To extend: Temporariness in a world of itineraries

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Abstract
Recent urban analysis has emphasised the ‘big moves’ – planetary scales, extensive processes, major actors, mega-developments and substantial financial flows – important in accounting for a seemingly all-encompassing urbanisation. Still, significant volumes of the urban environment have historically been shaped by the collaborative efforts of residents and their associative institutions. These were collaborations largely operating without formal contracts or consensus, piecing together concrete places capable of holding different practices and sentiments and, as such, rarely became sedentary, even if conditions and power relations might have appeared fixed. These forms included and exceeded clear demarcations of entities (individual, household, social), with, for example, the operations of the digital media increasingly beyond the apprehension of human cognition, making it increasingly unclear ‘who is the what that does something to whom.’ As a result, the terms and economies of such collaborations amongst residents – their acts of autoconstruction – have become more complex and precarious, particularly as residents emphasise the importance of mobility, flexible commitments and individual aspirations. Hence, urban environments are elaborated in ways not captivated by plans, measures or even advanced computational analyses, and there are many ways that residents continue to operate in concert but without discernible mobilisation or organisation. Focusing on temporariness – not as a specific sector or set of practices but as a constellation of efforts to generate something of value – and drawing upon fieldwork across different sites in Indonesia, this lecture explores the new terrain of urban invention by poor, working and lower middle-class residents in the wake of its purported demise.

Keywords
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The time of the temporary

‘It’s only going to be temporary’ is a phrase that I have heard repeatedly during the past several years. Particularly from young adults looking upon their present circumstances. While youth has conventionally been considered as a process of transition, as something temporary anyway, this process is prolonged for many in anticipation of gainful employment, marriage and family or a sense of stability, an anticipation that may never end (Côté, 2018; Honwana, 2012). Much has been made for a long time about the seemingly intensifying temporariness of everyday life and the way this word has been affixed as temporary contracts and labour, temporary friendships with or without benefits, even temporary autonomous zones (Boersma, 2019; Kloos, 2015; Rao, 2007). In an extensively urbanised era replete with the valorisation of mobility and circulation and the ways in which any apparent stability seems tenuous because of the ways in which social and geographic positions are networked across an ever-expanding range of relations, what could not be temporary?

In this lecture I want to briefly reflect on the way in which such temporariness inhabits the urban. How it may be the urban’s sole inhabitant, as the temporary itself seems to constantly unsettle what it means to inhabit, and how the cities and suburbs and peripheries and all kinds of strange urban formations perhaps should not be viewed as places to inhabit. Rather, they are what Karen Barad (2011) might call an electronic body all the way down, a condensation of dispersed and multiple beings and times, where future and past are diffused into each moment. This is a body set loose as a transmattering, constantly wandering through what might be or have been, regenerating itself through strange alliances. As such, urban residents are always on the way to themselves already somewhere else.

Or, to take Jennifer Robinson’s (2016a, 2016b) project of comparative manoeuvres, where urban territories are forged through things shifting sideways, laterally, without...
subsumption or overarching frame, without settling somewhere. For, ‘to settle’ has always been excessively burdened by the imperial practices of the ‘settler’ and his fascination, obsession in marking a story with a definitive beginning and end. This has been a story from which to measure the worthiness of all others, their rights of use and potentials of self-making (Povinelli, 2011). Much of the urban today, however, wards off narration. Storytelling may continue unabated but what is told is less a story than a profusion of disconnected details.

Of course, the obdurate abounds – all of those markets, shops and cafes that have barely made a few daily sales for decades; all the residential and commercial buildings that always have seemed to show signs of imminent collapse, all of those who have never extricated themselves from the same dead-end job. Much is made about the relentless and accelerated transformation of cities and urban life. But from Mexico City to Mumbai large swathes of the city have barely been altered (Hommels, 2005).

Yet, regardless of empirical evidence, the modality through which we tend to look at things seems to attribute a temporary condition to them. Sometimes it seems that residents look at their surroundings as if they are already gone, past; that there is nothing about them that seems adequately prepared to survive through what is just about to arrive. In a daily search for more intense experiences and exposures to the world, the ability to sense what is in front of us or where we are as somehow important or adequate quickly fades into a generalised restlessness (West-Pavlov, 2013). Even the notion of the ‘temporary’ would seem to undermine its own meaning – for we usually would recognise something as temporary in contrast to that which endures, sustains, continues.

**Riding the waves and lifetimes of circulation**

For many in Indonesia’s ‘black’ far east, there is little recognition of continuity or of a destination to travel to. In recent weeks I have been taking long ferry rides with youths as they make their way back and forth from Kupang – the main city of the East – in search of work on palm plantations in Kalimantan and Malaysia, gold and coal mines in Papua, the pearl beds of Alor, the oil fields of Aru, commercial ships from Makassar, agricultural processing and construction in Ende or Maumere or low-end jobs in Surabaya.

