic urban change.

This section builds on a recent paper (Pieterse 2012) in which I argued four perspectives on urbanism of relevance in working on, and through, cities in the global South — southern urbanism, everyday urbanism, ecological urbanism and perspectives on cities that arise from a vitalist ontology (see Figure 1).

Heuristically, these four bodies of literature can be mapped onto two axes: research methods (stretching between qualitative and quantitative) and a temporal-political axis that runs from the present to the future. The present

connects with the imperative for practice — i.e. *to act* or intervene and the future denotes an aesthetic sensibility that seeks to address violently truncated futures and ethical aporias. The frame upon which I will elaborate extends this work and specifically the temporal axis. I aim to substantiate two scalar dimensions of the imperative of practice—the meta or regional scale and the molecular intimacies of the city.

Figure 1: Conceptual landscape of urban theories



Source: adapted from Pieterse 2012: 40

Meta dimensions of practice

Arturo Escobar suggests that we are at a good point to be bolder about transition discourses and take greater responsibility for fleshing them out with concrete ideas about how other worlds – non-anthropocentric and non-exploitative – can be imagined and translated into a practical politics of alternatives and purposive action. “A hallmark of contemporary TDs [transition discourses] is the fact that they posit radical cultural and institutional transformations – indeed, a transition to an altogether different world. This is variously conceptualized in terms of a

paradigm shift, a change of civilizational model, or even the coming of an entirely new era beyond the modern dualist, reductionist, and economic age. This change is often seen as already happening, although most TDs warn that the results are by no means guaranteed” (Escobar 2011: 138). Taking a cue from Escobar’s assertion, I suggest that one of the most significant and potentially rich transition discourses pertains to urban infrastructure. It is clear in the African context that the recent change in economic fortunes³ has drawn attention to the massive infrastructural deficit, and by extension the policy vacuum that characterizes the management of cities (Foster and Briceño-Garmendia 2010). In a political economy marked by denial of urbanization (Pieterse 2014), the seemingly technical insistence on improved infrastructural investment and maintenance has afforded urban activists and scholars an opportunity to confront policy elites. There is an unmistakable opportunity to resignify the infrastructural deficit as an urbanization policy deficit, which in turn can open up long argued political claims to engage with the urban (Parnell and Simon 2014).

The research and policy agenda that arises from the work by Hodson et al (2012) is promising. They are proposing in their evolving work that two isolated bodies of literature focusing upon the regional city-scale be brought into conversation. These literatures are: “material flow analysis” (MFA) and “transition analysis” (TA) encapsulated in the multi-level perspective. The former is a quantitative literature that normally works at the national scale to express the volume of resources flows — energy, water, carbon, etcetera — through the national economy based upon an internationally agreed upon set of measurement standards (OECD 2008). The underlying driver of this research is to substantiate what dematerialization of the economy would mean in practice. It fits with the broader perspective that treats city-regions as a series of interdependent systems that can be represented as a metabolic system. The technocratic version of this literature treats these flows as abstracted patterns of matter in motion whereas critical political ecologists regard these flows as socially constructed socio-technical dynamics (Gandy 2005; Kaika and Swyngedouw 2011; Lahwon et al. 2012; Moss 2001). Hodson and his colleagues (2012) explain that in the past decade there has been a recognition

³ In macro economic turns most African economies have seen a reversal of fortunes since 2000 after three decades of effective stagnation (see: AfDB 2012; McKinsey 2010)

among industrial ecologists that the overwhelming bulk of resource consumption is connected with economic and population densities in cities and therefore requires a down-scaling of material flow analysis to the city. They review and connect this burgeoning literature with the sociological interests of the multi-level perspective.

The multi-level perspective encompasses a body of scholarship that arises from an intersection between sociology, technology studies and political science. The primary focus of this literature is to understand how innovation arises in large, complex socio-technical systems such as infrastructure networks, among others. The approach rests on a triadic conceptual schema: landscape (macro), regime (meso), and niche (micro). Landscape designates the various factors that come into play to apply pressure on the operations of specific infrastructural regimes. Landscape encompasses "... issues such as political cultures, economic growth, macroeconomic trends, land use, utility infrastructures, and so on (Geels 2002b). It also applies pressures on existing sociotechnical regimes, creating windows of opportunity for responses" (Hodson et al 2012: 6). Regimes in turn are at a lower level of abstraction. Regimes encompass the stabilized agreements among a wide-ranging set of actors implicated by how a specific technological system is defined, standardized, institutionalized and reproduced through norms that are taken for granted as well as operating procedures. Diverse actors and interests are held together "through regulations, policy priorities, consumption patterns, and investment decisions..." (Hodson et al 2012: 6). In this schema, niches designate small networks of people who are exploring technological innovations that transcend the stabilized assumptions of the broader regime. They operate in protected spaces and effectively agitate for new technological ideas to be brought into the mainstream.

