



Anthropology for Radical Optimism

Allegra
March, 2021



At Allegra, we strive to find alternative modes of expression, new ways of working, collaborating, knowing and inquiring. Ultimately, we seek different ways of being anthropologists: collectively looking outwards to engage with the world at large and collectively looking inwards to change anthropology. In the wake of that fully dispensable year known as 2020, we determined to move Allegra



forward by seeking to establish a broader alliance for a better anthropology. Through dialogue, we want to facilitate finely textured and well-reasoned approaches to comprehending peoples' struggles, in whatever form they exist. Thus committed, we introduce and explain our new motto: anthropology for radical optimism.

It is easy to mock optimism — after all, look around you, what reason is there to be optimistic? Still, Allegra maintains that anthropology remains a worthwhile project: seeking to understand what it is to be human, especially in times of reckoning with the fragility of our global existence, by cherishing and embracing difference, both conceptually and personally.

It is easy to mock optimism.

We are not prepared to forfeit that ideal now: The never-ending pursuit of better understanding the lives of others — or, rather, the lives of each other — is a prerequisite for doing justice in a world rife with injustice. Our optimism stems not from naiveté, but rather from a firm awareness that justice follows from open-minded inquiry. Anthropology can not only offer positive change in this regard, but also itself be changed by that constant engagement. So, we found ourselves in agreement: to move forward, we must believe that there is something to move forward to.

“Allegra: Anthropology, Law, Art, World” — whoever paused to think about the header that graced our website for so many years? (Don't look now. It's gone.) These are all fine words, but as many people have remarked, conjunctions (or lists) are not the pinnacle of intellectual sophistication in approaching a subject matter. We do not disavow the terms now, either. But rather than offering a list of terms that are cornerstones of our work, we now want to be upfront about what we are about, what fuels our engagement, and what we aim to generate.

Anthropology: While we always have been open to inter-, cross- and transdisciplinary approaches, anthropology is what we are trained in, what some



of us are by now even getting paid to do, and where we feel at home. We are perpetually frustrated with the state of academia, and we sometimes share the sentiment to [burn everything down](#), but we will not be doing that: We have experienced that training in anthropology and anthropological practice can engender tremendous positive changes in people, and that's something.

Law: Law was and still is central to our preoccupations and our work. Several members of our collective are card-carrying anthropologists of law. Law organizes much of our contemporary life and should thus be of key interest to anthropologists. Moreover, ethnography is particularly apt at capturing how people generate ideas of legality and illegality, justice and injustice, etc. and how these ideas play out in all their complexity and ambiguity in social life. And while an anthropological critique of the rule of law, and of human rights more fundamentally, remains necessary, to chart and demonstrate the emancipatory potential of law, of legal processes and of legal institutions is central to Allegra's programme of radical optimism.

Art: We publish and curate art and regard it as a form of anthropological research, more than an object of inquiry. We endorse and support expression, increasingly in multimodal formats, be it in surreal forms or critiques of beauty. While academic institutions seem to hold artistic knowledge in low esteem, we do not. An established artist helps guide our editorial collective. Beyond intensifying our podcast-witchery, we are also planning to eventually establish "Allegra TV" and get more serious about our virtual museum.

World: An ethical anthropology must start from that premise: world. This term was also chosen with a wink at good old holism: nothing as such shall be excluded from our purview — no region, topic, or social context. We winked at "holism" because while we disavow its connotations of the seamless integration of parts and systems, we accept its insistence on inter-relatedness. The world is holistic because people, animals, plants, things, and materials are constantly transforming and we want to offer a broad and quickly reactive platform for spirited and timely debates, within and beyond academia.



This is still what Allegra does. But in the eight years that have passed since we coined that motto, Allegra has evolved from an ‘online experiment’ to a full-fledged anthropological alliance and a multimodal publication platform. Our [contributors](#) have diversified, our readership has increased, and with this wider outreach comes the need to more clearly convey what Allegra does and stands for.