Most have not retained any positions in advance and, if they manage to secure some kind of temporary arrangement, do not stay at it for very long, for the working conditions are oppressive, the supply of potential labour voluminous and the work itself is often pitched to fluctuating markets of demand. They rarely talk about where they come from or where they would settle if they had a chance. In this region of promiscuous mixture, the long nights on the ferry are punctuated by racial and religious anxiety, the result of the ways in which skin tone indicates a shifting barometer of proximity to increasingly precarious economic opportunity on the one hand, and a tenuous rootedness to tradition on the other. ‘I am going to put a smile on your mother’s face finally’ or ‘I am gonna do the job your father has long dreamed of’ are frequent phrases tossed back and forth, only to be answered by ‘my mother rubs you between her two fingers like the insect you are’ or ‘you will spend your days combing the street for rotten fruit.’ Such insults seem more obligatory ‘introductions’ than heartfelt feelings, as if in face of racial, religious and regional difference, the derogatory is a ritual that must be invoked to get to something else. That somehow eventual displays of generosity are more
intense or valuable by initially demeaning the prospective recipient.

In a region where barter, piracy, mercantilism and capital exchange on steroids all intermix more or less, race is a marker of who and what is made available for what. As few on these boats claim any capacity to manage their fates, nights of sugary coffee banter centre on who is really Indonesian or is not, as if any had the faintest idea of what such a national designation referred to in the first place. At one moment, they will vociferously complain about the enduring capacity of the Bugis – that ethnic designation given to Muslim traders who circulate across the seas of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines – to capture commercial markets, dominate the trade in every small thing. At the next moment, everyone will claim to be Bugis themselves, knowing about a deal that is about to go down, an opportunity that could make everyone rich for a few days.

Everyone sizes themselves against each other, men and women alike, although this is primarily a male world, with the women consigned to adjudicating disputes that threaten to get out of hand, or who may be the only ones carrying real things to trade. Yet, most are also able to temporarily break through comparisons inflected by racial anxiety to offer everyone something, where they seem to hold nothing back in terms of places to stay, names of contacts and tricks to get by. To listen to their accounts is to enter a fray, a sudden whirlwind like those that often plague the boats traversing these seas, and the subsequent rash of cancellations and rescheduling. For what is told is usually disjointed. An account begins in one place, but without warning, the scene switches seamlessly to another. Plantations become brothels become churches become rigs and so forth. It is hard to keep track of anything coherent. No wonder, would be the quick conclusion, that these youth are not getting anywhere because they do not seem to know where they are at any moment or what they are getting themselves into. They barely seem to touch shore and are at sea once again, which is the literal situation for many. Like their forebears, they are most familiar with ‘slash and burn’, as they are not investing in long-term relationships but in maximising this particular moment of contact. As such, it is hard to tell where these youth are actually coming from. Just as they continuously talk about something ‘out there’ that will change their lives, when you ask where they come from, they point out across the sea and say, from ‘out there.’

Of course, they all come from somewhere. Many are the offspring of long-disappeared migrants, of reworked households from which they have been sometimes excluded, or of which they have been sometimes made unwilling centres. They were sometimes the ones on whom extended family hopes were placed, ones designated not to work the fields or those for whom fields were already overcrowded or fallow. Some were designated as those who could best ‘do without’ – whether it be a parcel of land, a spouse, a normal future – so that the meagre savings of households could be applied to those seen as more vulnerable. The ‘strength’ of these youths was thus immediately converted into a deficiency in terms of their participation in larger labour markets, in which they had only a temporary footing – a little bit of driving, delivering, constructing, repairing or servicing.

Kupang, the largest metropolitan area of this East, is full of young people with such temporary positions, waiting around, waiting to leave and then leaving. They deploy themselves as disposable income for tenuous and increasingly tense affiliations ‘back home’ and beyond. These are affiliations that are only partly familial. They entail complex relations of indebtedness amongst blood relatives, clans, local sponsors and
authority figures. For the places they come from hover with uncertainty between the long-honed practices of bartering economies and the not yet fully instantiated economies of cash.

As major retail and wholesale corporations increasingly dominate agricultural production and cycles all the way down to the field, as large investors from Jakarta and beyond swallow up large tracts of land on and offshore in formerly remote locales, as the plantation system returns to consolidate individual landholdings, as already dry climates face further reductions in wet seasons and as larger amounts of small-scale agricultural production are left to older women, the stage is set for a preponderance of youth riding fast and loose on the motorbikes that their poverty no longer makes unaffordable. For, if you are not riding the seas, you are riding on what passes for roads, sometimes with purpose but most often without one. In Kupang, diverting petrol is one of the biggest games in town.