By bringing together these approaches, MFA and TA, it becomes possible to explore the role of governance in connecting territorial objectives such as "economic growth targets, carbon emission reduction targets, resources security" (p. 7) with a more deliberative engagement with the dynamics of socio-technical infrastructure networks. It forces a consideration of the precise connection between how city-wide infrastructure networks are conducting resource flows and

its consistency with broader policy goals. This exploration opens up the black box of infrastructure systems and potentially lays bare the variety of political and social assumptions that underpin the ways in which so-called technical systems are in fact an amalgam of specific choices. Stephen Graham's *Disrupted Infrastructure* (2010) is a good example of this point.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the merits of this particular conceptual architecture but what is of interest is the foregrounding of a multiplicity of transition pathways (NSFWUS 2000) that are available to cities responding to rapid growth, dealing with backlogs, and to some extent retrofitting the (colonial) core of the city to address questions of density and decades of insufficient infrastructural and built maintenance. Against this backdrop, it is possible to mobilize technical data and hijack technocratic debates to address directly a number of critical long-term imperatives: resource efficiency, economic inclusion (through labour intensive manufacturing and maintenance regimes), social integration, and citizenship (Pieterse 2011b).

I can only hint at the potential of this line of work owing to space constraints. Researchers at The Sustainability Institute connected to the University of Stellenbosch have been working in a multi-scalar manner to translate this theoretical approach into a multiplicity of policy arenas that reinforce the overall legitimacy of the argument. For example, one of the key international development agencies, United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), established the International Resource Panel⁴ in 2007 to parallel the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). If the mandate of the IPCC is to establish 'scientific consensus' on the dynamics of climate system, the International Resource Panel would attempt to marshal all available evidence to demonstrate the levels of resource consumption relative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and population growth with an eye on making a case for both relative and absolute decoupling of economic growth from material consumption (UNEP 2011). Mark Swilling from the Sustainability Institute was invited onto this panel and in this position drew in

⁴ "The International Resource Panel was established in 2007 to provide independent, coherent and authoritative scientific assessment on the sustainable use of natural resources and the environmental impacts of resource use over the full life cycle." Drawn from the website: <http://www.unep.org/resourcepanel/> [accessed on the 09 April 2013]

a global network of critical urban environmentalists with an interest in Southern urbanisms to put forward the argument outlined above. This report was launched in 2013 (UNEP 2013), creating an “official” reference point for African, national and local policy struggles to redefine the scope, purpose and logics of infrastructure investment at a moment of economic boosterism (Swilling 2013). In anticipation of the global-level exercise in discursive legitimacy, Swilling and his colleagues have in the meantime managed to “infiltrate” the UN-Habitat machinery and infused this same line of analysis and politics into a variety of accessible policy framing and guidebooks. Simultaneously, one of the chapters in an influential South African Development Report published by the Development Bank of Southern Africa framed its review of infrastructure deficits and future needs within this conceptual schema, opening the door for influencing the discourse of the South African National Planning Commission and various provincial, regional and metropolitan governments. In fact, a lot of the exploratory empirical work towards this conceptual agenda emerged out of a series of sectoral studies on infrastructure transitions in Cape Town (Swilling 2010). This points to an important practice to connect cutting-edge academic research to “live” policy arenas where the duties, roles and interdependencies of the state, civil society, market and academy are being contested and redefined.

The molecular dimension

Faranak Miraftab (2011: 861) correctly points out that in the field of planning at least, scholarly recognition regarding “a range of actors’ everyday spatial practices that shape the city through formal and informal politics” is recent. This insurgent turn in planning can draw upon an expansive literature in development studies, geography, cultural studies, anthropology and sociology on the emergence of heterogenous civil society organizations and mundane everyday practices as constitutive of urban politics and social identities (Beall 2004; Lindell 2010; Moser 2008; Williams 2004). There has been a search in these literatures for a conceptual frame that can appreciate the agency of ordinary people amid vast oppressive machines and economic patterns of uneven development. At the same time, this literature has cautioned against any simplistic or over romanticized valorization of everyday practices in the realm of informality and/or insurgent agendas (Myers 2010).