To move forward, we must believe that there is something to move forward to.

With this in mind, we debated our new motto throughout 2020. We compared and contrasted many suggestions in heated Slack chats and Zoom meetings. Those ranged from the earnest and profound-ish to the whimsical and purely tongue-in-cheek. “Anthropology for radical optimism” emerged quite late in the debate as a reaction to the barrage of catastrophic news we all confronted in endless lockdown.

We know that to move forward, we have to be aware of the structures and inequalities that hold us back, all the stuff that frames our interactions and curtails our dreams. It’s not a naive optimism we’re embracing, but one in which we expect things will have to get messy. We dare to be optimistic to take a stance against individuated competition, and for academia as a collective endeavour, opening up spaces for creativity, intellectual curiosity, and the imagining of alternative futures. Whether we will truly be “radical” in this endeavour will have to be seen; but Allegra has always cultivated a streak of irreverence and subversion, and by not hedging our bets here, by not pursuing — say — “tentative” or “preliminary optimism”, we want to challenge ourselves to consider all the ways in which we as a collective and as a discipline can be optimistic.

We expect things will have to get messy.

The foundation for this optimism, in the end, lies in our Allies — all those who read Allegra, who review for Allegra, who write for Allegra, who share our stuff



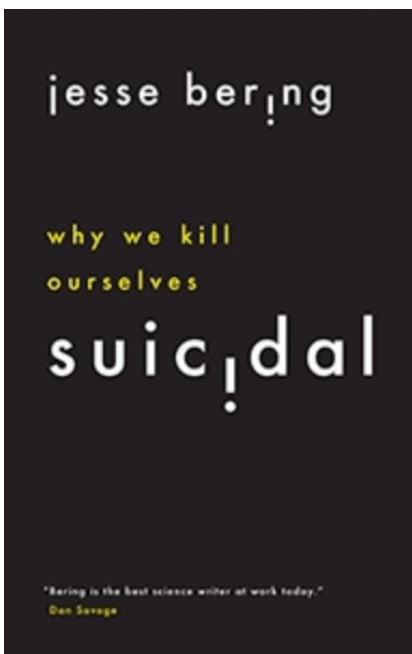
and who see something worthwhile in this project.

If you are optimistic about us, we will be optimistic about everything else.

Editorials are debated and elaborated by the editorial collective and appear semi-regularly as comments on current affairs and ongoing developments, and should be considered statements of intent. They also invite response and conversation.

Suicidal

Luisa T. Schneider
March, 2021



In “Suicidal - why we kill ourselves” Jesse Bering asks what drives some of us to die by a self-directed fatal act. According to him, “there are no satisfying answers” (233-234) not least because “suicide is one of the few social acts for which (...) the individual does not have to face society” (223). However, Bering argues that we end our lives largely because we are too invested in what others think of us. We humans, or so goes Bering’s argument, are sensitive to how others perceive us and react to us. Accordingly, many of us spend much time imagining what others think of us - and envisioning how others see us negatively is precisely what can tip us over the edge.



Bering's eclectic publication is divided into eight chapters. In Chapter 1, we learn about the author's personal journey and his struggles with suicidal feelings which ultimately motivated him to write this book. An animal lover, Bering explores whether animals commit suicide in Chapter 2. We read, *inter alia*, of vast numbers of sheep jumping to their death, of leaping lemmings, of tests on scorpions to determine whether they end their lives before they are killed (they don't), or of Bering's cat who got stuck in the crown of a tree. The author uses examples, anecdotes, stories, myths, and vignettes. This creates an engaging, but not always streamlined reading experience. Ultimately, Bering concludes that while we cannot know, it is likely that animals do not commit suicide because they do not possess a "theory of mind" - that unique ability humans have to develop theoretical constructs about the "inside of someone else's head" to (try to) "make sense of their behavior" (28). Suicide may then be "a consequence of our species' emotional Achilles' heel" (37).