Moving bodies around

In cities where the jobs of delivery are dependent on managing the mechanics of circulation, getting around is an intricate series of constant calculations. These calculations in the heads of young delivery drivers almost seem deliberated algorithmically as they are buying time for their customers or making the sheer act of consumption possible. Algorithmically in the sense of various combinations of variables, impressions, hearsays and shared messages that are reweighted in relation to each other and then applied to the question, ‘what should I do, how should I proceed?’

For, in many cities, this kind of driving is done by marked bodies – those otherwise marginalised by virtue of racial or locational background, legal status, such as refugees and migrants, all of whose precarity cheapens the costs involved. Still this is the closest to stable employment many young men and women will ever get. Their itineraries are always subject to interruption – all trips between here and there are fraught with increased risks for specific bodies, where the specifics of their histories and aspirations are irrelevant to the fates to which they could be disposed. For, roving gangs, strongmen who exert control over specific territories or bored police who entertain themselves with shakedowns are not interested in the backgrounds of specific drivers or the purposes or destinations of their rides.

Knowing that these drivers have to move around, have to show themselves beyond the relative confines of safety in hidden neighbourhoods, entire apparatuses function on the inflated prices of both survival and death that target them. Extortion rackets, arbitrary detentions and executions, illegal detainment and shakedowns not only become purviews for criminal elements but integral aspects of official policing and municipal fundraising. So there is always a biomass available to be picked up, put over there, made to do whatever, and easily disposed of – creating an atmosphere in the midst of the urban poor where everyday planning to manage personal and household affairs might simply be only useful as a recreational activity.

Instead of investing in the development of people’s lives as productive citizens, availed of a place from which to narrate a history of progression, of improved well-being, populations are ‘let go’, subject to what Ruth Gilmore (2007) calls organised abandonment. Their lifetimes, freed up from definitive anchorage or accreted value and made expendable, are currency to be spent. In aggregate, these lifetimes constitute a form of securitisation, a constant stream of income available for expenditure, a wide-open terrain of manipulations on what bodies can be used for, how they can be shifted around. All of which can be paired into
claims of investment worthiness issued by elites and their nation-states.

Neferti Tadiar (2015) talks about the entrapment of populations convinced that becoming properly human is something worth pursuing and being willing to pay for. Residents have long been coaxed into jettisoning mixtures of jocularity, trickery, fast-talking, inexplicable generosity, deft manoeuvres, festivity and dissimulation in favour of a belief that propriety was attainable through considering one’s lifetime as a property to be cultivated, a value to be maximised. Never mind when teachers rarely showed up in classrooms, that the army milked every effort at entrepreneurial spirit or that savings groups ended up paying exorbitant interest rates.

The urban poor are no longer reserve labour but indications of the capacity of states to move bodies around, keep them in line, kill them when necessary and thus prove their creditworthiness on the international market. The refusal to invest in social reproduction, leaving the poor to fend for themselves now under conditions where fending becomes improbable, conveys the willingness of nations to do what is necessary to guarantee the safety of foreign investment, enabling it to detach itself from its own coherence in favour of the machinic resonances of continuous income streams dutifully laundered. Life for many is what Tadiar (2016) refers to as ‘remaindered life’, that which remains after the pursuit of a normative humanity has been exhausted.

To mobilise even remote opportunities requires intricate forms of brokerage, lives subjected to intricate insurance policies that calculate the risks and attempt to circumvent them. Even for those riding the waves in Indonesia’s East attempting to escape all kinds of tedious obligations, they often end up owing far into the future, lives already mortgaged, working to pay what they already owe. Here, indebtedness seems far from temporary. Rather, lives are locked into a set disposition from which there is no escape, except perhaps the literal taking on of more debt to escape that already accrued.

Under such circumstances, what kind of story is worth telling? For these youths on boats, heading back and forth, they have little to carry with them but scenes of provocation, the way they push and pull at each other’s manoeuvres. The ship may move ever so slowly, but in these long nights, they do not sit still, they wander up and down every nook and cranny, they preach from tables, they sing local versions of Thai songs they have seen in videos. They demand each other’s attention, they hatch plots and schemes to take things weakly guarded, they talk about cousins and uncles who can do this and that. It is a thick web of complicities that can dissipate at any moment. Everything (but debt) remains temporary.

