

AbdouMaliq Simone, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019; 120 pp. 978-1-509-52336-8, \$19.95 (Paperback), \$59.95 (Hardcover).

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Endurance in the city victorious

There are lots of ropes, ties and knots in Asim Waqif's *venu*, pictured on the cover of *Improvised Lives* (Simone, 2019). There are also lots of uncut ends, ready to be picked up, perhaps to tie a new knot, or rope in a new rod. Overall it is a structure that does not look finished. It is a provocation of incompleteness, interspersed with intersections of holding ropes and knots. This provocation hints to the promise of this text; to think through urban living in idioms beyond “seeing”, “understanding” and “mastering” the city, an urban living that will not –and perhaps, should not– be pinned down in academic discourse.

In what follows I pick from Simone's book two modes of relation to and in the city: “failure” and “pockets”. I would like to weave together these three threads in a reflection on how I come to think about and relate to my city. That is, the city that appears towards the end of *Improvised Lives*, and one I have been trying to write about and research through all sorts of side-glances, and in roundabout, messy, and fragmentary ways: Cairo. Cairo forcefully patterns many questions of sovereignty and mastery (Singh, 2018), or the lack thereof, confronting us with complicated attachments, optimism and disappointments.

The definitive text on Cairo covers its long history. Its title references Cairo's Arabic name, *al-Qāhira*, which means “the city victorious” (Abu-Lughod, 1971). The root of the word *al-Qāhira* (Q-H-R) means to defeat, subjugate, coerce or oppress. ‘The city victorious’ invokes Cairo's relationship with an ‘outside’ world. Abu-Lughod was certainly conscious of this when her

publisher suggested removing ‘victorious’ from the title. She resisted removing it, explaining that the name sustained the city throughout its history. For Cairo, “[s]urvival, not temporary fortune, is the true measure of victory” (Abu-Lughod, 1971, p. 239). However, *al-Qāhira* has another potential meaning that has been increasingly invoked in relation to an ‘inside’: *al-Qāhira Qahira li-‘Ablaha’* [*al-Qāhira*: the city that subjugates its inhabitants]. For some time, I have been fixating on this; the implications of the growing everyday acceptance of the literal reinterpretation of Cairo’s Arabic name, to include, also, the possibility of a city which turns against its own people. This sentiment appears in popular discourse in relation to perceived mess, traffic and noise. A failure of planning or order.

This messiness elicits in us- scholars of the urban- the desire to know it, fix it, order it, figure its logic out (Sims, 2010). This desire spills over into everyday debates about what constitutes a ‘good city’ – and what types of heritage are worth preserving (El Kadi and ElKerdani, 2006), and how to solve or sort its unplanned informality. It provokes academic and activist soul-searching on the proper roles of architects and planners within a broader society. A quest for order is not detached from a quest for mastery over empirical objects of research. It betrays a teleological narrative that casts (some) cities, in all their mess, as a failure and disappointment.

Failure

Towards the end of the fourth chapter in Simone’s book, we encounter a vignette on failure. More specifically, a vignette of stories about enduring or blurring the failure of “state-imposed-imaginaries, the failure of trying to organize life according to strict rules and parameters” (p. 116), and how, in turn, these stories become fascinating gestures to the productivity of failure for making unanticipated forms of urban living. I think about an exhausting and disappointing Cairo, precisely the city that was anticipated by modern and postcolonial ambitions. Sites of contemporary disenchantment, a neighbourhood that is gridlocked and stuck in traffic, a bridge that promised to

resolve its traffic problems, the crumbling paint of a promising façade – each was once a desirable object of attachment, offering the promise of a liveable city and a good life. A city, as Simone writes elsewhere, is haunted by multiple temporalities of what could have been, what is always not-yet and what is yet to come, a city always overflows (Simone, 2010) and we inhabit its excess and leftovers. Cairo, as with many of Simone’s case studies, endures some failures. The failure of total and totalising order rolled out to fix its spatial politics.

Through focusing on the postcolony’s truncated ambitions, Simone’s writing attunes us to incompleteness, holes and openings. Attuning to this incompleteness is not to centre victimhood, nor to celebrate the miracle of agential survival. It is to trouble the linear transition of imaginations of modern politics, in which failure is typically seen as catastrophic or inevitable. This translates to a method of inquiry in political scholarship on the urban: working with processes that are admittedly fragmentary; pockets of urban space, and appreciating the typically discarded as methodologically inaccessible or historically uninteresting.

Pockets

What might be then, the generative possibility of a poetic of the gap, the hole, the hesitation, and the pocket?

Pockets appear in the very beginning of Simone’s text. A pocket in the city itself offers what he refers to as a proportion of “exposure and opacity” (p.4), “small gaps” (p.3) that make “everyday life into something nearly impossible to police” (p.2). This is not a romanticised idea of resisting and existing, but a poetic of *holding* (p.4) that is part and parcel of district making and enduring urban living. A pocket is a dent and an unexpected fold in urban texture. It is the leftover of the incompleteness of orders of governmentality, exposure and legibility. These unfinished ambitions *hurt* (p.1) but *hold*. They lie uneasily within the necessity of life to be held, to have shelter without mutating to capture, fixing and locking down (pp. 1-28).

Pockets, are what arise with attunement to incompleteness, and from within the promises and specters of sovereignty. Kathleen Stewart, commenting on the thinking and writing of Laurent Berlant, provides us the evocative possibilities of ‘the pocket’:

A space opens up in the ordinary. There is a pause, a temporal suspension animated by the sense that something is coming into existence. ...things hanging in the air are rhythms and refrains worth describing. Not only because they have tentacular connections to other things but also because they are not the kinds of things that can be summarily described or approached in known realist genres. Describing them requires a digressive detour and a slowing and de-dramatization of analytic frames (Stewart, 2012, pp. 365–366).

Let’s return briefly to Cairo. A city that is infamous for two things: traffic and noise. There is an abundance wrong signals and incomplete sentences, and the hesitant, interrupted rhythms of tentative street crossings. Some editions of the Lonely Planet call it *Playing Chicken* (Lonely Planet, n.d.). You put one foot in, one foot back, use a native as a human shield, establish eye contact with drivers and once you cross, you cross. Anthropologist Julia Elyachar wrote in 2011 of how she had to relearn the choreography of walking in Egypt anew when she revisited it after a few years of fieldwork (Elyachar, 2011). The practical tips for the tourist as well as the seasoned academic is how the ordinary is experienced: with rhythms of stalling, dead-ends, side-glances and of unintended arrivals. For Stewart, again, “[t]here is no pure agency of marching forward, like a zombie going doggedly after what it wants. And people are not couch-potato-passive either, not even close” (Stewart, 2012, p. 368).

The postcolony might, thus, be better approached as a patterned object of desire and a constellation of ambitions and disappointments, through which multiple processes of ordering and repairing conjure attachments that bind us to a world which also disappoints us. Thinking with Simone, we could think of the affordance of mess and disillusionment, the temporary shelters

as pockets of an incomplete order, and the ordinary living from within the failures of extraordinary ambitions. Mess allows us to question the tenacious imaginations of power and sovereignty that seep through our scholarly disciplines as fixed, intact and inevitable. Ordinary sentiments like ‘Cairo, the city that oppresses its inhabitants’ conjure up a place that readily adopts the figure of a sovereign who would take life or let live. But thinking through the gaps and pockets and incompleteness of the city, as in the example of *Improvised Lives*, disinvests from a desire to ‘figure out’ the urban, once and for all.

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