

**Fragment urbanism:  
politics at the margins of the city**

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**Abstract**

Fragmentation is a keyword in the history of critical urban thought. Yet the products of fragmentation – the fragments themselves – tend to receive less attention. In this paper, I develop a politics of urban fragments as a contribution to debates both in urban theory and in urban poverty and inequality. I examine inadequate and broken material fragments on the economic margins of the urban global South, and ask how they become differently politicized in cities. I develop a three-fold framework for understanding the politics of fragments: *attending to*, *generative translation*, and *surveying wholes*. I build these arguments through a focus on a fundamental provision – urban sanitation – drawing on research in Mumbai in particular, as well as Cape Town, and connecting those instances to research on urban poverty, politics, and fragmentation.

## Introduction

Fragmentation is universal to the urban condition. If there is one consensus in the long and varied history of critical urban thought, it is that urbanization is a process of social, economic, political, and material division and fracture. As the world becomes ever-more urban, urbanization proceeds not in spite of sociospatial and economic fragmentation, but *through* it (eg Amin and Thrift, 2017; Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Sheppard, *et al*, 2013). As critical urban research has repeatedly shown, urban capitalist growth often requires the fragmentation of urban space and sociality, whether through real estate speculative urbanism driving property apartheid, or the privatization and commodification of infrastructure and services, or bubbles of exclusive high-end consumer urbanism, or through labour exploitation that drives down salaries (eg Merrifield, 2014; Graham and Marvin, 2001). The city is a fundamental theatre for the drama of fragmentation, a pivotal site for its production, spatialities and politics (Roy, 2015a; Massey, 2007; Davidson and Iveson, 2015).

All cities and urban lives deal with fragments of different kinds, but the city that the urban poor and marginalized inherit or arrive to is always already deeply fragmented, and in all manner of ways, from housing, services and infrastructure, to political and legal rights or economic opportunity. The world may be increasingly urban and we may have entered what some herald as 'an urban age', but for growing numbers of residents the city is experienced, as Ananya Roy (2015b: 7) has put it, as "a geography of shards and fragments". For the one in four urban residents who reside in some form of 'informal settlement' - in 'slums', refugee camps, transit camps, pavements and other slithers that increasingly house the denizens of global urbanism - a great deal of everyday life is a surfacing of so many material fragments (Elwood *et al*, 2016; Moser, 2009; Peake, 2015; Simone, 2014).

But what about the fragments themselves? Fragments are often, though not always, understood as the products of fragmentation. While critical urban studies has inherited a powerful and evolving grammar for understanding urbanization-as-fragmentation, our conception of the politics of fragments is less well established. My starting point is that, given the struggles with fragments that growing numbers of urban residents are forced to deal with, developing a politics of urban fragments is becoming an increasingly vital task for critical urban theory.

This paper develops a politics of fragments. I focus on the material fragments of life in contexts of urban poverty and inequality in the global South. I argue that across the economic margins of global urbanism, residents and activists do not only inherit the debris of fragments: fragments are also put to work as political tools. They are used, reinvented even, and become grounds for politicizing the city in different ways. In this reading, the urban political is a broad realm of action and contestation in which fragments, through translation in new relations, become differently politicized.

I develop a version of 'fragment urbanism' that is situated and provisional, and which charts three kinds of fragment politics: a politics of *attending to* fragments, a politics of *generative translation* with fragments, and a politics of *surveying* the 'whole'. My focus is the informal settlements of the urban global South, not because these are the only spaces where we might find fragments, but because here fragments are often especially vital elements in the experience and politics of the urban life and the city. My central concern is with the material

fragments of the city, and in particular – drawing on research on urban sanitation - on the fragments that make up crucial everyday urban life support systems.

Within informal settlements, sanitation is a central arena for improving life conditions. Almost 25% of the 2.6 billion people lacking adequate sanitation live in urban environments, mostly in informal settlements, and that proportion is growing (McFarlane *et al*, 2014; Pacheco-Vega, 2015). Sanitation is arguably the single most vital provision in a city, and the most important techno-environmental advance in the history of urbanisation. Yet, while the sanitation UN Sustainable Development Goal aims to provide sanitation for all by 2030, almost half the countries in the world do not recognise sanitation as a right, and progress with provisions are often slow and patchwork (Glass, 2012). I draw mainly on research on fragments over the past few years in Mumbai, but discuss too a case based on fieldwork in Cape Town.

There are few cities in the world where the juxtaposition of toiling poverty and bloated wealth are so starkly materialised than Mumbai. The city is home to Bollywood and the stock market, and is one of the planet's most unequal in property prices, income, and access to infrastructures and services (Fernandes, 2013; Dossal, 2010). While an estimated 55% of the city's residents lives in low-income neighbourhoods and 10% are confined to a life on pavements - all squeezed into an astoundingly abbreviated 8% of the land - the city is host to the world's most expensive private home, corporate India's celebrated Mukesh Ambani's US\$700 million 27-floor mansion (Fernandes and Pinto, 2013; Appadurai, 2006). As Arundhati Roy (2014) has put it, wealth doesn't trickle down, it gushes up.

Cape Town too is a deeply fragmented city, particularly through historical inequalities at the intersection of race, class, land and labour (eg Turok, 2001; Lemanski, 2007; Parnell and Pieterse, 2010; McDonald, 2006). While there is evidence of racial mobility in the labour market in South Africa, there is also evidence of growing unemployment amongst poor Black groups (Crankshaw, 2012), and 61% of all Black citizens live below the poverty line (Lawson, 2012: 12). As Jean and John Comaroff (2012: 41) have put it, the economic liberalisation that accompanied the transition to democracy was to “hollow out bodies, property, and institutions, and to leave behind only their facades”, a process intensified by the concentration of wealth and corporate power alongside both the casualization of labour and the extension of “cost-free labour” left toiling “ceaselessly without pay” (*ibid.* 39). In both Mumbai and Cape Town, as we will see, activists have powerfully connected the fragments of sanitation that residents inherit, work with, and politicize, to a multiple set of concerns around urban poverty and inequality. While the examples I draw upon are inevitably selective, taken together they resonate more widely with research on the politics of inadequate provisions in the city, from work on improvised energy provision, drainage, or water, to studies of inadequate housing, transport or health provisions (eg Amin, 2014; De Boek, 2012, 2015; Satterthwaitte and Mitlin, 2014; Graham and McFarlane, 2015; Lancione, 2016; Ranganathan, 2015; Shnitzler, 2013; Silver, 2014; Thieme, 2017).