The tentativeness of land(ing)

In the past, the acquisition of a place, a stable point of reference, would have been the goal of this incessant wandering by the youth of Indonesia’s East. For Muslims this would have been a small corner of a market, for Christians a low-level civil service position. These are residues of colonial economies that largely remain intact. In cities lacking extensive formal economies, the pursuit of land has been the biggest economic game in town and fuels a murky politics of land conversions, extractions and dispossession. Getting hold of land is rarely a straightforward process and then regularising what one has attained an even more complicated matter. In much of Indonesia’s East, land largely remains the purview of a clan, managing its access. Outside of state expropriation or murky deals within the clan, the ability of youth to acquire anything for themselves with their savings centres on small towns and cities. As these cities
expand, not only is there the likelihood of competing claims and bureaucratic manipulations but also questions about how any new acquisitions might be effectively serviced. Significant personal savings are mobilised in this pursuit only to run dry before any building can be completed.

Thus, urban life is punctuated by multiple temporalities, rhythms of ambitious starts, exhausted savings and the need to hold off unwanted incursions and infrastructural degradation until additional funds can be secured to start building again. So many cities are replete with landscapes of projects where it is difficult to tell what their incompletion might imply for sure (Collins, 2016; Moyo et al., 2015; Steel et al., 2017). Even when finished, the locations may be so far removed from work and amenities that the owners may simply continue to live in their former abodes and wait till the ‘time is right.’ Here, there is little driving up the price of land outside of the collective exigency to obtain it. Of course, in many instances there have been substantial inflows of foreign capital, some of which is speculative, others which capitalise on expanding ports, natural resource extraction and urban services. But for the most part, land values escalate primarily on the basis of a generalised expectation that the urban footprint will increase exponentially and so acting on this anticipation generates a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy (Goodfellow, 2017; van Noorloos and Kloosterboer, 2018).

Urban peripheries perhaps best exemplify a process where many different temporalities exist at the same time – sharecropping, industrial estates, small- and medium-scale manufacturing, high- and low-end housing developments, communally held farmland, leisure zones and watersheds (Caldeira, 2017; Sawyer, 2014). Because of rapid development, which introduces a sense of provisiorality as to the durability of so many ‘projects’, as well as the lack of clarity and coordination regarding jurisdictional responsibilities and the infusion of highly varied financial streams, these territories remain ‘unsettled.’ While many things are taking place amongst a growing number of residents, they remain unsettled in terms of anyone’s ability to predict where they are heading, what their eventual outcomes might be.

In such conditions, residents are less inclined to consolidate a life in place and rather hedge their bets as to where things might be headed. This hedging requires complex divisions and complementarities of labour in order to ‘cover’ the different angles. Some family members may remain in agricultural activities while others mobilise resources to start very small businesses. Some may move along the circuits of seasonal and temporary labour, while still others are designated to be recipients of investment in terms of education. This does not mean that there is an absence of desire on the part of households for stillness and stable homes but rather a working assumption that the costs of stability are too high, whether measured monetarily or in terms of strategic advantages.

When considering relations amongst many different households and actors in aggregate, such a division of labour is not a matter of implementing consensually determined distributions of work and authority but more a process of different actors moving simultaneously against and with each other. Small factories, land that is banked for eventual industrial estates or new towns, private schools and hospitals, gated communities, informal settlements, cultivated small holdings, the sudden emergence of small commercial centres, the residues of all types of ‘failed projects’, and watersheds, all sit uneasily with each other. What comes from the intersection of these different uses of land and types of projects is largely a matter of ‘give and take’, of different uses trying to
make some use of each other’s proximity. This exchange will then provide the semblance of an integrative force, not because something has been deliberated, administered or voted upon, but rather that the wide range of aspirations, activities and actors must continuously respond to each other, because alone, they do not possess sufficient confidence or institutional backup to impose their will (Anwar, 2014; Salet and Savini, 2015).

There are many moments when this process is cumbersome, seemingly in no one’s interest. The frictions amongst different ways of seeing things, different political pressures and expectations would seem to protract an endless game of compensations and small adjustments. Yet, in complex and volatile urban environments these continuous negotiations, subject to intense confrontations and acquiescence, are perhaps the only means through which divergent realities can be attuned to each other.

**Lateral comparisons**

Recall that my companions on long ferry rides managed to both momentarily immerse and dissociate themselves from the baggage of race and religion to offer themselves to what Jensen (2011) has called ‘lateral comparisons.’ These are ways of bringing lives together not identifiable through pre-existing categories nor through the intervention of some external causal and explanatory force outside the relationship itself. Candea (2016) describes lateral comparison as a process of placing a number of cases or instances side by side, where no single case acts as the front and centre of the comparison but rather different kinds of connections can be made across the cases as familiarity does not act as the primary reference. As new urban territories at the periphery are increasingly constituted in the intersection of migration towards and away from large population centres and are composed through competing, often seemingly incompatible trajectories of building, making, producing and servicing, the disposition of territories, and the very making of territory itself (Schmid, 2018), requires more such lateral comparisons.

