CrossMark

to tell the stories of the urban after the Anthropocene than those that can be, ultimately, mistaken as morally purified, romanticized accounts of hustling. Because I don't think that's what AbdouMaliq Simone intended.

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Is it hustling this world, or something else? Reflections on three engagements with Improvised Lives

This is a book that attempts to deploy Black epistemologies, to think not so much about Blackness per se, but rather about the continuously mutating forms of urban collective life. I want to use this statement then as a way to respond to some of the profound questions raised by my interlocutors; questions that deal with apparatuses and styles of agency, of remaining stuck in the Anthropocene, and of ethical considerations about how long a writer should stick around in a place in order to be able to say something useful. By Black epistemologies I mean the ever-changing archive of ways of knowing, unknowing and refusing the world based on a wide register of sensuous and technical engagements honed through the multifaceted experiences and displacements of (not) being Black across different terrains.

The endeavour to draw upon Black epistemologies is inevitably complicated by the conundrums that a vast repertoire of heterogeneous epistemologies faced in terms of their enunciation and application. Elaborated under conditions of subjugation, how were these ways of knowing to make themselves known, faced with alternating devaluation and assignation of supernatural powers – where any basis for Black capacity was either reduced to sheer labour or to special relationships with dark worlds? Here, large measures of dissimulation, reversal and opacity were required in order to realize at least some of the potential Black knowledge possessed. Stylization of words, bodies, everyday performances ran interference, erased tracks, offered short-term protection, nurtured gestations, all to modulate the attention paid. Certainly our common understandings of the 'hustle', of improvising ways of getting by and circumventing constraints, are all part of the repertoire of Black epistemology. But such agencies were also cultivated to be more than they seemed, to divert attention to the ways in which Black sensibilities and cultural productions were intensely technical, rooted in elaborate mathematical and systemic readings of things, methods for calculating the possibilities for converting atmospheres of abjection into the grounds for assembling intricate architectures of association with natural worlds; for disparate dislocated bodies to operate in concert across the interstices of weakly guarded spaces, blind spots and invisibilities in plain sight.

Not dissimilarly, improvisation in what the Art Ensemble of Chicago long has called 'Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future' may on the surface reflect an agency that embodies a hustle, an inexplicable ability to twist and turn simple vernaculars into dizzying lines of flight, a demonstration of bravura. Yet most of the great improvisers also saw themselves largely as technicians, experimenters with physics and mathematics, all reaching to posit structures of force able to intersect diverse knowledges – entailing practices of counting, intuiting, divining, formulating – into forms of alternation, where every knowledge was considered equal, had no more purchase on the real than any other.

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Today, improvisation is too often considered as a kind of resilience reflecting some deep-seated capacity of the subaltern to roll with the punches, to pull all kinds of cute rabbits out of the hat. Rather, musicians such as Coleman, Mitchell, Rivers, Parker, Shipp and McPhee realized that the 'real world' has nothing to do with truth, language or meaning; that there is no way to get at it, but rather to always work a way around it so that it can come at you from different angles, put you somewhere else than where you think you are, so wherever you are and what you have, confront that this is only part of what is going on, that in most respects whoever you are is already 'out of there', somewhere else. Given the unrelenting anti-Blackness that has shaped a large part of the world, improvisation remains a critical 'scientific method' of endurance and generativity. Given all of the hard work that has taken place across households and communities across the global South to experiment with the albeit limited resources to which they are usually availed – all of the keen observations, patient calculations and collaborative study that has taken place from street corners to overcrowded public universities – there is much more than 'hustle' going on.

Since I have tried to find salient applications for Black epistemologies in terms of rethinking some of the precepts of contemporary urbanism, in the book I use the notion of the uninhabitable not to point to how bad conditions in the urban global South might be and then use this assessment to foreground the capacities for improvisation. Rather, the uninhabitable refers to the disjunction between what Black epistemologies could do, might already do, and the world in which they are emplaced. In other words, this is not a world that Blacks cannot inhabit simply because of abiding racism and deprivation but rather because Black knowledge does not aspire to be 'settled' in this world anyway, that its application goes beyond the contingencies of inhabitation, of putting down roots, in order to seek multiple forms of occupancy and operation across different terrain.

In Hortense Spillers' reformulations of the flesh, flesh was not only absence of a recognized addressee, a person with a name and location, but a means of extending the body across different creatures and materialities, of moving with the earth, and in ways that already anticipate and exceed whatever complexion Haraway had in mind for the Chthulucene. It wasn't that there was a lack of commitment to tending to place, to instituting infrastructures of care in place, but rather that place itself need not be territorially fixed, that where you found yourself now and the things you learned about how to exist in that place could only be fully realized elsewhere and in different conjunctions of sense, force and bodies. Black writers across a wide range of genre from Octavia Butler to Iceberg Slim to Martin Delany to Sony Lab'ou Tansi to N. K. Jemisin have reiterated that even though we are stuck with this world it is insufficient to accommodate Black thinking; that there is no possible home in this world for Black thought and thus the world has to go. But within this world there are the incipient trajectories, often on the run, often showing up briefly in different sectors, towns, ways of life, and that what Black thought may be particularly well equipped to do is to gather them up, not within the sedentary, sovereignty-ridden, territorially burdened matrix of place, but in motion as they circulate with and through each other, across towns here and there.

Far from evincing a lack of commitment to knowing folks over an extended period of time, the deployment of this sensibility of mobile gathering is a gesture towards respecting a long tradition of distributing personhood and place across space, a way of speaking to folks in Delhi with the stories of Jakarta fresh in one's mind, of using one's own life as the locus for experimental articulations. It probably isn't good academic research or the basis for deep knowledge, but a tentative modest attempt to track how one thing, one place, one

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people leads to another. Additionally, when residents of the familiar uninhabitable conditions seem to exhaust their appeals for justice, for some kind of discernible improvement in their lives, they may simply attempt to go elsewhere, and even for those stuck in place, they often try to find ways to 'reach a larger world'. Just as the deeply stuck residents in Seelampur, Delhi I came to know found what means they could to make the potentialities, not hardships, of their lives known to a larger domain of speculative contacts.

All this said, Pratten reminds us of the importance of finding resonance among the illusions and metaphors that are our only means of navigating the complexities of urban life, and that are the very tools through which we might discover connections among seemingly discrete ways of life. Ntarangwi's remarks imply the continued disjunction between communities that do the work for the state, for figuring out ways to govern themselves and the possibilities of naming things, of defining just exactly what it means to be a citizen and the rights incumbent on them – in an abruption of illusion and metaphor. Beck's comments would suggest that no matter how we write about this world, 'Black thought' is required, not as an instrument of salvation, but as a means to restitute the potentials interrupted in the extermination of pluriversal worlds – through the colonial and imperial – a possibility only if the world we know comes to end. These are all critical considerations through which the book must be read and challenged, and I am deeply appreciative of the way in which they have surfaced in this journal debate.

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