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In Chapter 3, Bering examines whether (and to which extent) suicide could be considered pathological - a product of a diseased mind or a failed life - as opposed to the sign of an adaptive mind. The author guides us through some of the core debates on suicide such as evolutionary models, the bargaining hypothesis, altruistic suicide and, above all, the key role social anxiety, emotions and worries play in suicide. The book's strength resides in offering another lens through which to examine those theories which suggest that suicide results from a "derangement of the eusocial instinct" which makes people assume that their deaths are more valuable than their lives (see e.g., Joiner 2016: 237; 71). Bering shows how intense and unbearable the pain which can result from worrying about what others think of us can become. He also suggests that we are all potentially suicidal and that assuming that some of us are "entirely safe from ever dying at our own hands is a grave mistake" (92).



In Chapter 4, Bering introduces the reader to Roy Baumeister's stage-theory model of suicide. Suicidal thinking, we learn, is precipitated by events that fall short of high standards and expectations (Stage 1). People then attribute these unfortunate events to the self and begin blaming themselves (Stage 2). In a third stage people turn inward and unto themselves. They become absorbed by things they dislike about themselves. Suicide notes, we learn, are an indicator of this heightened, negative self-awareness. In these, first-person singular pronouns such as "I" and "me" are frequently used, whereas inclusive pronouns like "us" and "we" only appear rarely. If others are addressed at all, then it is usually as "being cut off, distant, separate, not understanding, or opposed (103)". During stage four, ongoing negative affect—so called psychache—becomes so unbearable that the loss of consciousness through death is what makes the idea of committing suicide appealing (108). The physical pain that may accompany suicide is no longer a deterrent for it is considered to be more tolerable than psychological hurt. Stage five constitutes cognitive deconstruction (see Vallacher & Wegner 1987) where the world becomes increasingly black and white and where the perspective on time is affected. For suicidal people "time crawls." Thinking of the past and of what the future may hold causes such pain that suicidal people try to focus on the here and now in an unemotional way. This then leads to disinhibition, the sixth and final stage where "those who are intent on taking their lives (...) have entered a mode of dichotomous thinking characterized by all- or- nothing reasoning"(113).



In chapter 5—which is Bering’s strongest chapter—he analyses the diaries of seventeen-year-old Victoria (“Vic”) McLeod leading up to her suicide. Here, we can see Roy Baumeister’s escape stages unfolding. This chapter shows most clearly how personal this book is to Bering. Not only does he reject distance to the people he writes about or the scholars he engages with (he calls most of them by their first names), but, through her diaries, he builds a relationship with Vic and imagines that had she not left this world their paths would have crossed.

This bonding with like-minded strangers is also an undercurrent of Chapter 6 in which Bering considers the influence of the internet on suicide. On the one hand, social and other media enables open conversations and can help with suicide prevention, (the “Papageno effect”, see Niederkrotenthaler et al. 2010; 169-170). On the other hand, argues Bering: “with access to intimate strangers willing to die with us as suicide partners, a worldwide voyeuristic audience perversely ready to watch us do it, and detailed information about how to complete the act



‘successfully’ at our fingertips, the internet has clearly troubled the already troubled waters of suicide prevention.” (165)

Chapter 7 takes us back to (other) animals and Bering notes that it may be helpful to consider that we are all animals because it confronts us with our own mortality, something which paradoxically can make us value life more. This chapter turns to the influence of religion on suicide (which is overall protective), asks what happens after death, and how people cope with the passing of others. In this chapter, Bering’s opinionated, sometimes judgemental writing style appears most clearly. He argues for instance that people believe in the survival of consciousness after death by default . This is because we “feel, emotionally, what we’d expect our future selves would feel under those imagined conditions” (185). However, Bering uncompromisingly touts the idea that there is an afterlife as a rejection of modern brain science.

Rather than offering a new theory of suicide, this book offers a new angle: the personal.