For, the kinds of scenarios being triggered through the efforts of different actors and financial streams to maximise reachability and spaces of operation, for the ability of farmers to transition within and outside a reliance on agricultural surplus, for the ability of small factories to access multiple circuits of distribution, for the ability of young families to subject themselves to long commuting times for work or school, all within governance structures that are usually unclear, require ways of paying attention to each other. Transacting must emerge from the situation at hand, involving an attention to details that are difficult to frame or cohere into a story whose criteria for commonality are set in advance.

Such movements sideways, again what Jensen (2011) and Maurer (2005) have called ‘lateral comparison’, are not just endemic to the periphery but also evident in urban cores. For many years I have worked with a community theatre group in Kampung Rawa in Jakarta – a place where family members take turns sleeping, where so-called informal sectors are overcrowded and where having the name of this district on one’s residence card practically guarantees being shut out of many kinds of employment. At the same time, Kampung Rawa is not a slum and, while many of its residents are poor, many self-described themselves as ‘middle class’ and are more than willing to publicise certain proof of it.

Although districts such as Kampung Rawa and neighbouring Galur, Tanah Tinggi and Sentiong are sites of vast intertwined productive activity, a continuous influx of new residents and the re-makings of
micro-developers, there is a pervasive sense that these districts are being left behind, that they soon will be over. They are simultaneously positioned in a need to demonstrate broader articulations to the rest of the urban region and intensify their own perceived singularities, as places apart, capable of performing particular ‘jobs’ that cannot be done elsewhere. Thus, there is the continuous elaboration of projects of normalisation that attempt to demonstrate the ways in which residents of these areas are like others, while co-existing with projects that regenerate the illicit, transgressive and idiosyncratic. These are projects of inclusive dysjunction – both normalisation and idiosyncrasy are equally necessary and spur tensions that absorb a great deal of energy, not in terms of reconciling these tensions but in continuously recalibrating them.

The intensive Islamicisation of some neighbourhoods formerly tolerant of many deviations can bring with it a strict policing of everyday morality, but where many unmarried households continue to live. While neighbourhoods everywhere are replete with various contradictions and exceptions to whatever rules preside, I am less interested in the existence of such contradictions and more concerned with the comparative work that residents do to identify the possibilities of action within the apparent contradictions they navigate through each and every day.

As one of the subdistrict local authorities in Kampung Rawa has donated space behind its main building for the community theatre group, participants are subject to its scrutinising gaze, imposing implicit limits on how participants gather with each other. The daily ritual of performing the Muslim late afternoon prayer before rehearsals in the parking lot of the facility not only meets a daily requirement but demonstrates fidelity to a religious ethos that provides a substantial amount of cover for what then ensues inside the rehearsal space. Not dissimilarly, the act of performing *dawah* – acts of popular religious dissemination – enables participants to go door to door to inform residents of a wide range of non-religious events as well. The theatre training has instilled a great deal of confidence in the participants that is often reflected in their participation in meetings and events that have nothing to do with theatre, enabling them to speak up about issues that they otherwise would not have the eligibility to comment on.

The ability of these youths to move laterally in and out of different territories of expression, each with their own incommensurable logics of operation, enables them to act autonomously in face of their vulnerabilities in terms of how they are perceived by various household, local and institutional authorities. They ply the edges of sectoral divides and have managed to entice young ‘religious enforcers’, criminal syndicates, Islamic schoolteachers, retailers and factory workers into the performance space to act out scenarios that on the streets would otherwise lead to violent confrontation. Perhaps more importantly, they conceptualise modes of theatrical intervention in a wide range of public spaces – deploying ways of questioning, demonstrating respect, putting people in touch with each other – that are not recognisable as theatrical performance. Conversely, the operations of an important all-night produce market not far away have been staged as an explicit theatre piece inside the gymnasium of a Catholic school.

All of these activities are acts of comparison not aiming to discern likenesses or divergence, nor for generalisability or interdependence. Rather, they prospectively aim for ‘what could be done’ in circumstances that tend to render actions evaluable either in terms of the singularities they contribute to this area of Jakarta, the degrees of normalisation attained or in terms of their capacity to criticise and diminish a wide
range of actions. Comparisons are not retrospective judgements in search of modulating existent dispositions but speculative practices aimed at inducing ‘strange compositions’ of potentialities from within circumstances seemingly adverse to them. Alternately, they identify ways of being ‘regular’ at the margins of urban life.