Focusing on fragments and urban poverty operates primarily to underline the potential of the discarded, broken and insufficient materials of the city for how we understand the politics of contemporary urbanism. My hope is to contribute both to debates on urban poverty and inequality, particularly in the global South, and to wider debates in urban theory that seek to develop grammars for making sense of the contemporary city and global urban condition. The

fragment urbanism I develop here is a particular account; I am not claiming to offer a theory of cities or urbanism in general.

Nonetheless, the paper is an experiment in using the figure of the fragment as an entry point for understanding urbanism. I see the fragment urbanism I develop here as reflecting a particular kind of genre of urban thought. Urbanists find themselves in an exciting and generative time. Cities play central roles in the global economy, in environmental change, social inequality, and political transformation. Routinely, and rightly, urbanists are enquiring afresh - as Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2015) have put it - into the very categories, methods, cartographies and concepts through which urbanism should be understood. As they ask: "Is there - could there be - a new epistemology of the urban that might illuminate the emergent conditions, processes and transformations associated with a world of generalized urbanization?" (*ibid.* 155).

Can urbanists collectively fashion 'a' new epistemology of the urban? There are at least three reasons to be doubtful. First, given that the urban condition – or for that matter the city, or urbanization – does not, as Ash Amin (2013: 206) has put it, operate like a "mechanical entity such as a clock" that can be made "transparent in all its workings", any epistemology will at best only ever illuminate quite particular kinds of logics, systems, networks, and entities. Second, and straightforwardly, cities are hugely divergent and changing. Patterns of urbanization, forms of urban life, and conceptions of what a city is are not only distinct in Kampala, Indore, Manila, London, and Caracas, they are themselves subject to change (Schindler, 2017; Davidson and Iveson, 2015).

And finally third, as the critique from a set of distinct positions has surely taught us – including, for instance, postcolonial, feminist, and queer debates - the ways in which the urban, city, or urbanization are conceived and take place demand at the very least some modesty, provisionally and openness to different perspectives and processes across different parts of the world (eg Buckley and Strauss, 2016; McKittrick, 2006; Morland and Willcox, 2005; Robinson, 2015; Roy, 2015b). Understanding urbanism *demands* plural, even contradictory positions, including multiple conceptions of the urban and the city. I agree entirely with Natalie Oswin’s (2016: 4) provocation that “we ought to be committed to keep thinking rather than settling on an epistemology that aims to ‘pin down’ that which is bound to always elude us, the truth of the urban”.

I see fragment urbanism as part of a genre of urban knowledge that, as Amin goes on to argue, posits a “modest and experimental style of knowing and acting in the world”, urban thought “accustomed to working with partial and adjusted insights” (*ibid.* 207, 206). The discussions that follow, then, are explorations made in that spirit – a conceptualisation of fragment urbanism, and an iteration of the politics of attending to, generative translation, and surveying. I end with three questions that emerge from this account of fragment urbanism.

### **Fragment as urban keyword**

The predominant and most influential way in which critical urban thought has engaged with the fragment has been in relation to *spatial fragments*, and particularly the fragmentation of urban space through capitalism. ‘Fragmentation’ is a key term for thinking the production of urban space, from gated enclaves and gentrification to sociospatial polarisation, archipelago

and splintering urbanism, and urban conflict (e.g. AlSayyad and Roy, 2006; Kooy and Bakker, 2008; Caldiera, 2000; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Lees *et al*, 2008; Smith, 1996; Leshem, 2016).

To take just one example, Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin's landmark book, *Splintering Urbanism* (2001), examined the 'splintering' of public space and provisions in the context of urban infrastructure. They demonstrated how neoliberalism, and in particular the relations between privatisation, liberalisation, and the application of new technologies, shaped a globalising process of 'unbundling' infrastructure. This process led to the collapse of what Graham and Marvin called the 'modernist infrastructural ideal' - standardised, monopolised and integrated infrastructures for all – in the process intensifying inequalities across urban space (Graham and McFarlane, 2015).

Or to take another example, a central resource for critical urban thought on fragmentation is the work of Henri Lefebvre, whose writings have been remarkably influential in recent years (eg Buckley and Strauss, 2015; Pinder, 2015; Stanek, 2013; Merrifield, 2014). In *The Production of Space*, for instance, Lefebvre (1991 [1974]: 342) describes space as "homogenous yet at the same time broken up into fragments". In both this book and others - *The Urban Revolution*, for example - capitalist urbanization is conceived as actively requiring the fragmentation of urban space in order to sustain itself, for instance in the geographical (dis)placing of labour, or in the targeting of specific spaces in the city for accumulation and speculation (Merrifield, 2014).

Lefebvre (1991) describes spatial fragments as the spatial products of capitalist production. This includes a wide variety of physical and imaginative geographies that are divided, carved-



up, and controlled, including spaces “subdivided for the purposes of buying and selling”, buildings, bodies, subjects, images, practices, and discourses (Lefebvre, 1991: 96-97, 131, 307, 310, 365). Importantly, Lefebvre argued that to research those fragments on their own terms – to become concerned with “things in space” – would be “deceptive” (*ibid.* 37, 96). Instead, critical research must “rip aside appearances” (*ibid.*), focus on the ‘production of space’, and show how spatial fragments are positioned as part of processes of fragmentation across global capitalist space (*ibid.* 92, 37).

