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# The city and its margins

## Ethnographic challenges across makeshift urbanism

### Introduction

Tatiana Thieme, Michele Lancione and Elisabetta Rosa

#### Introduction

This themed special feature focuses on urban marginality, interrogating ethnographic practices and dilemmas in themselves rather than relegating methodological questions to the parentheticals of research narratives that privilege the ‘data’.<sup>1</sup> We feel this is timely and important because ethnographic research focused on urban marginality requires problematising and re-imagining both the city itself as a splintered and plural field site (Amin and Thrift 2002; Graham and Marvin 2001), and investigating the complex web of structural and social forces that produce urban marginality at various scales (Wacquant 2008).

Four interrelated questions animate each of the papers in this themed special feature:

- (1) What does it mean to ethnographically investigate the city today, building on the latest developments in urban and geographical thinking?
- (2) To what extent do we contest or contribute to the regimes of representation of marginalised subjects through our ethnographic texts?
- (3) Through what medium can/should we reflect on our own subjectivity as ethnographers and does reflexivity have a renewed place in politically committed urban ethnography?
- (4) What are the methodological pathways that promote grounded research on

marginality whilst advancing theorisations of ‘cityness’?

In this introduction, we interrogate ethnographic thinking and methods in relation to the investigation of life at the margins, including research related to performances, agencies, assemblages, atmospheres and events. In this introduction and as illustrated across the papers, we deliberately aim to reflect on the role of ethnography both as text and as method in contemporary urban research, linking together preoccupations about how we *write* ethnography (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Nagar 2002) with how we *do* ethnography (Cragg and Cook 2007). In doing so, we pay attention both to the subjectivities and situated experiences of research ‘subjects’ who are in one way or another marginalised, and of the ethnographers who aim to make sense of and do justice to their interlocutors’ experiences and accounts, while grounding the ethnographic findings within the broader structural and socio-technical dynamics of the fragmented and uneven cityscape.

This special feature also echoes aspects of earlier debates in anthropology reflecting on the predicament of ethnographic representation and the ‘making of texts’ (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 2). In George Marcus’ (1986) chapter in a seminal co-edited volume *Writing Culture*, he points to two key dynamics in ethnographic writing relevant to our discussion here. Firstly, many

ethnographers have tended to emphasise the social meaning of actions they observe in the field, while avoiding analysis of the broader systems in which these lived realities are embedded. Secondly, some scholars interested in studying the effects of broader political economic systems (such as capitalist society) have incorporated ethnographic description into their accounts to 'thicken' and bring to life structural theories related to labour, class and politics. Marcus points to Paul Willis' (1977) seminal work on *Learning to Labor* as an example of an ethnography examining how working-class dynamics become socially reproduced and performed from schools to the factory floors. At the same time, Willis engages with wider critical analyses of changing capitalist society and its effects on cultural experience.

In this introduction, we emphasise the productive dilemmas associated with ethnographies of lives lived on the edges of the mainstream. On the one hand, we express a commitment to a kind of ethnographic representation that is post-structuralist in its sensibility, but nevertheless takes on the challenge of stitching together micro-geographies of lived experiences into a broader account (Amin and Thrift 2016; Pieterse and Simone 2013) that seeks to provide productive avenues for (re)thinking and reconceptualising urban marginality and makeshift life. Here, Mitchell Duneier remarks in the appendix of his ethnography *Sidewalk* are particularly useful. Duneier spent over 10 years engaging with second-hand book vendors working and sleeping rough on the streets of New York City, and in many ways his appendix is where any ethnography as a form of representation ought to start. It reflects self-critically on uncomfortable issues related to encounters in the field, positionality when conducting cross-race fieldwork, the fragility of trust and the fraught process of doing justice to your research participants when it comes to writing up the research.

Most of us in this special feature conduct fieldwork that might be regarded as cross-

race, cross-gender, cross-culture, cross-class and cross-language. And rather than merely remark on the ongoing complicated predicaments of negotiating one's positionality in the field, we also aim to reflect on the persistence of negotiated positionalities in ethnographic representation. As such, we take into account the inherent uncertainty in knowing how to set in conversation our catalogued observations, the recorded expressions of interlocutors and the broader forces in which our research participants are situated. As Duneier (2000) argues, acknowledging one's uncertainty as an ethnographer is paramount, especially when we 'cannot be sure how those forces come to bear on individual lives' (344).

