

Spatial Grammars and the Urban Political

Ash Amin and Michele Lancione, eds, *Grammars of the urban ground*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2022, 264 pp.: ISBN 978-1-4780-1833-9

'Even more than urban planning, this emergence of form in and from the informal, is the city we're always making, the city of plans, the city of terms, the city of terminals, the city of passage, the centrifugal refuge of the eternal middle, moved and moving, margined, monthly, weekly, daily, over here, over here, over here, the city of stateless practice.'

-Fred Moten (2018: 190)

'Theory is always a detour on the way to something more important.'

-Stuart Hall (1991: 42)

In a remarkable 2013 commentary on grammar, jazz and fugitivity, the critic, poet and theorist, Fred Moten sets out a vision of black sociality grounded in a re-imagining of the political as a *generative grammar*. For Moten, the very question of fugitivity - and the black radical tradition that it enacts - is inescapably intertwined with the refusal to be governed and subjected to formal rules, institutional organisation and membership of a 'bounded political body' (Shulman, 2021: 295; see Moten, 2013). Through a close reading of Robert

Cover's celebrated exegesis of legal excess, "Nomos and Narrative," Moten develops an understanding of Black social life as 'form-giving' characterised by a 'juris-generative' capacity' to make, in Cover's words, *nomos*, which Moten conceives as a 'grammar that gives form to life in vitalizing, not deadening, ways'. This "grammar", according, to Moten, offers up an alternative 'space of the political predicated otherwise'; a space he later describes as an 'animated urbanity in the cracks of the polis' (Shulman, 2021: 275; Moten, 2018: 190).

If the terms of Moten's fugitive sociality point to a world-making grammar that trades in autonomy, difference and excess, it is his reference to an alternative 'animated urbanity' that forms the starting part for this brief review essay on critical urbanism(s). As this essay argues, Moten's reflections on the nature of "grammar" open up a problem space for how we might come to conceptualise and inhabit the city. This is a problem space that, in turn, forms the main basis of a recent edited collection by Ash Amin and Michele Lancione, *Grammars of the Urban Ground* (2022). At the heart of the collection is a recognition that the very grounds of urban theorising are shifting and that new ways of thinking and living the city are needed. As the editors themselves remind us, 'criticality in urban thinking requires working with plural analytics and concepts, placing them in continual dialogue with each other' (p. 2).

Taken together, the essays gathered together in *Grammars of the Urban Ground* reflect the ongoing transformation of global urban studies. In the words of one key interlocutor, 'new topics, new subjects of theorisation and new centres of analytical innovation [now] shape the field.' According to the same author, 'the last decade has seen a significant

transformation in the terms of the analysis of urbanisation and of the territories thought of as urban across the world. Many more places and processes are being brought into analytical conversation.’ These shifts have prompted many critical urbanists to call for a ‘renewal, if not a fundamental transformation, in urban theory’ (Robinson, 2022: 1).

In the case of *Grammars of the Urban Ground*, this is a transformation that remains tethered to the urban ‘ground’ – staying close to the ‘instantiation of urban processes’ and the messy entanglement of bodies, places and infrastructures that are immanent to contemporary forms of urbanisation – while building on a diverse range of perspectives from historical materialism and political economy to feminist, queer, black and decolonial thought (pp. 5, 2). For the organisers of the collection, this is a ground that exceeds ‘theoretical homogeneity and methodological clarity’ (p. 3). It shifts attention to the margins and peripheries of urban world-making as sources of concept work in their own right (on ‘concept work’, see Stoler, 2016; see also Roy, 2009).

The contributors – whose shared work has, in many ways, helped to re-draw the boundaries of urban theory – were asked to reflect on ‘what a nondogmatic, open and critical urban epistemology might look like’. At stake here, as their chapters show, is a way of attending to the city from *within*; a way of thinking and writing the urban that eschews ‘categorical thinking’ while holding onto the various everyday orderings that shape urban life (pp. 12, 13; original emphasis). Organised around a loose shifting grammar of edges, fragments, sutures and a lexicon rooted in the logics of banishment, deformation, density, and affirmation, *Grammars of the Urban Ground* is a collection that ultimately seek to catalyse

new theoretical arrangements that re-centre and re-imagine the ‘grounds of the city’ as a source of radical social transformation.