In this section, I take those debates as read in order to move onwards to a propositional discussion of molecular politics. My starting point is the social struggles of the Social Justice Coalition (SJC). This is a broad-based social movement anchored in Khayelitsha, one of the poorest areas in Cape Town, comprising dozens of neighbourhoods and home to between 15% and 20% of the cities' population of 3.9 million. The peripheral parts of Khayelitsha can be classified as the peri-urban edge of Cape Town and therefore also the logical settlement area for new, mostly poor migrants. Much of the informal settlements in this part of the city lacks sanitation and other basic services, and is marked by very high levels of routine social violence. The SJC explain their identity as such:

The SJC's main focus area is Khayelitsha (in Cape Town) – home to approximately 700 000 people, most of whom live in shacks made of wood and metal sheeting. With 11 active branches and over 40 partner organisations, the SJC promotes active citizenship through education, policy and research, and community organising to ensure government is accountable, open and responsive. The SJC is currently engaged in two primary campaigns – The Clean and Safe Sanitation Campaign and the Justice and Safety for All Campaign. (www.sjc.org.za)

I have been following the unfolding of The Clean and Safe Sanitation Campaign for some time, alongside the work and methodology of the Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU). The latter is another network and coalition of local organizations focussed upon the use of design to improve neighbourhood liveability and safety. The highly imaginative and emergent practices of these two organisations compelled me to conceptualise a more integrated framework for thinking about how best the most intimate folds of community life can be activated for sustained cultures of citizenship.

A full account of the history, structure, social composition, institutional and political tensions that comprise SJC and VPUU is not feasible here. For now, all I can do is offer some context on the former.⁵ The SJC is committed to a politics of social justice, which demands them to identify and address the structural drivers

⁵ Disclaimer: In 2012 I was part of an ACC team that collaborated with the SJC to organize the annual Grootboom Lecture series that comprised of various activities over the course of a month to draw attention to the roles of design in development.

of urban inequality that produce unequal levels of access to basic services. At the same time, they remain rooted in the tough realities of everyday life marked by the stark health, environmental and safety problems associated with inadequate household and communal sanitation services. One of the central planks of their organisational model is to grow membership-based neighbourhood level organisations that can address the most immediate challenges associated with service delivery failure. This could involve informal community oversight structures of communal toilets, the establishment of monitoring committees that follow the contracted maintenance crews around to ensure they do their work, fixing broken toilets while the community waits for repair crews to show up, and keeping painstaking records of crimes associated with getting to the poor quality communal toilets. They simultaneously make sure that the City government is held accountable through a multi-pronged strategy straddling various political arenas ranging from the symbolic via the media to bureaucratic organs responsible for sanitation and safety and direct action to foreground the scale of injustices.

Engaging the bureaucracy has required of the SJC to learn about the minutiae of institutional systems that embody the routines of executing sanitation functions for a city of almost four million people. They were able to calculate through this work the per capita expenditures on sanitation in Khayelitsha versus other parts of the city, especially the wealthier parts. They were also able to contest the record and claims of the City about the number of working toilets, the speed with which repairs are conducted, the frequency of use, and so on. These were all tough and bitter struggles with engineers who may not previously have been able to conceive of the idea that non-specialist knowledge can be something that should factor into their managerial techniques. An integral part of these bureaucratic struggles was a relational focus on public embarrassment. For example, one of the favoured techniques of the SJC is to bring coalitions from across different classes together in highly visible and desirable public places to form long queues at public toilets. One such toilet is located at one of the most dramatic public spaces in Cape Town, the Sea Point promenade.