### Returning to the makeshifts of the margin

In recent years the study of marginality in cities across the globe has elicited increasing attention amongst urban scholars. Going beyond studies of seemingly fixed social categories of difference including class, race, gender, age and citizenship status, the interest in marginality in increasingly 'super-diverse' urban lifeworlds considers the complex perceptions and experiences of individuals and groups of people who navigate uncertainty and variegated forms of insecurity associated with urban life (Cooper and Pattern 2015; Kinder 2016; Vertovec 2007; Vigh 2009). One of the recent seminal texts advancing urban scholarship on marginality is Loïc Wacquant's (2008) book on *Urban Outcasts*, which has elicited much attention and debate, including *City's* vibrant engagement with Wacquant's work (Musterd 2008; Tissot 2007).

It is especially worth noting that Wacquant's contribution to the study of marginality included a comparative study between different American and European 'ghettos', which Wacquant emphasises must be understood in relation to complex and situated legacies of social inequality informed by race- and class-based relations and uneven

access to urban services, labour and life chances. Wacquant's work points to the considerable structural and institutional forces that influence and further entrench marginality, but also emphasises the constellation of actors who contribute to social stigma and regimes of representation that render particular people, places and practices marginalised in relation to the mainstream city. Marginality is therefore produced, and persists in relation to the particular roles of the state, access to urban services and labour markets, and everyday habitation in the city.

Wacquant's comparative urban sociology is key in showing the differences across cities and neighbourhoods that nevertheless produce forms of urban marginality in a post-Fordist, post-industrial urban context. Yet, it is worth thinking beyond Euro-American contexts and considering how we might extend the 'comparative gestures' (Robinson 2011; Södestrom 2014) further. Indeed, this special feature brings together a diversity of cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, as we travel from marginalised spaces in Italy, Romania, the USA, China, Uganda and Kenya and hear from authors trained in urban sociology, anthropology and geography. At the same time, we also seek to move away from a reflection that primarily considers the structural and social stigma associated with urban marginality. Indeed, Mike Davis' (2006) work on 'slums', similarly to Wacquant's work, is crucial in highlighting and documenting structural injustices that have produced advanced marginality in cities of the global South. This very journal has engaged critically with the return of the 'slum' into academic and policy realms and the implications for broader understandings (or misunderstandings) of urban poverty (see Arabindoo's excellent introduction to the 2011 special feature and homage to Alan Gilbert, 'Beyond the Return of the "Slum"'). Our critical engagement builds on our colleagues' intervention by pointing out that both authors fall short in three key areas that, to us, need to be brought to the centre of contemporary research on the

urban margins. First, there is the need to focus more on the agency and coping strategies of those who not only inhabit the urban margins, but also negotiate the conditions and terms of marginality through their everyday lived practices (for a critique to Wacquant's shortage of empirical enquiries/observations, see, i.e. Kokoreff 2009). Second, both authors omit a much-needed frank discussion on the tenuous and fragile encounters, negotiated power relations and the politics of representation that take place between researchers and 'marginalised' subjects. Third, there is the need to promote an analytic of the urban margins that, without diminishing the importance of structural elements, is able to grasp the nuanced process of assemblage and makeshifts that (re)produce and challenge marginality on an everyday basis (for a similar critique of Wacquant's approach, see Caldeira 2009; Tissoot 2007).

This themed special feature brings together seven papers that each address particular methodological challenges associated with ethnographies of urban marginality in a given city. Across cognate social science disciplines, the authors in this special feature are committed to bold theoretical projects that call for 're-imagining' the city (Amin and Thrift 2002), but in their grounded practice, these scholars study marginality by first and foremost grappling with the messy and thorny realities of qualitative research, which has increasingly borrowed from ethnographic traditions but has also had to rethink what exactly constitutes 'the field' in urban ethnography. These seven papers explore the role of ethnography in urban research on marginality through its entanglements with the plural positionalities of the ethnographer who navigates the 'field' as part academic researcher, part activist and bearer of political responsibilities.