Jakarta is a city where many frequently talk about a limited horizon, of diminished aspirations because they have reached the limit of their capacities to consume and experience rampant uncertainty about where the region is headed. Can it provide work, housing and basic services in the face of political and climate turbulence? As such, many residents whom I know constantly invoke the need to keep their options open, to approach their situations in different ways. For example, they are increasingly reluctant to put their available capital in building or acquiring a permanent house or investing heavily in a specific job or entrepreneurial activity. The comparisons they make then are less to the past, less to thinking comparatively across already semi-congealed scenarios and more towards ways of thinking across disparate landscapes and situations in order to provisionally piece together itineraries for fulfilling responsibilities and providing necessary degrees of stability. At the same time, they engage their surrounds as a field of improvisations, of sites and functions that could be composed in different ways. It is a form of subtraction, of saying ‘no’ to that which is familiar, while at the same time not dispensing with familiarity all together. A kind of temporary in-between.

While the precarities such households face are not necessarily new, and might simply be construed as a deepening of informalisation, residents seem less inclined to ‘shore up’ their situation in the face of uncertainty, to consolidate their family and financial resources to wage a viable defence against it. Rather, the inclination seems to be to find ways of ‘riding with it’, to deploy what they have available towards a series of ‘temporary landings’ from which they might attain a new angle on things, and to proceed from there.

**Hijra: Shifting sideways**

The Islamic notion of *hijra* addresses the importance of these shifts as something both temporary and continuous. Familiarity, with oneself, with an environment, with Allah, is attained not in the consolidation of position, not in defensive manoeuvres against an ‘out there.’ Rather, this is a shift in position, through precipitating an event that enables the performance of new capacities as a means of reconciling oneself with what has been virtually present all along. The common popular meaning of *hijra* refers to a flight from oppression. But in its multiple uses across the *Quran*, *hijra* is rather the cultivation of a transformative event, a volitional suspension of the rules, the making temporary all that seems definitive.

Most of my neighbours in a working-class district of Jakarta where I lived for several years took pride in what they had built together over the decades since they were evicted from the neighbourhood that now houses the national parliament several kilometres away. In erratic fits and starts, homes and viable work were pieced together. A sense of accomplishment was particularly hard-won since lots of discrepant ways of doing things basically had to share the same arena. Over the years this conviction has only intensified as workshops, residences, religious institutions, coffee houses, stores and small factories all seemed to compete for the same space. Conflict usually did not pin people down in a corner from which they could not move sideways. For conflict was a means of shifting associations around, often ever so slightly. There were no guarantees, no overarching codes at work. Rather, there
was a pervasive awareness that any initiative had to be carefully and impetuously steered through an array of nebulous forces and eyes. Any initiative would inevitably pick up a motley crew of sentiments, hangers-on, interferences and unanticipated openings along the way. It was a difficult but not a precarious life.

Yet, in recent years, there have been other kinds of shifts, with residents willingly jettisoning these accomplishments for much more uncertain lives at the region’s periphery or in mass-produced vertical apartment blocks with their small spaces and compressed densities. As reasons for the shift, many cited the ways in which everyday maintenance work had become too labour intensive, that neighbours were shirking basic responsibilities and that the pressures of speculative real estate were too overbearing. But what was more important was making the shift itself, or rather to assume a position that perhaps was more facilitative of a shift, more likely to bring it about. For almost all of those whom I knew who had left the district sought out temporary and affordable arrangements that would not eat up savings and incur too much debt.

While now operating sometimes at great distance from the central city, many continued to work at their same occupations in the same former locales. They did so with a sense that the provisionality that they now embraced better prepared them to move with the new urban realities. The contours and modalities of long commutes were constantly being experimented with. Those with kids continuously improvised different caretaking arrangements; cheap rooms in boarding houses were rented if they were closer to work or emerging opportunities. Younger household members circled the city late into the night at cheap eating-places and coffee houses soaking up information, rumours and gossip. Everyone I knew said that these arrangements would not last for very long, that they were temporary, that the event they were looking for, that shift in the way they saw and experienced things, was right around the corner, right around the corner of an urban region whose own shifting boundaries seem to have no end in sight.

\textit{Hijra} was important to the family of Amadou Diallo, one of my oldest and more important collaborators, who recently passed away in the district of Chicago in Conakry, Guinea. I recall the many times he said, ‘It was always going to be only temporary’, when referring to almost everything in his long life: the simple mud brick house he acquired from a cousin executed by Sekou Toure, his residencies in some 20 cities across the world and the durations of his stay. His life was always going to be on the move in order to exist even as many aspects were replete with permanence. As a young man, he bought cloth in Togo and brought it to a simple stall in a peripheral market in Conakry. Decades later he was arranging the despatch of containers of textiles, electronics, foodstuffs and hardware from Shenzhen to ports across West Africa. Having spent years shuttling between Bangkok, Dubai, Abidjan and Conakry, he was one of the first generation of African traders to base themselves in Guangzhou, later spreading out across other Chinese entrepôts before heading to Mumbai as China got ‘overcrowded.’

