Hypatia (2025), **40**, 671–675
doi:10.1017/hyp.2024.64

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

INVITED REVIEW ESSAY

Non-City: A Review Essay

Contentious Cities: Design and the Gendered Production of Space. Jess Berry, Timothy Moore, Nicole Kalms, and Gene Bawden (editors). London: Routledge, 2021 (ISBN 978-0-367-52021-2)

Feminist City: Claiming Space in the Man-Made World. Leslie Kern. New York: Verso, 2020 (ISBN 978-1-788-73982-5)

Irina Aristarkhova

Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design and Digital Studies Institute, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Email: airina@umich.edu

(Received 31 December 2023; accepted 31 March 2024; first published online 18 December 2024)

Gender and space studies, and feminist philosophy of space, have been flourishing mostly propelled by intersectional and interdisciplinary methodologies. The anthology *Contentious cities: Design and the gendered production of space*, edited by Berry, Moore, Kalms, and Bawden, and Kern's monograph *Feminist city: Claiming space in the man-made world*, contribute to these rapidly expanding fields. The cities that are discussed in detail include Toronto, London, Hong Kong, Oakland, Melbourne, Kuala Lumpur, Lahore, and Amsterdam, among others. Together, the books provide an excellent overview of the field of gender and space in those specific contexts and raise important feminist questions about several disciplines, such as philosophy of place and space, geography, gender and sexuality studies, critical ethnic and decolonial studies, environmental studies, and urban design and planning. At the same time, the books could not be more different, apart from the obvious point of one being a monograph and the other an anthology.

Feminist city has been written as autoethnography of Leslie Kern's experience of London and Toronto (and, to a lesser extent, New York), with elements of a memoir and theoretical engagement with feminist geographers. Kern mostly chronologically describes and critically analyzes her own life in various cities, from childhood, then as a student, a pregnant person, a parent, and a researcher and an activist (who participates in demonstrations as a mother who has to choose between her political action and taking care of her daughter). The book is a joy to read, engaging, and written in a fluid and self-aware prose. Kern often reminds us how aware she is of her own privileged position as a white cisgender educated woman, without downplaying her

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Hypatia, a Nonprofit Corporation. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.64 Published online by Cambridge University Press

difficulties or challenges. For example, she states on p. 35: "(i)f my presence is going to lead to the further marginalization of already-struggling groups, then I need to strongly consider whether my presence there is necessary." Not trying to present her own experience as universal helps the reader to relate Kern's questions and feelings to their own lived experiences.

Overall, Kern challenges us to imagine what a feminist city would be like and engages with other feminist ideas and ideals that she analyzes to provide some answers. For example, we imagine with Kern, how her activist participation in demonstrations would scale up if labor movements and social justice initiatives provided childcare and other support to single parents and other currently marginalized groups. Kern is also very effective in showing how most women are forced to deal with their strong feelings of fear and anger in isolation, when "claiming space in the man-made world," in mostly men-designed and men-run, cities. Therefore, at the very least, we are left to imagine a feminist city as a safe space for women and other excluded groups, collectively sharing a space with equal and equitable participation in designing, building, and running a feminist city. The book, overall, ends on a hopeful note, as we get a sense of the joy that Kern experiences in a city, partaking from its energy and possibilities of its feminist, intersectional, and communal futures.

Contentious cities, in contrast to *Feminist city*, has no one style, methodology, or an over-arching question, making its reading experience (perhaps, intentionally) sometimes challenging and truncated, but also thick and rewarding. Each text, or each page even, could present a new research method or visual material, requiring the reader to slow down. Unlike the Kern's book, *Contentious cities* is based on a research project and gatherings organized by an experimental design laboratory at Monash University's XYX Lab in Melbourne, Australia. The book is the fruit of the labor of an interdisciplinary group of 25 designers, urban planners, theorists, ethnographers, and activists. What unites the chapters, and the project overall, is its activist, interventionist, and coalition-building, commitment. Researchers do not just collect and present data about how gendered the space is in a particular place, or how limiting it is to women and LGBTQIA+ persons. The engagement is wide-ranging, from oral histories to focus groups with stakeholders (urban planners and municipal officials), with comparisons between what is stated in official missions on creating safe environments for all versus what citizens experience on the ground, thus creating opportunities for accountability. There are contributions that could be seen as fulfilling an element of a Kern's vision for a feminist city, such as the chapter analyzing how 600 individual donors funded a purchase in Oakland, California, of "Liberating Ourselves Locally, a QTPOC-centered community space, run by the Peacock Rebellion that houses a lending library, many computers, DJ equipment, an industrial sewing machine, and two 3D printers." The purchase went through the "Oakland Community Land Trust (OakCLT), who had the resources and legal expertise to navigate through the process of buying the property." (168, Yeros, in *Contentious city*).