Though the themes of each research project are wide-ranging, they are linked by the dilemmas associated with ethnography as method and as text, and the plural role of

the ethnographer at different stages of fieldwork and indeed after ‘leaving’ the field. But these papers also contribute in important ways to current debates regarding the modes of knowing, learning and navigating the city (Amin and Thrift 2002; McFarlane 2010; Merrifield 2014; Vigh 2009). While each of the papers in this special feature can stand alone, we aim in this introduction to offer a conceptual thread to bring the papers in sustained dialogue with each other to offer a broader argument and contribution to the theory and practice of urban ethnography. In what follows we focus on the two most important threads: the politics of engaged ethnography and the politics of encounter at the margins.

### Politically engaged ethnography

Studying urban marginality poses considerable methodological questions about how the 21st-century city should be approached, but it also bears a peculiar responsibility: arguably, how we investigate and write about the urban is not detached from our capacity to imagine alternative urban politics (Merrifield 2014). We do not discount the importance of macro analyses, desk studies and large survey-based research, which can provide crucial demographic and economic data sets to illustrate broad trends and urban divisions along infrastructural, digital and labour market lines (e.g. UN-Habitat World Cities reports since 2003). The benefit that such approaches bring to academic and policy debates includes comparative and systematic analysis across different urban contexts that is beneficial both to academics across disciplines and policy realms. Yet, as we also collectively argue in the edited volume *Rethinking Life at the Margins* (Lancione 2016), macro-measures of the city can also obscure and essentialise the messy realities on the ground, especially where people, places and practices do not fit neatly into prescribed categories of place, work and other classifications, or are off the

grid in all sorts of ways. Therefore, we refer to these urban realities as being ‘at the margins’ simply to connote that they, in their everyday struggles, complicate and upset established norms, institutions and definitions of progress. They bring new cartographies, alternative codes and counter-currents that merit further investigation and, crucially, must be acknowledged, recognised and included in urban stories. These ‘marginalities’ are where certain practices in the everyday city exist not just in spite of systemic breakdowns and unreliable structures of support, but also often because of them (Amin 2014; Desai, McFarlane, and Graham 2014; Lancione and McFarlane 2016; Pieterse 2013; Robinson 2006; Simone 2004; Vasudevan 2014).

As such, many urban scholars have increasingly engaged in grounded research in order to capture a granular portraiture of the city’s interstices and often invisible corners and invisible forms of labour and dwelling (Duneier 2000). ‘The city’ and its protagonists living on the margins are being depicted in relation to everyday modes of quiet encroachment (Bayat 1997; Hall 2015; Rosa 2016), experimentation and frugal improvisation (Jeffrey 2010; Simone 2009; Vasudevan 2014), self-provisioning in cities without services (Kinder 2016; Thieme 2013) and assemblage urbanism (Lancione 2014; McFarlane 2010) where questions of power, resistance, contestation and agency are continuously reconfigured and brought to the fore to foster new political imaginaries and animate collective politics of outrage (Castells 2012).

Our interest in reflecting on urban marginality coincides with recent interdisciplinary commitments to conceptualise rising and plural forms of precarity across urban areas, as changing labour markets, structures of state welfare and rising costs of living mark cities across the global North and South, undergoing austerity measures in an increasingly unpredictable and insecure global economy (Harvey 2007; Standing 2011;

Waite 2009). In this sense, our intellectual commitment is two-fold: we aim to render visible urban practices and subjectivities that may be ignored by mainstream political and institutional structures, but we also wish to reflect critically on the very conceptual categories that are deployed in the academic scholarship in which we take part. Drawing on postcolonial critiques of ethnographic practices that importantly interrogate the inherently partial production of knowledge and authorship that emerges from even the most embedded qualitative research, we take inspiration from Spivak's (1988) timeless question, 'can the subaltern speak?' It is in this spirit that we use the term 'marginality' carefully, aware that it carries loaded connotations not least because it assumes that if there is a periphery along which the margins and the marginal lie, there is a prescribed and normative centre. The special feature therefore seeks to question the fixity of the centre, and suggests that engaging with marginality means shifting the points of reference.