This focus is on the spatial fragmentation of the city is indispensable to the wider project of critical urbanism. It allows us to reveal how urban spaces are produced *as fragments* as a result of the geographies of exploitation and oppression in which they are historically produced (Perlman, 2010). It allows us to see how in Mumbai, for example, the fragmentation in land, housing, infrastructure, and resource forces the majority of the city’s residents into informal settlements that occupy just 8% of the land in the richest city in India, or how in Hong Kong’s Sham Shui Po district, around 3000 households, often migrant workers, are consigned to makeshift housing on rooftops, crammed into homes as small as 4m<sup>2</sup> that are under-serviced and vulnerable to rain, heat, cold and typhoons (McFarlane *et al.*, 2014; SOCO, 2016).

At the same time, spatial fragments in critical urban thought have been shown to be *more* than just the products of capitalist urbanization. As we know, they can also be sources of urban transformation. Michelle Buckley and Kendra Strauss (2016: 626), for example, engage with what Lefebvre called ‘the residual’: “Far from being the conceptual debris of more important matters, to Lefebvre, the production of residues are of fundamental

epistemological, theoretical and political importance". For instance, in Volume 1 of Lefebvre's *Everyday Life*, the residual is that which is leftover, and which can feed into revolutionary potential.

What we see not just in Lefebvre's writings but across critical urban thought is a tension between reading spatial fragments as the *products* of capitalist urbanisation, and reading them as *generative* spaces that can challenge or transform processes of fragmentation. My emphasis is on the latter, relatively neglected in critical urban thought. I focus on material fragments and their political instantiations, rather than spatial fragments - although as we will see spatiality is crucial to how material fragments are produced and become politicised. My focus is on how material fragments are drawn into different kinds of urban relations, so that they are not just the products of urbanization - not just nouns 'there' in the city - but verbs, processes that can be made and remade through different forms of politicisation.

### *Material fragments*

At its simplest, a material fragment is a detached portion or piece. In the city, this includes all manner of broken or inadequate objects and things, from insufficient infrastructure in informal settlements to the ruins of former factories and housing or discarded commodities. Bits and pieces that either demand constant maintenance just to work, or which constitute the remnants and leftovers of previous activities that are no longer operational. There are two key conceptual starting points for the fragment urbanism I develop here.

First, fragments are always caught up in *distinct forms of 'whole-fragment' relation*. The whole to which a fragment originally belonged may or may not still exist. But that does not mean that fragments are necessarily 'broken off'. Some fragments were conceived or made as fragments, not as wholes, such as some forms of writing, art, or make-do infrastructure. And yet, the idea of the 'whole' is often made present, even if only as an imaginary. The fragment is caught in a relation of presence and absence (Lichtenstein, 2009), a reminder of something missing, whether parts that might improve or complete it, or investments (eg from the state) that might augment its operation. The absences that fragments draw attention to texture urban life, especially in lower-income parts of the city often struggling with partial provisioning. The city, as AbdouMaliq Simone (2008: 30) has put it, "is a constant reminder of what could be but isn't".

Fragments can take on new lives. As research on waste economies and recycling has shown, fragments can be remade in all kinds of unpredictable new contexts, sometimes constituting new 'wholes' altogether (eg Gregson *et al*, 2010). The changing relations that fragments are drawn into points to the double-status of fragments as nouns and verbs. As a noun, the fragment is a material form in the landscape of the city. As a *verb*, it is a process, something that is pulled into different relations, forms of work and angles of vision.

Second, and following on, the *politics of urban fragments are not fixed*. Materials are animated and reanimated by all manner of political imperatives. In informal settlements, fragments are always already political, whether as markers of partial or denied citizenship, or because access to them often reflects dominant relations of class, gender, ethnicity, race, and religion. Nonetheless, I identify three broad ways in which urban fragments are often

politicized on the economic margins of cities in the global South: *attending to*, *generative translation*, and *surveying wholes*.

First, there is a politics of *attending to* fragments, for instance of social collectives working with broken down or inadequate buildings, infrastructures, or community provisions (Amin, 2014; De Boeck, 2015). This politics of attending to includes rhythms of maintenance, improvisation, incremental improvement, and the often gendered labour of holding things together even as they break down and fall apart. Given that in many informal settlements, people are forced every day to manage the uncertain oscillations “between the provisional and incessantly mutating practices required to viably ‘make do’” (Simone, 2008: 13), this politics of attending to is an unfolding urban learning process (Larkin, 2013; Björkman, 2015; Schnitzler, 2013; McFarlane and Silver, 2016). I will illustrate this through an example from Mumbai.

A second form of the politics of urban fragments is that of *generative translation*. Fragments are sometimes used as tools of political critique. I draw attention to how fragments of the city in informal settlements are translated as political objects that call the city as a whole into question. I focus on this form of whole-fragment relation – fragments as political generators – through a discussion of the politicization of waste infrastructure in Cape Town.

If both the politics of attending to and generative translation *stay with* the fragments, the third and final form of politics I discuss – that of *surveying wholes* - moves the focus away from the fragment to the city as a whole. To illustrate this, I stay with urban waste and informal settlements but shift back to Mumbai, and to a movement that moves from material

fragments to urban rights, via data, accountability and citizenship. I also reflect on some of the tensions and possibilities of shifting between a politics of attending to, translating, and surveying fragments, and argue for seeing these politics not in terms of 'better' or 'worse' but as forms of *becoming* driven by context and aims.

Before elaborating on these three forms of politics in the next section, a final brief reflection on the specificity of the word 'fragment'. Why fragment and not another of the family of related terms, such as splinter, part, shard, or trace? The term 'splinter' has proven useful for thinking the relations between fragmentation and urban inequalities, as Graham and Marvin (2001) influentially demonstrated. However, 'splintering urbanism' has come to mean a process of infrastructural fragmentation, with the splinter maintaining its status as the *product* of capitalist transformation, and its potential *agency* in urban politicisation falls from analytical view. There is a longer history with the term fragment, in contrast, only some of which I discuss below, that emphasises the generative relations and possibilities activists enact with fragments.