And yet, as the remainder of this brief commentary argues, the implications for how we come to inhabit the urban political – as grammar and lexicon – are never fully adduced. It is not my intention, in this respect, to adjudicate the shared conceptual landscape that emerges out of the collection. Rather, I wish to offer a sympathetic addendum that presses on the question of “grammar(s)” and its relationship to urban theorising and how we come to imagine the city as a site of political action and liberatory practice. To do so, is to open up some urgent, albeit tentative, even errant, lines of flight that clarify, it seems to me, the relationship between theory and practice, concept work and political engagement (Glissant, 1997). As a scholar whose own work emerges out of – and in response to – the actions of radical social movements (see Vasudevan, 2015, 2023), these are, moreover, lines that crystallise the kind of generative grammar (and animated makeshift urbanity) dramatised by Moten.

In practical terms, I offer up three brief discussion points (or propositions) that trace the contours of a more expansive understanding of the grammars needed to rethink the urban political:

1. Grammar and Archive:

As many of the contributors to *Grammars of the Urban Ground* make clear, the practices of city-making that they take up are rooted in sedimented, sometimes secretive, histories that connect the urban margins to other ways of assembling and organising – and, in some cases,

containing and dismantling – collective city life (McKittrick, 2013). The editors remind us that ‘no grammar is ever really “new”’ (p. 13) and that we need to heed the pull of earlier conceptual frames and acknowledge the role they have played in shaping critical urban studies. And yet, to think with urban grammars is to also ‘expand the range of words’ available to us as we come to confront a vast archive of city living that disrupts, rewrites, unsettles and reorganises existing categorisations of urban spaces (Bhan, 2019, p. 640; see Burgum and Vasudevan, 2023). The disparate vocabularies and practices at the heart of *Grammars of the Urban Ground* thus encompass a range of historical geographies that point to a way of ‘thinking and theorizing’ – a modest archival optic – that is itself grounded in distinctive and increasingly interconnected urban worlds (p. 1).

2. Grammar and Writing

The editors of *Grammars of the Urban Ground* are at pains to highlight the particular relationship between writing the city and a conceptual attentiveness to the urban ground that is ‘key to the grammars we are signalling in this book’. But what is it about staying close to ‘the particularities of situated city life that finds conspicuous form as a grammar (p. 9)? What is, in other words, the relationship between conceptual pluralism and the kind of toolkit developed by the contributors to the collection? One provisional answer to these questions demands, in my view, a more rigorous engagement of the now over-worked relationship between language and discourse. To paraphrase Jacques Derrida, it is important to consider the degree to which a critical urban geography is governed and shaped by the ‘constraints of language’ as a lexicology, a formal language, a grammar (1976: 527). More than anyone else, it is perhaps the Swedish geographer Gunnar Olsson who has, in this wider context, acknowledged the challenges of developing an alternative ‘language of social

science' - a spatial grammar – that exceeds categorical certainties in order to approximate a world that is 'open-ended and indeterminate; (Scott, 1976: 633; see Olsson, 1975; 1979). These are, ultimately, challenges that could have been addressed more fulsomely in *Grammars of the Urban Ground* especially as recent experiments in 'writing the city into the urban' (p. 9) have found common cause with decolonial, indigenous and queer styles of thought that serve to further reinforce the possibilities of 'composing theory in a minor key' (Hartman, 2021: 134).

3. Grammar and Pedagogy

To experiment with new (and old) urban grammars is to also foreground the question of method and pedagogy. I am interested here in the kind of urban 'detailing' (p. 10) advocated by the editors in *Grammars of the Urban Ground* and how it opens up the possibility for new ways of accounting for and registering the practices of endurance, survival and world-making adopted by the urban majority. This is, moreover, a process that brings the relationship between theory and practice into sharp relief. As an urbanist whose research has focused on the experimental world-making practices of squatters, making sense of the spaces assembled and produced by the precariously housed has always been a shared collaborative exercise; an exercise which, in the words of Kelly Gillespie and Leigh-Ann Naidoo, serves as 'a way to venture toward a creative vulnerability with and to others, to be open to learning and invention, to deliberately cultivate the willingness to be exposed, leaning into uncertainty with others who share a willingness to move toward something more beautiful' (2021: 295). Gillespie and Naidoo, writing in a rather different context, place particular emphasis on the 'complex interaction between reading the word and reading the world' and how a certain kind of *pedagogical openness* might serve as a platform for radical

critique and social transformation (2021: 296; emphasis added). This is a platform – and methodological ethos – that finds common cause with the disparate urban practices explored in *Grammars of the Urban Ground*. To follow this pedagogical orientation is, as I conclude, to redirect our critical energies towards more modest ways of attending to the processes that shape contemporary cities while acknowledging that the question of urban grammar is ultimately a question about how we might inhabit the urban otherwise.

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