Rather than offering a new theory of suicide, this book offers a new angle: the personal. The author not only wrote himself into the book, in many ways, he is the book. Bering is convinced that the scientific understanding of the urge to commit suicide can help save people’s lives, “at least in the short term”. He says: “I want people to be able to recognize when they’re under suicide’s hypnotic spell and to wait it out long enough for that spell to wear off” (17). This product of “intellectualising a personal problem” (16) he provides the reader with is the result of both his conviction and a defence mechanism for himself and others. In his final chapter (chapter 8) Bering urges us to remain “acutely aware that we are social animals...whose mental machinery has evolved to be so finely attuned to the stuff of other people’s thoughts that sometimes our very existence hangs in the balance of what we think others think of us” (235). Additionally, we should focus on building a “community of like-minded allies who value and appreciate us” (235). Knowledge and community are then the two deterrents Bering



proposes against suicide.

The content of the book is driven by Bering's own scholarly interests (mostly from the broad field of social cognition) and by his personal priorities; by all that which helped him "see more clearly"(7). The book interweaves disciplinary, literary, historical, media, personal and sensationalist sources. In some parts, the resulting amalgam brilliantly succeeds at providing both an accessible and an earnest **account**. In others we wonder how certain passages advance the argument—like when the author contemplates murdering a field mouse which made a home in his pantry—or they feel uncomfortable—like when he writes in a nonchalant way about other people's suicides (see also McGinnis, 2019). This style and tone made me wonder which consequences this book may have for people with suicidal feelings. Bering clearly cares about his readers and offers trigger warnings. At the same time, his tone can shift quickly from conversational and empathetic to mocking or cold. It is important to note that one of the main reasons why Bering wrote the book, his belief that "knowledge of others' suicides—is an important line of defence against suicide contagion" (148)—also makes it a tough read for it is spiked with examples (sometimes detailed and graphic) of other people's suicides.

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In a nutshell Bering wanted to create an academic self-help book for himself, like-minded individuals, loved ones and interested parties. A mosaic, on the pages of which all those who wonder why it is that some people consider committing suicide or have ended their lives in such a way may find possible answers about motives, about inner life-worlds and about "how we, as a society, think about suicide". (16-17) The result is a book which is unparalleled in content, but which must be approached with caution especially for readers who are themselves struggling with suicidal feelings.



Bering, J. (2018). [Suicidal: Why we kill ourselves.](#) University of Chicago Press.

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All in a day - The story of an intersection

Chiara Moslow
March, 2021



It is early, the sun has only just begun to rise. A bird swoops from her nest to rest on an electric wire. She overlooks an intersection, a residential street that merges into the city's large business district. It is lined with what were once single-family homes - most now contain at least 4 apartments - made of brick, with cement stoops jutting out in front. A bodega sits at the corner, its windows plastered with advertisements for phone cards and cigarettes. Across the street, an unnamed dollar store, selling every item imaginable. A maple tree waving in front of the bird periodically blocks her view of the junction.

A man emerges from the corner and walks up to the bodega. It is his family business, started by his father when he moved to the city 20 years ago. He unlocks the iron grill, then the locked door, multiple layers of protection from the



outside world. Just last week his friend's deli had their glass door shattered, probably by some stupid kids. They have no respect for the neighborhood anymore.

A bus pulls up, and a man in a uniform with SECURITY stenciled across his back steps off. He waves to the bodega owner - "morning!". He works down the street in a new apartment building. He is not from very far away, having grown up in a similar neighborhood. Now he protects the residents of the building from the outside world. The buildings' residents greet him cordially, although not quite familiarly, despite passing by his station daily. But the pay, if not amazing, is at least steady.

A young boy walks with his grandmother on the way to school. He moves to run across the street and she stops him with a sharp remark. These streets are dangerous, with busses and taxis zipping by, especially in the morning as everyone emerges from their homes to begin their lengthy commute to work. A little boy has to be careful. An unmarked taxi rushes by as they stand by the side of the road, pressing his horn. Once the way is clear, she leads him across and they are on their way to grade 2.