### Politics of visibility and encounter

Some of the papers in this special feature reflect on spaces and practices conventionally classified in terms of negation (Roitman 1990), notably the 'slum' or 'informal economies' in Kenya (Thieme), the 'homeless' and the 'nomadic' in Italy, Romania and France (Lancione and Rosa). Two papers focusing on China's rapid urbanisation examine the spatial dialectics that on the one hand turn marginalised outskirts of cities into new 'green belts' and urban frontiers (Zhao), and on the other hand reflect the backstories of rapid industrialisation as rural migrants aspire to enter Special Economic Zones (Kho). What links these seemingly disparate urban experiences are the everyday negotiations related to finding work, dwelling and recognition for those outside prescribed institutional structures and norms. Other authors in this special

feature focus on the emotional geographies and expressions of residents in low-income and stigmatised neighbourhoods through multimodal mediums including art and photography (Aru, Memoli and Puttilli), and the micro-geographies of moral obligation expressed in everyday transactions in a Ugandan marketplace (Monteith). Finally, the temporality and fragility of ethnographic encounters are also explored in various papers (Ramakrishnan; Thieme; Lancione and Rosa) as reflections on the personal geographies of the 'revisit' and the ways in which the changing attitudes of our research interlocutors towards past and present forms of dis-possession shifts or disrupts the claims we make in our writing.

Therefore, the papers in this special feature offer individual examples of noteworthy though under-documented practices on the urban peripheries exposed to precarious conditions. Collectively, they raise a crucial common concern about the multiple encounters, tensions and frictions between life on the urban margins and the mainstream city. Together the papers contribute to recent scholarship investigating and theorising urban marginality, social exclusion and injustice in both the global North and South (Lancione 2016). But they also offer a unique methodological commentary on the nexus between marginality and the city that reflects but also advances the interest and urgency of a politically engaged scholarship (Sheper-Hughes 2009; Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006). In many ways, each paper engages explicitly with the often private, iterative critical reflections of any passionate ethnographer 'doing' research (see, i.e. the contributions of Lancione and Rosa; Thieme). In different ways, the authors pull out from their journals and informal conversations with peers at the end of a day's 'fieldwork' the intimate vacillations that unsettle any presumption that research might be straightforward and data unproblematically 'collected'.

As a special feature, this collection aims to demonstrate that spaces and practices lying outside formal institutional structures and



norms are not merely exceptional and imperfect counterparts to the mainstream city. Instead, we argue that while such people, places and practices may be subject to exploitation and injustice if left to their own devices they are nevertheless also integral to (re)shaping urban practices. Their subjectivities and agency must be better understood and more sensitively documented so that these experiences are not read as technical problems to be fixed (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007) but rather as important composites of meaningful urban struggle to make a life in the city. Rendering these stories more visible becomes integral to a progressive academic politics that aims to value the experiments inherent in these struggles and rogue practices (Amin 2014; Pieterse and Simone 2013; Rosa 2016; Simone 2009; Thieme 2013; Vasudevan 2014), whilst resisting the tropes that would romanticise informality and makeshift urbanism (Arabindoo 2011; Varley 2013).

### The making of urban ethnography

For those who seek to study how urban marginality is experienced and contested on an everyday basis, urban ethnography has become not only an appropriate mode of qualitative research focused on ‘microsocial description and contextuality’ (Marcus 1986, 166), but also in some cases a politically committed form of research that seeks to reflect on broader systems that both reproduce marginality but also become stages on which ‘marginalised subjects’ continuously contest and renegotiate their place in the city. Here we close with two points justifying the timely return to reflections related to the connection between ‘*doing*’ and ‘*writing*’ ethnography. Firstly, while the literature is rich in fine-grained accounts of how to theorise the contemporary city and its margins, not enough has been said about the empirical context shaping urban ethnographic investigations and their implications. Both as methodological vehicle for research and as text, ethnography raises critical questions

concerning how to define the ‘field’, or how the urban ethnographer should announce his/her presence as a researcher, as opposed to a fellow urbanite, pedestrian or bystander. Urban ethnography, put simply, is rarely fully discussed in terms of its implementation, the complex ethical dilemmas concerning positionality, and it is therefore often under-theorised as a contemporary methodology for studying the difficult, invisible, ‘no-go’ and in-between zones of cities. Secondly, we return to unsettled questions of ethnographic representation, because doing ethnographic research in cities draws out the importance of deeply embedded ethnographic description in difficult to pin down urban fields (Simone 2009), but also perhaps calls for ambitions to draw out the broader significance of ethnographic particulars taking place in urban spaces that are both producing marginality but also shaping potentially progressive urban cultural practices and places (Vasudevan 2014).

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Note

- 1 This themed special feature is the outcome of a vibrant panel session ‘The City and its Margins: Ethnographic Challenges across Makeshift Urbanism’, which we organised and convened at the Royal Geographical Society Annual Conference in Essex, September 2015.

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