A 'part' can refer to any kind of portion or division within a whole, whereas fragment carries a deeper sense of ambivalence to the whole. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002), for example, has written about fragments and wholes in subaltern studies to show how activists in colonial India not only resisted the social 'whole' as constituted by colonial elites, but saw themselves as embodying knowledge-forms – fragments - that sought either to develop an alternative kind of 'whole', or for which the idea of the whole simply carried no meaningful value. While Chakrabarty's fragments refer to knowledge rather than materials, the point here is that the

term 'part' struggles to capture this sense of forms that do not straightforwardly connect to a pre-constituted whole.

The term 'trace' is a useful descriptor of those histories which linger in particular spaces in the city. Chakrabarty (1996: 60), for example, uses the term in his argument that histories of heterogeneous subaltern labour can only be located in narratives of capitalist transition as a Derridean trace "that constantly challenges from within capital's and commodity's...claim to unity and universality" (see Derrida, 1981). As with a trace, a fragment both contains the marker of that which it is not (Napolitano, 2015). As Gyan Pandey (2006: 66-67) has argued, the fragment can be thought of not just as a thing but as a "disturbance" and "an appeal" to the possibility of difference. Nonetheless, I use the term fragment rather than trace because of its emphasis on a material thing. Finally, if the term 'shard', in contrast, is useful in emphasizing the physical thing, it is nonetheless a more specific term that does not carry the definitional flexibility of 'fragment', which implies more multiple material forms (on shards, see Mohammad and Sidaway, 2016).

### **Fragment politics 1: attending**

Fragments are often politicized through the everyday work of attending to inadequate urban things. This politics of attending to is most starkly visible in moments where urban provisions breakdown. To illustrate this, I turn to the case of sanitation provisions in Mumbai. Most of the Mumbai's poorest residents live in the northeast of the city, especially in M-East ward. While M-East is a large and varied urban area, the 2009 Mumbai Human Development Report identified it with the lowest scores for human development and the highest rates of infant

mortality. The report noted that the situation was worsening - "if anything has changed, it is the deterioration in health and sanitation conditions and the increasing social trauma of visible inequity" (HDR, 2009; Panjabi, 2015; and on water in M-East, see Björkman, 2015).

In the poorest neighbourhoods of M-East, people are forced to find whatever available spaces they can, often at great risk, especially for women and girls who routinely suffer harassment and abuse, including near railway tracks and under bridges to garage grounds and riverbanks (McFarlane *et al*, 2014). Where toilets are available, queues can be long and the structures are often poorly maintained and unclean community toilets.

There are regular stories of toilet blocks lacking water, or electricity, not being maintained and becoming blocked or falling into disuse. In some cases, they collapse altogether. In Mankhurd, for example, a low-income neighbourhood in M-East, a poorly maintained two-storey community toilet block suffered a catastrophic collapse in 2015. Early one morning in March that year, Raksha told me how she made her way to the local municipal toilet block in Mankhurd<sup>1</sup>. From the cubicle next to hers, she heard a crash, followed by a woman screaming. The toilet floor had broken and the woman, Kalgana Pingle, a 41-year old widow with two children, had fallen into the septic tank below. She died from head injuries and suffocation. Residents had tried to help her out with a long bamboo stick, but by the time the fire brigade arrived it was too late.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Rakha' is a pseudonym given to protect anonymity.

In the weeks following, Raksha would hear Kalgana's cries in her head, and for the first few nights she couldn't sleep. The toilet structure, said Raksha, had been poorly built and ill-maintained. The septic tank had not been cleared for a long time, the block was old and unclean. Blockages were using chemicals which further degraded the infrastructure. The women's section of the block was built directly above the septic tank, so when the floor weakened through time a terrifying death trap had been created. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) sought to avoid responsibility, and attempted instead to blame the nongovernmental organisation that had built the block through a BMC-run sanitation construction programme (Khan, 2015).

A year on from Kalgana Pingle's horrific death, Raksha reflected, sanitation conditions had not improved in her neighbourhood. The consequence of one block closing was even greater pressure on the other public toilet that remained, and a visible increase in open defecation in the area. The BMC provided a temporary mobile toilet with five seats each for men and women, but it was never cleaned, infested with insects, the plastic floor became broken, and residents had to bring their own water. One woman injured her leg badly trying to walk down the steep steps to the toilet, and Raksha spoke of how her grandmother had been injured falling from the toilet. The exit pipe was left to drain into the open outside the structure. In response to one broken infrastructure, here was another disconnected and broken fragment.

Eventually the toilet was removed and replaced with a state-built toilet, but this too was poorly maintained, had no light, and again the pipe was left to drain outside the toilet. Residents paid BMC road sweepers to informally clean the toilets. From her house in the morning, it takes Raksha around half an hour to both walk to the structure and wait in line to



use it: “If you have a running stomach you can imagine what happens”. There are just two toilet blocks in the area for around 400 households.

The difference, however, reflected Raksha, is that these urban fragments have become imbued with a new set of political expressions. Raksha became a volunteer with a high-profile community based organization that runs a successful toilet block in the west of the city, Triratna Prerana Mandal. TPM have opened a slow and frustrating discussion with BMC officials, but residents formed a community-based organisation. Their work to is aimed at attending to the existing provisions and to interrupt the repeated process of fragments replacing fragments by pushing for new forms of urban provision.