A middle-aged man is asleep in the doorway of a shuttered shop. A cop comes by and wakes him up with a hard jab of his truncheon - "move along, you can't sleep here!". They never used to care, but recently a new craft brewery has opened down the street. Since the South Bronx has been rebranded "SoBro" - or "The Piano District," depending on whom you ask - places like this have been popping up. The owners of the brewery have never made a complaint, and even give the man water whenever he asks for some. But the cops seem sure he is suddenly a bother to the neighborhood, and make sure that he moves along before the street



gets busy.

A man in a business suit approaches the crosswalk. A newcomer to New York and unfamiliar with the city, he has taken a wrong turn and gotten off the subway at the wrong stop. How did he end up all the way up in the Bronx? He pushes his shirt sleeve down to make sure it is fully covering his watch. He is nervous, checking over his shoulder and around himself. He knows this neighborhood is rife with crime, his new colleagues and neighbors have warned him to stay away. He should have called his brother for directions before trying to get around himself, how stupid!

Set in the South Bronx, this short story depicts how different individual lives interact with space and the wide array of ways that violence can be expressed and imposed on individuals in an urban setting. It offers very little background on each person; instead, the focus is on how they interact with the neighborhood in the moment.

His brother puts on his jacket on his way out the door of his home in Long Island, saying goodbye to his wife and daughter (she sits in front of their TV, watching “West Side Story”; it is her favorite musical - how cool that it was filmed right here in the city, in the Upper West Side!). He gets into his car to begin his long commute. He pulls out of his driveway, makes a couple turns and then merges onto the Cross Bronx Expressway. It is one hell of a road, always congested, but it makes his ride to work possible. Without it, he wouldn’t be able to live in his beautiful home outside the city, with a yard and everything. He’s heard that there used to be some nice houses along the highway, but it’s now mostly no-man’s land, and the few houses that remain are all broken down. Those kinds of places



only encourage crime, so hopefully they will go soon.

Back to our intersection. A woman pushes a cart slowly down the side of the street. She avoids the sidewalk, not wanting to risk the cracks toppling her wares, individually packed bags of sliced mango, which she sells for \$3 each. She buys the mangos early at the wholesale market, and then slices them up to sell during the day. She is always aware, keeping an eye out for police. Without papers, she is unable to get a permit for her little business, and the police like to crack down on street vendors every so often. The neighborhood is heavily policed, so she is always a bit on edge, knowing her situation is precarious.

A man, mid-height and skinny. More of a boy, depending on whom you ask. He is hanging around one of the stoops, apparently not doing anything much. A gun is clearly visible, stuffed into his waistband. He is a member of the local gang, comfortable in his territory. Another fellow walks up to him, checking his surroundings. They greet with a friendly hand slap, make a quick exchange and he is on his way. Smooth, well-practiced. He walks down to the bodega for a pack of cigarettes.

There is a ruckus. It appears to be coming from the bodega. A different boy runs out of the store, closely followed by the gang member who had just entered. He quickly catches up and jumps him, knocking him down to the sidewalk. This new boy has a gun too. It seems he tried to rob the bodega owner, but was chased down before he could do so. The bodega owner is a long-standing neighborhood resident, and he keeps eyes on the street, keeping it safe and letting the right people know when he spots the police. No outsider will mess with him without suffering consequences.



An old woman leans her head out over her fire escape to see what's going on. The radio plays in the room behind her, announcing the news. There was another fatal shooting, just two streets down. A young man, in the early hours of the night. Homicide rates have been going down, but she still worries for her grandchildren. People are killed on purpose, and passers-by by accident, far too frequently. She listens for names and checks up on her grandchildren every time she hears a report of a shooting on the radio.

A pretty woman emerges from the house next door, dressed in a tight blazer and high heels. She is heading to yet another job interview. She tries to keep her hopes up, but it is getting tiring. She used to work downtown, but public transportation in the city is so unreliable. Having been late to work too many times, she was let go. She misses the lost income, sure, but does not miss the fear that came with having to catch the 5am bus for her opening shift. She is no idiot, and she knows the dangers that a young woman like herself runs waiting for the bus outside of daylight hours.