On Human Rights Day in 2010, the SJC congregated at this site to form a long line to highlight the differential budgets for public toilets in these groomed spaces

versus what the City spends on sanitation in Khayelitsha. They explain the rationale behind this intervention in the following terms:

On Human Rights Day last year [2010], 600 SJC members queued outside a public toilet in the seaside suburb of Sea Point – a toilet which is impeccably maintained by full time janitors, stocked with provisions like toilet paper and soap, is well lit, and patrolled by security personnel. None of these services exist for the overwhelming number of residents in informal settlements, where health and safety is being jeopardised on a daily basis. The immediate response by the City was one of denial and misinformation – a trend which continues a year later. (Silber and Majola, *The Times*, 26 April 2011)

They then illustrated that R770 000 (\$90 000) was spent to upgrade this facility versus a total annual budget of little more than the same figure for all the public toilets in Khayelitsha. Leading up to the direct action, the SJC deploys the full gamut of social media to raise awareness, enrol middle-class people behind the campaign in acts of solidarity, and undertake the technical work on the scale of need and concomitant levels of investments required to fundamentally address the sanitation crisis in the city. One year later, the campaign was upscaled: on Human Rights Day (21 March), a service was held in the downtown St George's Cathedral, the same cathedral from where Archbishop Desmond Tutu ran his anti-Apartheid activism. A march to the office of the Mayor followed, where another toilet queue was enacted before a petition for action was handed over (See Figure 2). The petition contained two specific demands:

1. An implementation plan for adequate maintenance, monitoring, and coordination of existing sanitation services in Khayelitsha's informal settlements. The City must ensure that existing toilets and water sources are clean and safe!
2. A commitment, public consultation, implementation plan and budget to ensure that every household in Khayelitsha's informal settlements has access to basic sanitation, and access to water within an agreed upon timeframe, following consultation. We must develop a model in Khayelitsha that can be replicated across Cape Town, and the Country [sic]. Local Government must have an appropriate plan for the future delivery of sanitation services! (SJC website: <http://www.sjc.org.za/posts/sjc-to-queue-for-clean-safe-sanitation>. Accessed: 6 April 2013)

The upshot of this work was a grudging agreement from the Mayor and the City to form a partnership with the SJC to address the most pressing problems of maintenance of the existing stock of toilets. A janitorial service was created that would be structured as a public works programme drawing upon unemployed youth in Khayelitsha. In the meantime, joint technical working groups were formed to deliberate and reach agreement on the nature of the problem and what would constitute a viable solution in the short-term and medium-term. Double-speak, public spats and bureaucratic inertia have mired this 'victory' over the past two years but it has not diluted the unique alchemy of non-violent militancy, pragmatic action and steadfast searches for alternatives.

Figure 2: Campaign Poster of SJC



A number of political and organization challenges beset movements such as the SJC. Firstly, despite the explicit recognition of the connection between local problems and the overall City budget and institutional configurations, it is difficult to avoid getting mired in micro, neighbourhood level practicalities, especially when the movement gets directly involved in service delivery and monitoring. Secondly, the intersection between sanitation and other drivers of liveability at both the neighbourhood and the larger regional scale are difficult to find and sustain in programmatic work. Thirdly, it is challenging to build optimal relationships with politicians, technocrats, workers and community members in a political frame that simultaneously deploys direct action and service delivery functions. Finally, these issue-based movements struggle to address the structural drivers of inequality, poverty and unemployment, which are not necessarily within the purview of the City or even growth coalitions into which the City may be enrolled. These challenges are not unique to SJC but rather reflect a generic class of problems that beset grassroots politics that seek to be both practical and strategic in the parlance of an earlier feminist framing of (urban) politics (Moser 1989).

Two structural factors overdetermine everyday (political) life for urban majorities in African cities. The first is the absence of stable and decent employment that makes most households profoundly unstable, vulnerable and tense, compelled to continuously negotiate how various competing and overlapping social networks should be serviced or used in order to just get by. Secondly, most households who make an effort to engage with various official democratic processes to solicit needs or participate in service delivery end up deeply frustrated, if not disillusioned, by the ineffectual nature of these experiments in participatory governance (Myers 2011). These trends do not suggest that popular neighbourhoods are passive or resigned to a horizon-less political and economic future. On the contrary, by dint of necessity and cultural vitality, “[l]evels of participation in some form of collective action have increased. While the particular form of collectivity may not always be recognizable as a coherent social or political force, such collective actions are opportunities for participants to rehearse various practices of negotiation, collaborative exchange, and strategic planning” (Simone 2010: 8).

In this sense, the rise of the SJC in Khayelitsha is emblematic of larger processes at work across many African cities (Ilda 2010; Myers 2010; Rakodi 2014; Simone 2010). But can these nimble and sometimes multi-scalar movements contribute to a more systematic and radical effort to carve greater autonomy and efficacy for a plurality of grassroots formations and practices? My reading is that an affirmative answer is contingent on the instantiation of intermediary institutions that can animate more savvy and creative politics and cultural repertoires.