There is a universe of often small groups of urban activists working with a politics of attending to fragments. For example, not far from Mankhurd, the nongovernmental organisation *Coro for Literacy* works with volunteers who inspect state-provided community toilet blocks in informal settlements. CORO’s network of *Mahila Milan* (Women Together) groups monitor and inspect the conditions of municipal public toilet blocks and the activities of toilet block caretakers. Each of these activists – over 20, mostly women – take a checklist to toilet blocks and inspect them, identifying improvements to be made, from physical conditions to the ways in which women are treated by caretakers. The inspection activities involve the slow work of bringing localized shortcomings with particular toilet blocks - broken toilets, maintenance, and services to toilets (water, electricity, drainage, etc) – to the public, private, and civil society groups responsible for running them.

When the inspection work is able to work well, fragments – broken or inadequate or dysfunctional toilets – are made more reliable. But this is laborious and sometimes frustrating process, in which activists often become embroiled in site-specific disputes set within particular histories and power relations. The inspections reveal and attempt to address a multiplicity of concerns: local power relations, structures of ownership, forms of intimidation and violence, collaboration and solidarity, and social relations of caste, gender, and class.

Some blocks are run by municipal officials who have vested interests. There is occasional intimidation. One inspector pointed out that after a public meeting on a particular toilet block he received a phone call from the owner – an individual who owns several blocks - warning him not to create problems. Another complained to a local politician who then himself confronted her and warned her off. Sometimes the inspections have unintended consequences. For example, owners have occasionally responded to poor inspection reports by firing the caretakers rather than investing in better conditions. One of the challenges has been holding caretakers to account while recognizing that caretakers are themselves often marginalized, lower-caste residents. Other operators treat the blocks as commercial enterprises rather than local services.

In the case of sanitation in Mumbai, the politics of attending is a messy, provisional and in-the-moment politics, involving a set of distinct local actors. We find this kind of contingent politics of attending to fragments regularly across cities in the global South (eg De Boek, 2015; Simone, 2014; Shnitzler, 2013; Silver, 2014). It is a politics, following Elizabeth Grosz (2005: 2), that is not so much “mapped out in advance” as it is “linked to invention, directed more at experimentation in ways of living than in policy and step-by-step directed change”. It is not

that the results don't matter, but that the politics needs to be adaptive to whatever the work of attending needs in the moment, to the small and large changes that reconfigure the textures of locales and lives.

The politics of attending is composed through open human and material agencies that are variously expanding and narrowing. As events of different sorts 'pile up' and 'happen upon each other' (Simone, 2010), attending entails monitoring and intervening in how they co-mingle and co-exist in a heterogeneity of multiple trajectories or 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005). The challenge of attending is, as Farías and Blok, (2016: 11) argue, one of learning "how to inter-articulate, compose and make co-exist, however precariously, the multiplicity of urban assemblages, entities, relationships, circulations, and sensations that make up the city". While it can be unpredictable, and lack guarantees, it is an important part of residents' efforts to "negotiate conditions of turbulence and to introduce order and predictability into their lives" (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: 349).

### **Fragment politics 2: generative translation**

As verbs, fragments are not just things but potentials that can be put to different uses and given distinct meanings, for better or worse. The second form of politics, then, follows on from the discussion above: just as different people and groups – residents, activists, states, and so on – attend to fragments in ways that pull them into different relations, so too are fragments occasionally radically reinvented as political tools.

As an example, I want to stay with fragments of sanitation but turn to a social movement in Cape Town that turned fragments into political objects that forced urgent questions of the

city. Residents of low-income neighbourhoods in Cape Town - both informal settlements and townships - are forced to live with an inherited set of fragments of sanitation in the form of broken or poorly maintained toilets, inadequate in number, often lacking adequate water and electricity, meaning that they sometimes have to share urban space with their own individual and collective human wastes. There are over 200 low-income 'informal settlements' in Cape Town (Mels *et al*, 2009), many of which had rarely experienced state investment before the end of apartheid. If the transition to democracy in the 1990s was accompanied by considerable state investment across the country, including the delivery of hundreds of thousands of housing units and utility connections to cities (Jaglin, 2008; Parnell *et al*, 2005), an estimated 500,000 (from 3.74 million) residents in Cape Town experience inadequate sanitation services (SJC, 2014; Mels *et al*, 2009).

In 2014, residents in the informal settlement of Barcelona, Cape Town, were in intense discussions about their daily conditions and their political possibilities. In common with the residents in Mankhurd, city officials, residents believed, were either ignoring them or paying them lip service. They had protested, requested meeting after meeting, but nothing had changed. For weeks, their toilets had not been cleaned. The private company paid by the city to collect the 'buckets' in the standalone 'bucket toilets' had gone on strike over a wage cut imposed by the municipality. One of the residents suggested: if they won't come and collect the waste, let's bring the waste to them.

The residents decided to take uncollected buckets of human waste and emptied them at different sites in the city. They deliberately targeted symbols of sanitized and powerful Cape Town, including the international airport, the steps of the state legislature, and the Premier's

car. Sithembele, one prominent activist in the protests, said they had targeted the airport “because this is one of the things the government is grandstanding about – as if they don’t have any problems.” And they targeted the steps of the state legislature, he continued, so that “it would smell like it does in Barcelona”. From a politics of neglect emerged not a politics of attending, but a kind of dis-attending, a refusal to do the work of attending.

Through a politics of shock and spectacle that might – and did - force a new debate in the city, the activists (Robins, 2014) – dubbed ‘poo protestors’ in the media, but known as Seskhnona or ‘*We are here*’ - inverted and mobilized material fragments in order to stage a critique of urban development in the city, connecting histories of race, class and gender to fragments of infrastructure, urban space, political economy and policy (McFarlane and Silver, 2016). This was a politics of juxtaposition that powerfully entwined both fragments and the larger city, an urbanism that makes its performative mark through what Walter Benjamin (2003) called ‘dialectical images’: the entanglement of distinct spaces that reveal something wider about the nature of urbanism, while at the same stroke creating a new context. Buckets of waste were expressed in an inventive and powerful political light by being brought into the light of day in contexts where they are usually barely spoken of let alone seen or smelt. In the act of re-inventing buckets of waste, the activists brought together *both* fragments and histories of fragmentation.

