Cities of entanglements: social life in Johannesburg and Maputo through ethnographic comparison

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Cities of entanglements: social life in Johannesburg and Maputo through ethnographic comparison, by Barbara Heer, Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2019, 340 pp., €44.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-8376-4797-6.

Cities invite attention because of the multiplicity of lifeworlds and encounters they engender. Whether approached from an anthropological, sociological or political vantage point, the "urban question" renders itself to a miniature of various encounters. Since Castells' ([1972] 1977) classic work, "the urban question" — a reformulation of urbanisation as a capitalist project that emphasises the centrality of the city — has attracted significant attention by critical urban scholars. Scholars who expanded on Castells' classical argument (for example, Brenner 2019; Merrifield 2014; Wacquant 2008) suggest that urban life is replete with unending pathways that leave us with more questions than answers.

It is against this background that I review Barbara Heer's book, *Cities of Entanglements: Social Life in Johannesburg and Maputo through Ethnographic Comparison*. Segregation is a common trope in the reading of urbanity and has long dominated urban studies in Africa and elsewhere. In her book, Heer successfully brings two cities into conversation with each other beyond the suffocating strictures of their history of segregation. It takes chance encounters and the mundane seriously as avenues through which a different urban imagination can come to the fore.

The imagery of "the wall" has been the personification of segregation par excellence. However, as Heer intimates, "the wall" is not impervious. It is penetrated by a multiplicity of social practices that do not respect physical barriers. "Cities of walls" thus constitute "only a partial lens which omits many aspects of urbanity" (10). Through an ethnographic comparison of two cities — Johannesburg and Maputo — Heer offers a rich portrait of diverse spaces of encounter that illuminates our understanding of the urban condition. She draws on Nuttall's (2009) notion of entanglement to avoid several shortcomings that have marked African urban studies (29–31). I shall return to these weaknesses, for they allow us to say something about the extent to which Heer's book addresses the problématique.

The book is based on fieldwork that spanned over 14 months. Notwithstanding that this is a comparative ethnography, the theoretical anchor of entanglements suggests that the emphasis is not on difference but on the "lines of flight" in the sense of the "principle of multiplicity," as expounded by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). A richer understanding of an object or subject is generated by an assemblage of meanings that proliferate when various connections and relationships are emphasised. Through this multiplicity, the book explores the lives of urban dwellers in four unequal and adjacent neighbourhoods: Polana Caniço and Sommerschield II in Maputo and Alexandra and Linbro Park in Johannesburg (12). Before preparing the terms on which the two cities are to have a conversation, Heer adeptly traces their histories, recalling the injunction that "the contemporary urban condition cannot be understood or re-imagined without a spatially informed obsession with historical antecedents" (Pieterse 2013, 13). Also worth recalling is that these two cities are marked by an imbricate colonial history and by stark contemporary urban inequalities.

Heer identifies four shortcomings of African urban studies and uses them as linchpin for her comparative ethnography of urban entanglements. The first pertains to a mosaic thinking that invariably focuses on a single neighbourhood. The second weakness to beset research on African cities (for which she draws on the work of Leslie Bank [2011]) is a "bifurcation between an emphasis of location and place-making," on the one hand, and overstating "networks, mobility and aspatiality," on the other (30). The third shortcoming is that the scholarship of conviviality in urban spaces tends to privilege interactions in public spaces and renders sociality invisible in other spaces. Finally, the fourth relates to epistemologies and typologies of comparison that offer few practical answers to qualitative enquiries. To deal with the last limitation, Heer proposes an "entangled comparative ethnography," invaluable for how it offers "texts with multiple,

ever-shifting cases, and hence narratives about urbanity based on a diversity of urban experiences" (31). In a manner suggestive of the unending questions that urban life generates, the titles of the six ethnographic chapters that form the structure of *Cities of Entanglements* are phrased as questions. These questions provide an opportunity to open up urban encounters before weaving together multiple entanglements. Akin to Filip de Boeck's (2016) *suturing*, the re-stitching of the urban landscape into various possibilities and moments of interaction, *Cities of Entanglements* offers a picturesque view of entangled everyday lives in two contemporary African cities.