Yeros writes about this successful "safe" space for trans and queer persons of color, which could be sustained and saved for the future generations through grassroots organizing and fundraising, with awareness of what documentation of that process entails ethically, aesthetically, and methodologically.

The chapter "Beyond queer solidarity in Hong Kong: Migrant domestic workers and trans spaces," is another important intervention of the anthology. It is written as a collaboration between Marrz Saludez Balaoro, a "trans male Filipino migrant domestic worker" and founder of an activist organization Fylgus Association Hong Kong, and Merve Bedir, a "cis-female migrant worker from Turkey living in Hong Kong." The

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.64 Published online by Cambridge University Press

chapter addresses urban spaces inhabited by the often hidden or unseen and undesigned for bodies of the domestic service industry participants. Apart from centering the work of Fylgus in creating and occupying spaces for trans domestic workers, the key contribution of this chapter is the intersectional theorizing and critique of queer studies, with their limitations outside of their Western roots. Situated in the Southeast Asian context, the chapter offers several terms of non-binary and trans identities that question "(p)resenting 'queer' and 'hybridity' as a loose domain of non-normative genders or sexualities," since they reinforce, rather than "problematise the Western hegemony on the discourse" (204). Introducing terms such as "*baklâ* tomboy, and *silahis* as gay, lesbian, and bisexual" (205), and situating them within the larger Asian context with other terms that speak to a much thicker cultural and transnational context, allows to articulate and communicate the lived experience of trans Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong on their own terms. This chapter contributes to theorizing of gender and space with new terms and meanings.

At the end, *Contentious cities* also, like *Feminist city*, seeks to appear hopeful and optimistic about the cities. In the glossary section of the anthology, Justine Lloyd defines "Urban" as "The concept" which "is much broader and more nuanced than a simple measure of density of people per square kilometer: it signals modern and radical ways of living and thinking about oneself and community. Thus, urbanism is the belief that cities are a key site of human emancipation." (243).

However, *Contentious cities* is a much more radical book than it seems to appear within the discipline of design. In fact, the book starts from the deconstruction of the very notion of the modern city as a settler colonial, white supremacist, and sexist project. Thus, the team of editors set their goals beyond the corrective feminist critique within settler colonial Australia and the British Commonwealth.

As chapter 2 "Colonial imaginaries reimagined," claims to center the Australian Aboriginal vision of place and the experience of displacement, its co-authors, Gene Bawden and Brian Martin are "purposely positioned before the central structure of the book." (5). Exploring various places of white femininity in Australia of the nineteenth century, the chapter unpacks "the conditions of the colonial project which lies at the foundation of contemporary cities." This is a bold and important claim. The rest of the chapter uses visual materials and descriptions of Melbourne urban design and landmarks to demonstrate how the modern city is the product of indigenous exclusion in the colonies, of the land-grab, and the dual role that "respectable" white women have played (and continue to play?) in the city.

The technique of overwriting by Martin, in bold, in the rest of the chapter, describes and reinscribes the Aboriginal conception of space, Country, thus attempting to enable "the accurate and respectful representation of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture in design" (5). But it does much more than that in its promise, even if not in the rest of the book's discussion: it presents us with an opportunity to encounter and imagine a different conception of space that does not, epistemologically, divide the subject and its environment, or the city and the country, which replaced it through the British colonial project: "Place underpins inquiry in the deepest ontological sense, inasmuch as, from an Indigenous point of view, it is the fundamental existential quantifier: it informs us of where we are at any time, thereby at the same time informing us of who we are" (Graham 2009, 75, quoted in Bawden and Martin, 11). Martin continues: "Within this dynamic, there is no split between memory and temporality or between the ontic and the ontological, the real and the imaginary. All cultural productions within Australian Indigenous culture are created on the basis of Country

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.64 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(*Place*). One belongs to Country, which provides all sustenance in relation to living and all cultural practices" (Martin, 11).

This notion of "belonging" is important here. Both books take pains to detail the history and current practices of exclusion, of making women and girls (especially queer and trans girls) feel unwelcomed, threatened, frightened, silenced, disciplined, oppressed, erased, by building for "generic masculinity" disguised as "gender neutral urban planning design and architecture" (103). The effect is not only isolation by design (30), but also the recognition that, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, "your fear will not protect you." The sense of safety, which is famously defined as one of the fundamental human needs, would have to be collectively enabled, because it is continuously erased to undermine belonging and becoming.