Across his writing, Benjamin developed a *pedagogy of fragments*. Capitalism fragmented urban life, to be sure, but the fragments themselves could be expressed differently, put to different kinds of work that opened spaces of critique and possibility. The task of this

pedagogy was nothing short of the reinvention of the urban experience (Hansen, 2004): to jolt ways of seeing how urban life had become ever more fragmented, to imagine and practice new ways of using objects, commodities and technologies, other ways of seeing and of experimenting in the city. If Benjamin was, in Stephen Jackson's (2014: 237) phrasing, a "broken world thinker" trading in a "peculiar, fragmentary, archival, and recuperative mode of working", this broken world of things and spaces was also a propagative world.

A key method for Benjamin was allegory. Allegory takes a fragment, disconnects it from its context, and gives it a new meaning alongside other fragments (Buck Morss, 1991; Robinson, 2004). It is an act of reassembling meaning in new relations, of both destruction and creation through, as Scot Lash (1999: 246, 325) has argued, "weaving webs of the fragments of narratives" in the "ruins of the city", a process that "excavates the fragments and then recombines them", of "unravelling and then recasting in fragments". In allegory, larger insight is produced through empirical points of departure, not as symbols – where the general is revealed *in* the particular – but where the general is revealed in dialogue *between* particulars – in this case between neglected and sanitized Cape Town.

Benjamin (2003: 368) once described the poet, Charles Baudelaire, as a 'ragpicker' working with "the refuse and the detritus of the great city", taking from the past that which is discarded and putting it to work in the present. Benjamin invoked Baudelaire's poetry to allegorically conjure the image of Paris' streets as an abyss. In the *Arcades*, he revisits time and again the underground city, the catacombs used for political resistance, or the sewers carrying the 'unworthy nature' the city transformed by Haussmannisation. What he called the "dream houses of the collective" – "arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax

museums, casinos, railroad stations” (Benjamin, 2003: 405) are repeatedly juxtaposed with textual fragments from, for example, Victor Hugo on the putrid sewers of Paris. Just as Benjamin challenged the power of Haussmannisation in Paris with images of discarded, displaced, forgotten, and fading Paris – a Paris constructed *as waste* – so too have Ses’khona challenged and juxtaposed the powerful and elite spaces of the city with the waste fragments it fails to manage.

Rather than just the products of capitalist urbanization and racial cultures, Ses’khona inventively reconstituted fragments by challenging the ways in which they are conventionally storied and spatialized, and expressing them in a new context. ‘Expression’ here is a kind of ‘urban fabrication’ (Hentschel, 2015), a process of translating fragments into new social and political relations. The re-expression of urban fragments is more than just a form of coping or moving on; it is an effort to ‘reformat’ current conditions (Sennett, 2008) through politicising the “condensation and knotting of histories” (Napolitano, 2014: 57).

Ses’khona dramatized the relations between fragments, race and urban historical reproduction through the urban sensorium, and as such is part of a wider history of activism and critical thought in South Africa that radically connects fragments and the whole. This too is a kind of pedagogy of fragments, wherein the themes of disgust, anguish and condemnation are, as David Attwell (2006) has written of critical South African poets such as Mongane Wally Serote (eg Serote’s 1972 poem *What’s in this Black Shit*), become the ground – even if only for a moment - of a disruptive politics. There is a rich tradition of critical thinking on race and fragments here (eg Drabinski, 2013; Hsiao, 2009).

The spectacular and stark critique of the city through the politics of fragments in this Cape Town case is a relatively rare form of politics. More common is not just the politics of attending to described earlier in the paper, but also forms that operate a slower politics around data, accountability and citizenship rights. The next and final forms of fragment politics – surveying wholes - stays with urban waste and informal settlements but shifts back to Mumbai, and a group of activists that seek to address the politics of fragment through a politic of the whole via a discourse of rights and responsibility.

### **Fragment politics 3: surveying wholes**

If the first two forms of fragment politics tend to *stay with* the fragments – whether by attending to them or translating them as political tools - other activists seek to address inadequate provisions such as sanitation by *shifting away* from the fragments. For these activists, the locus of struggle is not the site but the legal, economic, and political processes that shape the wider city.

In Mumbai, for instance, we see this in rights-based movements focussed on citizenship rights for water, sanitation, or housing. One example is the ‘Right to Pee’ movement. Right to Pee builds databases of sanitation provision across the city, and lobbies the local state to invest in quality sanitation throughout the city - in informal settlements, on railway platforms, in public places, and so on – as a constitutional citizenship right. Here, with echoes of the earlier discussion of Lefebvre, the political logics is that localised fragments can only be addressed only through transformation of the ‘whole’. If there are echoes here of the Cape Town case above, the difference is that while Ses’khona stayed with the fragments – even as they sought



to reinvent them in new political expressions – Right to Pee moves away from the fragments to act at the scale of the whole city.

When Right to Pee was formed in 2011 through Coro for Literacy, their first priority was accurate data on sanitation provisions in the city. They began by surveying 129 city toilet blocks. This data was then set against the municipality's own data, made available through a Right to Information request, which revealed the relative budgetary neglect of sanitation, and especially sanitation for women and girls. In 2012, the activists launched a signature campaign on the railway stations. The signatures called for an improvement in provisions beyond the woefully inadequate and usually broken or poorly functioning fragments that exist. From the start, then, the campaign was not only about low-income neighbourhoods, but about sanitation experiences *across the city* – in town, in transit, near home, and for everyone from low-income vegetable vendors selling material in the city to middle class commuters. One Right to Pee activist remarked: "Today, the Right to Pee is everyone's campaign — from women fruit vendors to doctors and educationists, to town planners and gender experts" (cited in Patel 2013: no page).