In the interest of opening a debate, I reference a working model of an intermediary institution, a Citizenship Academy (CA), that I have been conceptualizing in conjunction with a Cape Town-based urban NGO, Isandla Institute. In this emerging and evolving work, the purpose of CAs is defined to be the creation of

deliberative and learning spaces initiated by a municipality in partnership with a local civil society or learning institution. The intention is to create structured spaces where community groups, civil society organisations, state officials, politicians and progressive professionals can be equipped with the relevant skills and information and have the opportunity to debate possible solutions to social and technical problems, thereby deepening their

understanding of the motivations and positions of other stakeholders. (Görgens, Masiko-Kambala and van Donk 2013: 40).

In other words, the central idea behind a CA is to create a practical learning space where community activists, volunteers, workers and state-interface officers can be socialized around a spatially conscious methodology of community development. It is therefore a conscious intervention to compensate for weak community organization and management skills and the practical capacities to organize, create common purpose, undertake effective planning and execute intentions with administrative competence. Moreover, apart from imparting practical organizing skills, a CA should inculcate spatial literacy connected with budget literacy. Spatial literacy denotes a knowledge set that allows for understanding of how a series of movement, flow and use systems optimally hang together at the local level. Specifically, this involves understanding how public transport routes and nodes interface with the green spaces and water spaces, the pedestrian flow and accessibility pathways, networks of streets and route-ways, and come together in a pattern of land-use and density (Pieterse 2008).

Budget literacy refers to an understanding of the accounting logics that underpin the quantum, division and growth of the public purse available for investment of the city at large. It further extends to the capacity to disaggregate the flows of resources to the local area and how that compares to investment patterns in other (income) areas with an eye on what the linkages are. Both spatial and budget literacy demands an understanding of the institutional actors, flows and dynamics in the city (Abers 2000; Fernandez 2012). Knowing how to perform institutional mapping from the vantage point of the neighbourhood is an essential prerequisite for optimizing local partnerships and forging city-wide coalitions. It is indispensable in the contemporary era for community activists to become increasingly well versed in digital tools that can animate, support and extend local efforts. Digital literacy is not simply a matter of effective communications. As the ubiquitous cell phone repair stall in every slum across the world suggests, low-tech and low-cost digital technologies offer an important backbone for a widely distributed culture of tinkering, adaptation, copying, hacking, tweaking and stretching (Boyer et al. 2011; Sinha 2012).

Practically, the imaginary is that these fundamentals of a learning agenda will be crafted around a series of synthetic competencies: (1) conducting neighbourhood level visioning and planning processes that are able to aggregate the voices and perspectives of communities; (2) prioritizing and leveraging (public) investment to operationalize these plans; (3) maintaining, improving and growing the assets of neighbourhoods; and (4) ensuring the accountability of the state and community representatives in terms of locally-defined plans, priorities and sequencing of investments. At the core of this layered agenda is an ideological and technical belief in prioritizing public infrastructure investment above all else at the neighbourhood scale. Inspired by Latin American and Asian examples, the public realm, comprising spaces of collective action such as leisure, trading, production and exchange, is deemed as more important than individualized transfers because it enhances the spaces that can make everyday life easier, safer and cheaper (Werthmann 2011).

The political agenda in the South African context is to get government funding for the establishment of a CA infrastructure but to leave it in the hands of civil society consortia to execute the work based on a renewable contract. This agenda found traction in the first draft of the National Development Plan of the Planning Commission (The Presidency 2011) but it was diluted and almost washed out in the final version of the Plan (The Presidency 2012). However, the basic rationale has also been embedded in public policy frameworks at provincial and metropolitan levels, specifically in Cape Town and Johannesburg. It will become the focus of a sustained campaign of Isandla Institute over the next period. Furthermore, ACC is working with various other bodies to experiment with a highly interactive methodology to craft a pedagogy for developing spatial literacy in three intimate neighbourhoods across Johannesburg, one in Port Elizabeth and another in Cape Town. Again, the point of these fleeting examples is to demonstrate the unavoidable embedding of conceptual work in “live” situations across various institutional domains and taking on the role of strategic intermediary to articulate the dots, even if they cannot always be connected.