Fodio, Amadou’s son, has pursued a somewhat different path of \textit{hijra}. He has waded into the murky seas of encampments, ghettos and makeshift settlements that line the agribusiness processing zones across Southern Europe. These are areas of just-in-time, of field to shelf production, intersecting labour from Africa and Eastern Europe on short-term seasonal contracts if contracts at all. These zones compress the aspirations of a better life with the freedom of corporate players to cheapen labour almost at will. As Irene Peano (2016, 2017a, 2017b) has exhaustively documented, the fraught crossings of the
Mediterranean and the intricate apparatuses of capture are applied once African migrants’ lands are converted into a lucrative business. Entire small cities take shape in abandoned military bases, warehouses or factories surrounding tomato fields, replete with cheap services of all kinds to a transient population subject to constant racial abuse. Fodio’s cousin, Ibrahima, an imam living in Turin for many years, had become alarmed at the oppressive conditions in which African Muslims and non-Muslims found themselves and requested some financial help from the relatives in ‘Chicago’ to assist.

As a result, Fodio spent many days sitting in single-bulb-lit prayer rooms in Foggia, Cerignola and Bovino listening to the stories of daily brutalities, of the violence directed against the very capacities of migrants to assess, to think and feel. Workers at various times had attempted to organise, strike, put their case before a wider public, managing to win short-term concessions. But the collusion of foremen, factory owners, local politicians and mafia continually made it nearly impossible for workers to accrue any savings, to forge some kind of life outside of servitude. Fodio, a well-educated and connected businessperson, managing a series of investment companies across the world, knew that any formal interventions would be of limited use. After all, the Diallo family had built its substantial entrepreneurial capacity by traversing a multiplicity of backdoors.

So by forging articulations amongst stolen trucks and containers, hacked security systems, favours garnered from illegal Chinese factory owners whose relatives in Guinea move large volumes of Bauxite, and cooperation from networks of long-time Fulani residents in Milan and Toulouse with their own long-time connections to dirty cops and customs officials, Fodio began to piece together the semblance of an underground railroad along which willing residents of these plantation ghettos could keep moving, to find a way to instantiate themselves in better situations, to make a shift. Across the faceless, banal suburbs of metropolitan areas, Fodio’s family had already made investments in storage facilities, currency exchanges, parking garages, low-grade supermarkets, butcheries, repair shops, bakeries, car washes, day-care centres and dilapidated but still viable apartment blocks through which circulated a world of discounted cargo destined for both licit and illicit consumption.

A wide network of mosques and prayer halls cemented ties that, even though largely ethnically rooted, served as platforms to negotiate deals with Banglas, Pakistanis, Kurds, Egyptians, Lebanese and Palestinians who possessed other specialised skills and assets. All this Fodio mobilised as an infrastructure through which the lowest of the low might pass temporarily. It is an infrastructure of more than small change accumulation that migrants might pass through temporarily on their way to other destinations, back home or somewhere else in Europe.

The importance of itineraries

Throughout these stories of boats, motorbikes, underground railroads, circulations across peripheries and performances, temporariness is not just an interregnum. It is not a willing or involuntary pause in the real action. It is not simply a deficiency, a lack of stability, opportunity or justice. It is not simply a problem to be solved. Rather, it is a register to be cultivated; a rhythm of endurance. We might reasonably expect that human life deserves to be sustained in conditions where people might have the confidence to reproduce the values and practices that are important to them. But, just as the tectonic movements of the Earth exert their own shifts, human life, as both Paolo Virno (2009) and Beth Povinelli (2016) remind us, is something without any fundamental nature. It is something open-ended, as
process rather than entity, and where the ‘end’ of the human is itself indicative of such open-endedness, that is, the capacity of the human to decide for itself the terms of its own finitude and of the fundamental distinction between life and non-life. If there is anything ‘by nature’ then it is the problematic politics of working out such a distinction.

Whereas city life may brutally connote the eviction of many from the possibilities of a viable life, the eviction of the city-form from the urban, the fact that the city no longer embodies the predominant urbanisation processes underway, points to the evacuation of a settler mentality. It is an evacuation from the ways in which the city was the locus for the exercise of a free will that necessitated relegating certain bodies to the status of property, capable of circulating only through the transactional circuits of economic exchange and valuation (Hanchard, 1999; Wynter, 2003). While the global assault on black life may be relentless, there is something about the shift, the temporary, that indicates that something else besides this is underway, a remaking of urban life whose dispositions are far from certain.