In "Navigating Belonging?," Heer addresses the first shortcoming in African urban studies, the overemphasis of a single neighbourhood. Heer argues that the variegated and dense social networks in Alexandra allow for a complex sense of belonging, complex in the sense that "Alexandra emerges as deeply connected to other spaces, while there are also very powerful boundaries characterising its residents' lives" (47). Alexandra effuses many things that coalesce to form a hybrid urban citizen. It is a "struggle monument," "a problem to be solved," "a space of creativity." Nonetheless, Alexandra is not reducible to any of the many things that it encloses. To be sure, this township is pervaded by entangled spaces and lives and, thus, must be understood "through connections, boundaries and interdependencies between residents of different milieus and neighbourhoods" (76).

Indeed, there exists another world of interesting relations that tends to escape scrutiny in urban scholarship. In "Intimate Encounters?," the figure of the female domestic worker brings to the fore the "worker–employer relationship constitut[ing] a habitual, quotidian and somehow invisible urban entanglement" (82). Classes, races, spaces and gender coalesce around this entanglement in intimate and enduring ways. By invoking intimate encounters (and thus addressing the second shortcoming of African urban studies), Heer collapses the walls that have "come to symbolise the vexed conviviality of urban elites and less affluent groups" (10). What becomes apparent is that "the home is scattered throughout the city, for the house is no longer a quiet microcosm and the city its receptacle" (Martella and Enia 2021, 402). By making domestic workers visible, Heer exposes how gender operates in the city. She revealingly intersperses highly gendered spaces with interactions between white homeowners and black domestic workers. This juxtaposition reveals the otherwise hidden landscape of Linbro Park, facilitating urban nuances outside the purview of a casual urban observer.

From this hidden world of intimate encounters and domesticity Heer transitions to another important question that produces various entanglements from the city's materiality. "A Politics of Loss?" problematises the contradictions of the term "development." How does a new housing development reconfigure ways of interacting and living together separately? The prescriptions of speculative urbanism point to an era where the returns on capital become the driving force (Sood 2019). With "politics of loss" there is a palpable fear that the provision of low-cost housing will lower property values. Arguably, property owners in Linbro Park define their position in the city by drawing boundaries. Yet, the state of difference they strive for remains a mirage because of relational ontologies they cannot escape. Cities shaped by various kinds of inequalities, such as Johannesburg, are bound to pit social groups against one another whenever the state intervenes to forge social justice. Groups compete with each other to defend their turf and privilege, and so betray an impending sense of loss. To step out of a "politics of loss," Heer leads us to the next critical question, "A Politics of Proximity?" Here she focuses on Maputo, which has an urban imagery quite dissimilar from that of Johannesburg. Here the emphasis is on forging coexistence while surrendering to the reality of a multiplicity of social practices that are generated when affluence and penury coincide. However, this proximity does not by any means rid Maputo of the trappings of neoliberal urbanism.

"Building Communities?" and "Spaces of Freedom?," the last two ethnographic chapters, hint at an optimistic urban future, optimistic in the sense of building enduring bonds and communities while pointing to "spaces of freedom" that are facilitated by "consuming together." Places of

worship, for example, are generative of an urban sphere where everyday differences of class, race and gender are partly dissolved. However, this partial dissolution of difference should not blind us to the persisting unequal power distribution within religious spaces. Enduring inequality in "these spaces complicates and limits their potential for creating new forms of conviviality and can lead to open or hidden conflict" (218). On the other hand, urban dwellers also integrate shopping malls into their urban circuits and everyday routines. This appropriation of malls allows ordinary residents to lay claim to urban life while asserting their agency in the broader milieu.

The strength of Heer's book lies in going against the grain and shunning the metanarratives that have dominated urban studies for so long. The approach of entanglements as a theoretical resource befits an ethnographic comparison of two cities with fraught histories, as different theoretical positions on reading the contemporary city are insufficient in accounting for the essence of complex urban milieus such as Johannesburg and Maputo. These cities present us with fleeting fragments that are difficult to grasp. What is needed is a theoretical position informed by an extensive analytical approach, such as that of entanglements. This framework allows for nuances that expose the limits of a conception like *divided cities*: though rightly pointing to the history of Johannesburg and Maputo, cities are not frozen in time and our obsession with historical antecedents should not suffocate quotidian urban praxis.

My ruminations over *Cities of Entanglements* convince me that Heer competently addresses the shortcomings initially identified. The volume of interviews conducted provides a thick description of the urban social alongside an admirable analytical sophistication. The book is an invaluable contribution to urban anthropology and to urban studies in general, and will prove useful more widely across the humanities and social sciences. It also appeals to a broader public readership as it privileges the mundane, the ordinary and the hidden as constitutive fragments that enrich the urban experience.

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