POLITICS OF CONNECTING METHOD TO THE PURPOSE OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The implicit argument built up to this point is that a certain form of instrumentality should anchor our research. As argued earlier, in ACC we seek to produce knowledge that can enable key urban actors to act with greater clarity of intent and self-awareness about the consequences of their actions. This is clearly a risky position to take: it raises all manner of methodological alarm bells and opens the door for accusations of political capture. I do not have the time here to work through these dangers but rather want to reflect upon the imperative of co-production as a central epistemic practice for research in the global South and the broader institutional-cultural milieu that is required to counteract the inherent dangers of co-production.

It is self-evident that there is a dearth of data and knowledge about both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of cities in much of Africa (Myers 2010). This can be connected to the long-term erosion and under-investment in higher education institutions in the postcolonial era. It can also be traced to the institutional reforms that African universities have been subjected to, paralleling neoliberal reforms in the global North, even though to begin with the foundation of these universities were already precarious and under-funded. It can also be tied to the larger epistemic crises that Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2004) have mapped with alacrity in their various efforts to explicate “modes of writing Africa into the world”. Finally, the lack of thick and multivalent knowledges about African cities can be referenced to the forms of rule that have predominated, especially since the 1980s (Chabal 2009). The fact that most African universities are then also embedded in multiple asymmetric relationships with Northern universities to serve as extensions for field work and data collection further complicates the picture.

A critical postcolonial disposition would suggest that amid these trends it is vital to secure as much autonomy and distance from the state in particular and other elites in order to ensure that knowledge production can indeed speak truth to power. There is undoubtedly an indispensable role for this but given the broader imperatives to inform the routine and extraordinary decision-making processes of

all urban actors, it might be more urgent to devote a considerable chunk of research infrastructure to building appropriate knowledge ecologies about the urban. At the core of such a system must reside an attentiveness to *institutions*. In other words, if we assume that cities are reproduced and contested through a multiplicity of agonistic confrontations that can in turn produce questions and decisions about how diverse actors position themselves and act in light of periodic clashes (Amin and Thrift 2013), the role of knowledge producers can simultaneously be a reflective mirror, critic, advisor and partner-in-learning.

The organisational and political implications of this positionality are demanding and fraught with all kinds of ethical and political dangers but these are unavoidable. To illustrate this assertion, it may be helpful to briefly explain what our imaginary is for collectively building a new generation of urban research institutions across sub-Saharan Africa.⁶ There should exist at the city level bespoke laboratories that allow practitioners (from the state and civil society organizations) to work with academic researchers to jointly decipher the most urgent questions that require sustained attention. These laboratories should ideally coalesce as an interdisciplinary space devoted to the contemplation of the city in both academic and popular registers. The eight CityLabs that ACC has established since 2008 offers an example of the possibilities and challenges of this approach (Anderson et al. 2013; Brown-Luthango 2013; Cartwright et al. 2012; Pieterse 2013a).

At the city-regional scale, there is a need to establish urban observatories that can systematize the collection of data and various representations of urban patterns and trends. These independent institutions should ideally straddle various universities and numerous public bodies with a vested interest in improving the accuracy of the data sets that inform planning, budgeting, monitoring and comparison.⁷ These kinds of knowledge institutions are particularly important to

⁶ ACC is working with a number of African university partners to establish and grow the African Urban Research Network that will collaborate to ensure more resources for applied research on urbanization issues that can inform and shape emerging policy responses at local, national and continental levels. The inaugural workshop of the initiative took place in Addis Ababa on the 20 & 21 March 2013. A second workshop takes place from the 18-19 February 2014 in Nairobi.

⁷ A strong example of this kind of institution is the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) that is co-owned by the University of Johannesburg and University of Witwatersrand.

become repositories of the system-level data sets that are required to undertake meaningful metabolic flow analysis as argued for earlier. Most importantly, a new generation of urban observatories can also work on bringing together different kinds of data sets and in particular resolve the technical compatibility problems between community-based enumeration and GIS layers and how these can speak to the official spatial data layers. One can also imagine these urban observatories figuring out how best to use statistical indices such as the multiple-deprivation index, which allows for tracking the prevalence and dynamics of poverty at a small area scale, to speak to profiles of livelihood and poverty that is so central to the organizational practices of social movements such as Slum/Shack Dwellers International and Streetnet. Finally, regional observatories will prove indispensable for meaningful claims and debates about city-wide redistribution and social justice, on condition that they operate as a public resource and adopt creative commons practices in how they treat their data.