In 2013, the state women and child development minister was petitioned by Right to Pee to provide public toilets for women free of charge. They delivered a list of 50,000 names, gathered mainly from the city's railway platforms. The minister helped introduce the *Maharashtra Policy for Women* in 2013, which mandates the construction of a women's toilet block every 20 kms (12.4 miles) – still, to be sure, a considerable distance between facilities, but the fact that this constituted an improvement in provisions is itself a powerful reflection of the urbanism of fragments women and girls, and poor women and girls in particular, inherit

around the city.

If a gendered urbanism of fragments is to be tackled, then writing change into the planning process itself is one vital step. Right to Pee have been arguing that toilets need to be identified as public amenities for planning in relation to any public places (schools, markets, transport stations). Each year, one activist at R2P pointed out, the BMC has increased provisions for sanitation in its budgets, and the legal basis for enforcing rights has strengthened. For example, in late 2015, the Bombay High Court responded to a Public Interest Litigation filed by activist groups around health and the rights of women in relation to public toilets. The petitioners invoked Article 226 of the Constitution, which empowers High Courts to interpret the Constitution, and argued that the poor condition of public toilets led to safety concerns, non-accessibility or unhygienic conditions, and medical concerns for women and girls. The High Court agreed, insisted that toilets must have trained maintenance staff and reasonable charges, and concluded: “[Women] need these facilities at public places like Railway Stations, Bus Stands, Banks, Public Offices like State Government Offices/Municipal Offices...it is the duty of the State and the Corporations to ensure that public latrines, urinals and similar conveniences are constructed, maintained and kept in a hygienic condition” (Maharaj, 2016: no page).

Welcome words, but there is a long way to go. On March 8<sup>th</sup> 2016, on the occasion of International Women’s Day, Right to Pee returned an award that the city’s Mayor, Snehal Ambeka, had presented to them for their work on sanitation and gender. Supriya, a Right to Pee activist, told the *Times of India*: "Nothing has changed on the ground. The BMC budget has no provisions for women's toilets in the city and focuses only on household and

community toilets" (Pinto, 2016, no pagination).

Right to Pee's work is a politics of universal claims that can be measured and anticipated in targets and steps, documents and budgets. Through surveys of fragments, they build a case that speaks the language of the state in terms of data, rights, policies and provisions, and in the process shift focus from the fragments *per se* to a discussion of rights in the city as a whole. As Sonia Faleiro (2014: no page) writes of the movement, "the unprecedented acknowledgement of a woman's right to a public toilet [at senior policy levels] was seen as a victory not just for the fight for better sanitation, but for the women's movement." The question of toilets here is a question of equality, of protecting women from violence and promoting empowerment, and of actively producing and being part of the planning and life of the city. As Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade (2011: 79) have put it, "if we had to pick one tangible symbol of male privilege in the city," "the winner hands-down would be the public toilet". Supriya, a Right to Pee activist, argued that "it's discrimination based on gender...it's not about facilities, it's a political statement".

Supriya argued that the campaign had "evolved" from "right to pee to right to city", while Sujata – another Right to Pee activist - talked about the "freedom" to participate in the city, to move around and not be stuck in-doors, and repeatedly asserted that the struggle was about "citizenship". If there are no provisions, Sujata argued, then the city is saying to people: "Shut up and stay home". Instead, added Supriya, they are asking: "How do you claim your city as a citizen?". Mumtaz, another activist, talked about the need to address the wider system and to deepen democracy: "I'm looking for my place in the city. My own safe place, with dignity".

The question of whether to pursue a politics of attending to, generative translation, or surveying, depends on the objectives at hand. There is, though, a challenge here for activists who seek to maintain more than one of these politics at a time. As Lisa Björkman (2015: 231) has shown in her work on Mumbai, a politics that shifts register to a whole, such as in the form of rights, can also entail “a conceptual disentanglement of things from their actual sociomaterial contexts”. Some of the best guides through these questions are urban activists themselves. Right to Pee, for instance, has developed ways of attending simultaneously to fragments, fragmentation, and wholes in their ways of politicising the city.

We might think of this simultaneous hold on different forms of fragment politics as a politics of *becoming*. For Grosz (2005), writing not about cities or space but about bodies, becoming is about both recognition (eg rights) and the contingencies of practice. Grosz finds in Deleuze’s thought, for example, not a rejection of rights and identity politics – Deleuze and Guattari recognise in *A Thousand Plateaus*, for instance, that such a politics remains vital – but an insistent pressure to push beyond rights to break into new ways of being and relating that do not fix and freeze categories like ‘woman’ (Deleuze, 2001 [1968]). If left to a politics of rights and recognition alone, the category of woman can become a knot that may not just strengthen but fix, that both enables and closes off possibilities (Braidotti, 2003; Colls, 2012; Irigaray, 2004). Such a position - a politics of becoming that works with and beyond recognition - is not without its challenges, as Grosz recognises. In queer theory, too, there is at once an embracing of a diversity of identities, but also a close attention to “the messy, fleshy indeterminate stuff of everyday life”, often “fragmented and fleeting” (Giesecking, 2013: 17).

From this position, a politics of becoming addresses the transformation of 'wholes' that produce fragments as such (for instance through rights, legality, and citizenship), while recognising that the excessive, relational, and generative nature of fragment urbanisms requires attending to particular contexts and struggles (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016). Becoming is one route for working through the classic tensions of political action in relation to structure and agency, but does so by bypassing the fixed and clunky baggage of those terms. In their very different ways, both Right to Pee and Grosz' argument insist that the political struggle cannot be resolved through attention to the whole alone, because life continues to unfold and surprise, forcing new struggles, and requires attending to multiplicities and specificities.

## **Conclusion**

All cities are fragmented in different ways and to varying extents, but for growing numbers of the urban poor in an increasingly urban world, fragments are particularly important in the experience, rhythms and politics of urban life. Fragment urbanism lingers with the potential of the discarded, broken and insufficient things that texture urban life, poverty and inequality, and which become enrolled in political relations of different sorts.