Perched on the wire, the bird lets out a squawk. Time to move on. The smog from the factories and the truck traffic is making her wheezy anyway. No wonder all these kids have asthma. Where to next? She opts to head North, where she can fly over the many green areas in the Bronx, rather than the hazardous glass walls of Manhattan.

Explanatory appendix

My short fiction is based primarily on Marie-Louise Glebbeek and Kees Koonings'



article, “Between Morro and Asfalto: Violence, insecurity and socio-spatial segregation in Latin American cities”, *Habitat International*, 54(1): 3-9 (2016). This article discusses how violence is more complex and “a strategy to control urban space”, and is “endemic” to “urban life and the urban condition” in Latin America. They discuss urban violence as perpetrated by gang members and criminal organizations, as well as by the state and law enforcement, and consider how violence and fear is spatially differentiated, taking different forms and degrees in different neighborhoods. Their article offers us a bird’s eye view of urban violence, and I decided to write a short story that depicted how different individual lives interact with space and the wide array of ways that violence can be expressed and imposed on individuals in an urban setting. Instead of Latin America, I chose to set it in the South Bronx, a New York neighborhood which - in popular conception - was historically associated with inner-city blight, crime, and urban violence, but which has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades.

Different versions of the city exist at the same time, sometimes overlapping, sometimes “fragmented” - in many ways mirroring Glebbeek and Koonings’ conception of the “fractured cities” of Latin America.

My story offers very little background on each person; instead, the focus is on how they interact with the neighborhood in the moment. Neither do I pass judgment on whether each individual’s perception of violence and of the city is valid or correct. Rather, the story aims to show how cities are multifaceted entities that are experienced differently by people depending on their race, gender, economic means, profession, and age, among other factors. In this sense, cities are less an objective reality than a “practice of the everyday”, constituted by the lives that pulse within them. The story starts with the bird as a putative “neutral” observer, detached from the microcosm of life in the city would view it, but the final paragraph highlights how nature itself is also impacted by the urban, in a way that could also be considered a form of violence.



In terms of form, I was inspired by a short form style that highlights many different stories in quick succession, similar to that of Italo Calvino's famous book *Invisible Cities*. I was particularly drawn to the way that Calvino describes apparently vastly different places as being in the end all the same city, which reinvents itself constantly over time. Different versions of the city exist at the same time, sometimes overlapping, sometimes "fragmented" - in many ways mirroring Glebbeek and Koonings' conception of the "fractured cities" of Latin America.

Featured [image](#) by [Takisha Rappold](#) (Courtesy of [pixy.org](#))

Lettre à Madame la Maire

Nathalia Turincev
March, 2021



Le 4 janvier 2021

[English Version](#)

Madame la Maire,

Si je vous écris aujourd'hui, c'est pour vous faire part de ma tristesse, et de mon indignation.

La semaine dernière, Negzzia est morte. Negzzia était une jeune Iranienne, venue se réfugier à Paris après avoir été condamnée à cent quarante-huit coups de



fouets par son gouvernement. Comme des milliers de personnes en France, Negzzia était ce qu'on appelle couramment un sans-domicile fixe. Elle a été retrouvée morte, empalée sur une balise en forme d'obélisque, sous le pont de la porte de la Chapelle. Peut-être était-ce un accident, ou peut-être était-ce son choix d'en finir avec la vie - bien que s'il le fut, il fut motivé par des événements hors de son contrôle. Personne ne saura jamais ce qui est arrivé.

Les balises qui ont eu raison de Negzzia sont un exemple de ce qui a été récemment nommé « dispositifs anti-SDF ». Ces dispositifs, dont la vocation est rarement formulée de manière explicite, ont, depuis quelques années, fleuri dans les espaces publics parisiens et autres villes de France. Ce que les autorités publiques et partisans de ces dispositifs qualifient d'architecture « défensive », dont le but serait de rendre nos villes plus sûres, propres et fluides, est en réalité de l'architecture « hostile ».