A third dimension of the knowledge architecture on cities is the national scale. There is considerable scope to exploit the UN-Habitat call for national urban forums to make a case for nationally funded research programmes that can enhance the quantum and focus of urban scholarship. We imagine in this dimension government departments with a vested interest in better urban policy collaborating with urbanists and social movements to influence the priorities of national policy and institutions geared to enhance research and development in the country. Unlocking national state resources for independent academic research on a variety of urban topics may seem prosaic but it can make all the difference in establishing a broad-based foundation of indigenous scholarship. In the short-term, the funding will likely prioritise only “relevant” work but as the system matures one can also expect a greater openness for more heterodox efforts. In South Africa, we have been experimenting with a bi-annual interdisciplinary conference under the banner of City Studies.⁸ This academic conference oscillates between University of Witwatersrand (Wits) and University of Cape Town and

⁸ The South African City Studies Conference initiative is a collaborative effort between ACC and the Centre for Urbanism and the Built Environment (CUBES) at Wits University. The first conference was convened during 24-25 June 2009 and the second one 7-8 September 2011. A third conference is planned for 24-26 March 2014. In the intermittent years, we convene a South African City Studies PhD Workshop to provide the opportunity for emerging scholars to prepare in a peer environment for the next conference. Two of these have also been convened.

aims to create a platform to showcase the truly heterodox and creative range of work that urban scholars are producing. Most importantly, it creates a social and deliberative space to demonstrate the important theoretical and empirical questions that emerge in the border zones where disciplines and sub-specializations overlap. It is also routine for us to invite public policy officers and politicians to participate and familiarize themselves with academic discourses.

The last level of research infrastructure that we are working to promote is continental. Africa is an immense and the vicissitudes of the international aviation industry make intra-continental travel extremely expensive. Furthermore, most African universities have no budgets for international conference travel or the basic infrastructures to enable virtual communication through, for example, video conferencing and other technical mediums. The deep divisions between linguistic regions add another level of complexity and challenge. Yet it is self-evident we need to establish and grow a number of platforms that can allow urban scholars and practitioners to engage and collaborate. One of the available avenues to advance this agenda is the policy need for comparative data about urbanization trends, dynamics and challenges. Thus ACC has over the past four years been working with an extensive network of actors — universities, multilateral development agencies, national governments — to produce “State of the Cities” reports at a national level. We are presently working on this initiative in Ghana, Botswana, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Malawi. I cannot elaborate on the avalanche of problems and obstacles we have encountered suffice to say that we have a very long road to travel to get anywhere close to baseline information rooted in indigenous research institutions.

It is clearly impossible to separate the institutional and epistemic imperatives in thinking about the priorities and practices of urban scholarship in the African context. However, when one considers the emerging literature on southern urbanisms, it seems disconnected from the practical challenges of routine scholarship. A lot of the fancy theoretical footwork that is commonplace is out of kilter with the lack of basic data and the prosaic work that is required to build a knowledge edifice from the ground up. Is there room to re-ground and anchor the debates on southern urbanism in the material constraints that underpin urban

scholarship in Africa? Is it possible to identify positionalities less patently on the side of the subaltern but rather distributed across many impure, compromised and murky terrains of institutional overlap and learning? And what could this mean for the moral certainties that so often accompany this genre of scholarship?

IN CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to draw attention to the mundane underbelly of institution building as constitutive of the epistemic project in cities of the global South. The purpose is to suggest that we need to radically broaden our conceptions of what this enterprise might involve. It cannot simply be about excavating indigenous theoretical lineages to elucidate the specificities of urban dynamics and cultures in these places. Of course, that is vital work in provincializing the claims of the canon, but it should form part of a broader endeavour to create the institutional infrastructures for autonomous knowledge production and thought. The very practice of institution building, positioning, is a form of theory building because it demands contamination; it demands immersion into profoundly fraught and contested spaces of power and control. It challenges us to think ourselves not apart from the world, but rather deeply and irrevocably caught up in all of its contradictory entanglements. In particular, I am making an argument for taking the postcolonial state more seriously in our thought and practice because without a viable state apparatus, it is not possible to remake our urban futures. It is of course possible to rethink those futures, as many scholars do, but such forms of theory building will always come up short because it has gone through the furnace of agonistic conflicts that arise from modes of coproduction.

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