Rather than having a specific destination in mind or an idea of fulfilment or accomplishment, an urban majority in what can still be construed as a Global South is showing significant signs of opting rather for a kind of maximum exposure, not to the truth of a particular situation – even as obsessions with religiosity are growing – but rather to an absence of clarity. They situate themselves against a background of prolific details not yet or if ever organised into a coherent narrative of development or of what it means to be human. In the continuation of a long legacy, exposure here is to the possibilities of autoconstruction – but not autoconstruction of a home, a community or a way of life, but more so to the viability of itineraries made up along the way. The details of daily itineraries are less viewed as indicative of specifically defined futures that would suggest clear courses of action, based on what they knew from their prior residential situations. Rather, they are entities still in motion, yet to be ‘settled’ within any framework. Instead of provoking stasis and an inability to take decisive courses of action, everyday life in an environment of detached details is seen as a function of paying attention to a larger picture, itself something vague in people’s minds, but something ‘out there’, something capable of registering a shift in perspective and experience.

Residents may ask themselves, ‘why are we here and not there’? Why are we facing the situation that we do; why don’t we have our basic needs met; why is life and livelihood so uncertain? Well, there are many different explanatory frameworks that can be legitimately applied to such queries. Yet, the pursuit of comparison that implicitly frames these questions always tends to fall short of engendering confidence in those who ask them. The ethos of neoliberalism emphasises a practice of constant comparison (Brown, 2015) – ‘how do I stack up in relation to others’ – and this becomes a motor for turning the body into a non-stop machine of effort and improvement. The more one compares, the more one falls short of attaining any sense of confidence in the present. Comparison may be deferred in celebratory acts of self-inflation or effacement but this manoeuvre simply amplifies the problem of rendering oneself comparable in a larger number of domains.

Another manoeuvre might be, then, not to ask ‘why are we here and not there’ but what does the ‘here’ look like now that we are already ‘there’? In other words, where situations are lived with as if they have already been vacated for somewhere else – a somewhere else that has not necessarily been made visible or even knowable within the terms that one would ordinarily apply
to constituting a perspective on a ‘here’, on a present situation. Here, comparison is not only more lateral – in terms of crossing fields of concern and sectoral domains – but a means of curating provisional interstices between dispositions, trajectories, life situations, physical locations and livelihood formations that permit a simultaneously retrospective and prospective view on things. This is a way of considering a past that is not yet over – but not in the terms in which it was experienced up until now – and a speculative view of something that has not yet concretised or formed into a solid destination, that is still coming into form. Here the temporary points to a temporal opening, a necessary shift into something else, rather than being a ‘weak’ temporality unable to forcefully assert itself.

This process of ‘still coming into form’ seems to characterise the contemporary moment of extended urbanisation. This is an urbanisation that takes on all kinds of dispositions: Iowa corn and soy fields that have become hi-tech and largely depopulated factory floors, Amazonian mining boom cities that mushroomed and then whose populations dispersed across elongated yet largely ghost-like municipalities, the vast hinterlands of Delhi and Kolkata whose built environments are constantly being recomposed, or the transport and logistical corridors of West and East Africa that amplify and accelerate historical movements of people and goods – all are intensely operationalised landscapes widely articulated with diverse mechanisms of circulation (Castriota and Tonucci, 2018; Keil, 2018).

The world is now urban not so much in terms of cities, suburbs or peripheries, not in terms of specific spatial designations or hybrids but in the profusion of itineraries, multiple times, disjointed places and ways of doing things. As such the extensivity of the urban could be expressed as a ‘lending of hands’, the temporary convergence of an improvised past and an unformed future – that lend to each other their own incommensurable perspectives as a kind of ‘decision-support system.’

Just as my companions on long boat journeys across Indonesia’s far east continue to remake the histories that have made them as they head off for futures which, at their insistence, remain unspecified, extended urbanisation is an arena for the extending of lives and bodies with and across uncertain terrain. It is an attempt to be attuned to the shifting templates of opportunity, a willingness to upend entrapment in the normative confines of a human form. For as Neferti Tadiar (2020) emphasises, the social reproductive capacities of the becoming-human have been subsumed as vital infrastructure or ‘living means of production’ for the capitalised reproduction of a free life. The struggle to be human becomes the very means through which capital reboots itself. So somewhere between the war on the part of the already human to remain so at all costs and the struggle to live on the part of those who can never be fully human is an indifference to buying into the normative conceptions of the human. This is a recognition that there may be other answers to ‘what constitutes a viable life worth living’ (Tadiar, 2020)? The answers may only be temporary, as those who struggle to find a life worth living move from here to there, line up for another cup of heavily sugared coffee and remain vigilant with each other, for there is yet another 24 hours before landing.

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