A première vue, la plupart de ces dispositifs semblent inoffensifs. Mais en regardant plus près, on réalise rapidement que ces dispositifs sont violents ; au sens actif, comme, en l'occurrence, dans le cas de Negzzia, mais également au sens passif. Derrière cette architecture hostile se cache une violence silencieuse et invisible, une violence structurelle, systémique et systématique, dirigée vers ceux qu'elle vise ; le plus souvent les sans-abris.

Prenez les bancs que l'on trouve communément dans les espaces publics. Vous avez dû remarquer que leur design a changé, que certains sont devenus plus courts et étroits, parfois fortement inclinés, ou que d'autres ont été séparés par des barres de métal se faisant passer pour des accoudoirs. A certains endroits, le banc a radicalement changé de forme, prenant des aspects bizarres comme ces barres de métal qu'on voit souvent aux arrêts de bus et de métro et sur lesquelles il n'est pas possible de vraiment s'asseoir, ou, du moins, par pour longtemps, ou encore ces gros rochers qu'on trouve fréquemment dans les parcs. Bien que l'intention de ces changements n'ai jamais été nommée, il est facile de l'imaginer. Le banc traditionnel a été remplacé par le banc hostile dans un seul but : empêcher les sans-abris de s'y allonger et, par conséquent, d'occuper trop



longtemps un espace public.

Derrière cette architecture hostile se cache une violence silencieuse et invisible, une violence structurelle, systémique et systématique, dirigée vers ceux qu'elle vise ; le plus souvent les sans-abris.

Prenez encore ces balises et autres poteaux pointus, comme ceux qui ont eu raison de Negzzia, qui se sont multipliés sous les ponts, là où les sans-abris se réfugient lors de mauvais temps, ou encore aux rebords des fenêtres, sur les perrons de portes et aux entrées des bâtiments. Il est facile de deviner qu'ils ont été placés à ces endroits stratégiques pour dissuader quiconque de s'y installer et de s'asseoir voire pire, de s'allonger. Vous avez également dû constater que récemment à Paris, des grillages ont été disposés autour des bouches d'aération des lignes de métro, qui souvent servent d'unique point de chaleur aux sans-abris en hiver, pour en empêcher l'accès.

Je pourrais mentionner des dizaines d'autres exemples, comme les poubelles couvertes scellées par un cadenas pour dissuader quiconque d'y plonger la main, ou les grillages barrant l'accès aux parking et passages souterrains après une certaine heure.

Bien que ces mécanismes passent habituellement inaperçus aux yeux du passant pressé, ils le sont moins pour celui qui les remarque, et franchement flagrants pour ceux qu'ils visent. Pour ceux-là, le message est clair : ils ne sont pas tolérés dans l'espaces public et ne devraient pas s'y trouver.

Les dispositifs anti-SDF ne sauraient être interprétés comme un événement isolé et sporadique car, en réalité, ils ne sont qu'une manifestation du phénomène plus général qu'est la manière dont la société gère le problème d'itinérance et, par extension, de la manière dont elle le perçoit. Le mobilier anti-SDF doit être interprété en concomitance avec la législation qui touche à l'itinérance, comme les arrêtés anti-mendicité ou le projet de loi « engagement et proximité » qui, si adopté, permettrait aux mairies d'infliger des amendes aux sans-abris pour



occupation du domaine public. Les dispositifs anti-SDF s'inscrivent dans le même contexte que les violences policières envers ces migrants qui, expulsés du camp de Saint Denis, étaient venus s'installer place de la République novembre dernier. L'absence d'installations publiques découle du même phénomène ; nous nous indignons à la vue d'un sans-abri qui urine dans un espace public sans nous demander à quelle distance se trouvent les toilettes publiques les plus proches, et nous les blâmons pour leur manque d'hygiène sans remettre en cause le manque d'installations publiques pour se laver.