In this paper, my focus has been on fragment politics, and on three forms in particular: attending to, generative translation, and surveying wholes. In particular, I have sought to identify some of the ways in which fragments of the material city serve not just as the products of capitalist urbanization, but as elements differently composed through diverse political relations. In doing so, I've attempted to show some of the possibilities, limits, inter-

relations, and tensions of different kinds of fragment politics. When we focus on urban fragments, the prospect of the city – its policies, political economies, priorities, cultures, socialities, and territories - come directly into view.

The discussion has been, to be sure, conceptually and empirically selective. While I have drawn on a wide range of perspectives, from Lefebvre and Benjamin to Chakrabarty and Grosz, I have not had space here to engage with a wider set of conceptual resources for thinking with fragments, including strands of critical theory (eg Theodore Adorno's writings on fragments, 1973), postmodern experiments with fragment thinking (eg Jean Baudrillard, 1995), or the particular presence of the fragment in a range of other critical postcolonial, race or queer studies (eg Pandey, 2006; McKittrick, 2006). There is a long and fascinating tradition of thinking with fragments - from classics, art history and archaeology to philosophy, social theory and urban theory - and tracing those histories and what they offer urban thought would be an exciting project.

Empirically I have focused on low-income neighbourhoods in the global South where fragmentation is often profoundly visible, in the histories of capitalist and social exploitation, oppression and marginalization, and where urban fragments are therefore often so important to the texture and politics of the city. The *where* of material fragments is vital to why and how they become politicized. I have drawn on fieldwork in Mumbai and Cape Town, but rather than compare the cities I have instead used the cases to illustrate different forms of fragment politics through the profoundly unequal materialities and geographies of sanitation provision. While exploring different cities may, of course, have revealed a different or wider set of

fragment politics, the three forms I have highlighted here resonate with the larger urban literature, especially that focused on politics, urban poverty and the making of collective life in the global South (eg Amin, 2014; De Boek, 2012, 2015; Elwood *et al*, 2016; Satterthwaitte and Mitlin, 2014; Graham and McFarlane, 2015; Lancione, 2016; Moser, 2009; Peake, 2015; Ranganathan, 2015; Simone, 2014; Shnitzler, 2013; Silver, 2014; Thieme, 2017).

I have explored a particular fragmented and crucial urban provision – sanitation – and shown how fragment politics are differently made in that context. I have not argued that one or other of these forms of politics is more strategically useful or important. Activists pursue forms of fragment politics that seem most relevant to their context and objectives, and may indeed move between different forms of fragment politics over time or operate more than one of them at a time. That said, there are risks in pursuing just one tactic over time. For instance, a politics of attending to may close off some of the drivers of fragmentation processes, while focusing exclusively on the latter may undermine the potential of supporting those struggling with fragments in an everyday basis.

Table 1 draws together some of the threads in the paper by looking at how different ways of knowing fragments, their form and their politics vary depending on whether we focus on fragmentation, generation, or alterity. It is useful to keep a hold not just of how fragments are produced through fragmentation, but to also attend to how they are shaped through generative relations in the city.

**Table 1: Fragment urbanism**

	<b>Epistemology</b>	<b>Materiality</b>	<b>Spatiality</b>	<b>Politics</b>
<b>Fragmentation</b>	Connecting histories and processes of urban transformation.	Products, residuals and minimal differences; Splinters of infrastructure.	Explaining transformation through how capital, labour, ideologies, resources and forms are transformed through cross-scalar processes.	Focus on the drivers of transformation.
<b>Generation</b>	Alternative ways of knowing and using fragments; Ways of knowing, projecting, or critiquing the 'whole' through translating fragments.	Material agents or affordances that are differently instantiated relationally; Tools of urban critique and difference.	Mundane everyday things in marginal spaces; Counter-publics, the episodic, radical spaces.	Attending to, generative translation, and surveying; Other ways of knowing and expressing fragments and the city; Processes of becoming.

Thinking and researching urbanism through fragments offers a set of conceptual, methodological and political challenges for reimagining and remaking the city. In closing, I want to raise three final questions emerging from this reading of fragment urbanism. First, there is a set of questions around how we might conceive and politically put to work the relations between fragments and wholes to make sense of contemporary cities. The whole – the complete, the fulfilled, the totality – lingers around the image and form of the fragment



just as it does the promise of the city and the modern. The relationship between the fragment and the totality or whole is fundamental to the politics of the city, and – through and beyond the city - to the struggle for how global urbanism will take shape. Charting, politicizing and re-expressing distinct fragment-whole relations is a useful conceptual and political ground for thinking and acting in the city. Might a kind of ‘whole-fragment theory’ connect with and open out genres of global urbanism that propel modest, of provisional and experimental epistemologies and ways of being/acting in the city?

Second, there is a set of methodological questions promoted by the reading of fragment urbanism presented here. The version of fragment urbanism I have outlined here is attuned to geographical context and difference, and to learning across resonances and distinctions in a ‘juxtaposition of singularities’ (Caldeira, 2017). What kinds of methods follow on? We might think, with Benjamin, of allegory and montage, modes of speculative and experimental intervention. At the same time, place-based methods that are the hallmark of urban research, including case-study work, ethnography, and comparison, run parallel to more experimental methods of thinking the city through fragments. Fragment urbanism, at least in this reading, operates within a propagative methodological space across rigour and creativity, convention and experimentation, and settled conclusion and improvisation.

Finally, third, is the question of how fragment urbanism might enable a politics of thinking ‘post-fragment urbanism’, whether through a politics of ‘wholes’ or some other route. However global contemporary urbanism has become, getting beyond fragments demands struggles focused on the territories of the city. Given that the experiences and needs of different people are geographically variable not just between but within cities (Parnell and

Pieterse, 2014; McFarlane *et al*, 2014, 2017), there is no singular frame here for progressive politics.

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