Though the authors, apart from this central framing, do not return to a vision of space as Country to weave it into contemporary feminist urban design, the chapters I described above hint at the need for more transparency in identifying power differentials among various project participants. There is a danger in assuming each other's good will and allyship rather than highlighting, for example, how individual participants' class, race, citizenship, etc., could operate within their respective research or design project and interactions with their "subjects" and "spaces" (Kern does it more effectively). This problem potentially reinforces the blind spots of design as a discipline, where "editors-experts" seem to assume a generic research position, neutral when it comes to their own positionality of gender, race, sexuality, class, or national origin. The co-design and co-writing are presented mostly as smoothly run practices, with few examples of contentious experiences of the research process (e.g., changing titles based on feedback) with its systemic inequalities. This leads to a potential of these inequalities being silenced. Feminist ethnographers and thinkers have pointed out dangers of reproducing "lovingly, knowingly, ignorant" (Ortega) epistemologies hidden behind the assumptions of "good intentions."

The editors, however, acknowledge this danger in the field of design, where "(i)f diverse perspectives are addressed at all, urban planners tend to focus on the technical aspects of designing for inclusion—emphasising defensive design and crime prevention" (102). This book gestures toward the corrective, but we need to engage more consistently with the deconstructive and constructive promise of Aboriginal philosophy of space, including in design education, in order to move toward concrete steps forward. "Defensive design" (lighting in parking lots and parks, visible panic buttons, gender neutral bathrooms, and so forth) is part of this process, too, but it does not go far enough. Without involvement of the whole community such programs remain corrective and limited, or even, harmfully contributing to carceral capitalism (through "crime prevention" strategies rather than de-masculinizing space and questioning its "generic masculinity").

These books help us *see* each other, to be present, to understand how the feminist spatial project would necessarily entail changing the settler patriarchal capitalism, toward a new set of social and economic relations, that are to be negotiated and renegotiated, starting by and with indigenous communities. Without questioning of the city as such, as a settler colonial project with its primary accumulation through stealing and privatization of land, the harmful, gendered binaries (of domestic/civic; private/public; rural/urban; barbaric/civilized) will continue to be reproduced, and with them, the existing harmful relations of production and reproduction of space. The books demonstrate that "women" and other excluded groups from the "polis" would remain both essential and threatening to the status quo (in production and reproduction of

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.64 Published online by Cambridge University Press

meanings, the capital, and the population), with cycles of hysteria and backlash against reproductive freedom and rights of LGBTQIA+ and other targeted and harmed minorities.

These books were published before the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021. Since then, the urban/rural divide has been further problematized, impacted by the most recent social and climate justice movements and questions about environmental costs of urban living (especially since so many major urban centers are either on the water or not far from it). The role of technology and artificial intelligence has also altered perceptions of the city, further contributing to the new digital inequalities (e.g., in aging). Corporations increasingly target cities as testing grounds for the so-called public/private partnerships that disproportionally disadvantage the urban working class and the poor.

Therefore, many important questions are raised in these two books through concrete examples of practices and experiences. These would be engaging to undergraduate students of various disciplines adjacent to the larger field of gender and space: philosophy, gender and sexuality studies, environmental studies, design and architecture, geography, urban planning, and public policy. These texts testify to the challenges of experiences of exclusion, harassment, and violence, of fear and anger that follow intersectional inequalities, while centering agency, joy, and change. The new challenge, then, is to envision forms of emancipatory living in cities that go beyond the urban experience as we know it. Reparative practices cannot be isolated from capital reparations and redistribution of land, to produce a possibility of a different subject/space relation and a new collective arrangement.

Irina Aristarkhova is a scholar and writer who is interested in cultural transformations and new forms of thinking, making, and being. Her ongoing research and teaching encompass comparative feminist theory, digital and technoscience studies, and contemporary aesthetics. Aristarkhova is Professor at the University of Michigan, Ann Abor, in the School of Art & Design and the Digital Studies Institute (College of Literature, Science, and the Arts). Among her publications are the monographs *Hospitality of the matrix: Philosophy, biomedicine, and culture* (Columbia University Press, 2012) and *Arrested welcome: Hospitality in contemporary art* (Minnesota University Press, 2020, available online with Open Access).

Cite this article: Aristarkhova I 2025. "Non-City: A Review Essay." *Hypatia* **40**, 671–675. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.64

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.64 Published online by Cambridge University Press