Toutes ces mesures- dispositifs et législation anti-SDF, absence de structures adéquates- révèlent une réelle aversion envers les sans-abris, un désir de les cacher, de ne plus les voir, de les chasser plus loin, hors de la vue du reste de la société. Elles témoignent d'un certain malaise, embarras, voire dégoût envers ces personnes tombées du train à grande vitesse dans lequel nous sommes contraints de prendre place si nous ne voulons pas être exclus, comme elles, de cette société.

Loin de remédier au problème d'itinérance et d'aborder les milles raisons qui, par un malheureux concours de circonstances, poussent un individu à se retrouver à la rue, les dispositifs anti-SDF servent seulement à cacher la pauvreté. Loin d'apporter des solutions concrètes qui contribueraient à réduire le nombre de sans-abris, ces dispositifs repoussent à plus tard les grandes questions, les discussions sur les grands maux de notre société qui sont à l'origine de la pauvreté, de l'exclusion sociale, et du manque de compassion envers les plus démunis.

Bien que ces mécanismes passent habituellement inaperçus aux yeux du passant pressé, ils le sont moins pour celui qui les remarque, et franchement flagrants pour ceux qu'ils visent. Pour ceux-là, le message est clair : ils ne sont pas tolérés dans l'espaces public et ne devraient pas s'y trouver.

Ces dispositifs sont non seulement cruels, absurdes et désagréables à l'œil, ils sont également couteux. Je soupçonne la France de ne pas réellement vouloir



remédier au problème d'itinérance car si c'était le cas, elle investirait les moyens employés dans la conception et la mise en œuvre de ces dispositifs dans des programmes de réinsertion des sans-abris dans la vie active, ou dans des programmes de logement pour permettre à tous, même ceux avec des revenus modestes, de dormir sous un toit.

Madame la Maire, comment la France peut-elle se revendiquer la « patrie des Droits de l'Homme » tout en faisant acte de violence envers les plus vulnérables de ses propres citoyens et ceux qui sont venus s'y réfugier ? Comment peut-elle se revendiquer la patrie des Droits de l'Homme lorsque, par ces dispositifs, elle leur enlève leur droit le plus fondamental : leur dignité ?

Que ces dispositifs aient été pensés, dessinés, conçus, approuvés, financés et finalement mis en place par des êtres humains afin d'exclure et harceler est révoltant. Qu'est-ce que cette volonté intentionnelle de torturer, littéralement, en privant de repos ceux qui sont si déjà fatigués, et de les repousser sans-cesse dans des lieux plus insalubres et violents, révèle-t-elle de notre espèce ? Nous sommes-nous interrogés sur les conséquences physiques et peut-être plus important encore, psychologiques de ces dispositifs sur ceux qu'ils visent ?

Le mobilier anti-SDF n'est qu'une face de l'architecture hostile. Les innombrables caméras de surveillance qui nous traquent partout où que nous aillions, les barrières ornées de dents qui barrent l'entrée aux bâtiments et parcs, les émetteurs d'ultrasons à haute fréquence perceptibles seulement par les oreilles des jeunes pour les décourager de rester trop longtemps à un endroit, la privatisation croissante de l'espace public, tous font partie d'un ensemble de mesures qui visent à discipliner les citoyens et faire régner l'ordre. Ces mesures me rappellent étrangement le roman de George Orwell *1984* où tout est surveillance, béton et menace. Nous nous éloignons des cités idéales imaginées par Vincent Callebaut et Jacques Ferrier où la nature et les humains vivraient en symbiose. Au contraire, nos villes deviennent toujours plus aseptisées, agressives et froides.



Madame la Maire, comment la France peut-elle se revendiquer la « patrie des Droits de l'Homme » tout en faisant acte de violence envers les plus vulnérables de ses propres citoyens et ceux qui sont venus s'y réfugier ?

D'une certaine manière, cette architecture hostile est anti-démocratique. Elle détermine qui a le droit d'occuper l'espace public et qui en est exclu. Elle nous a été imposée et nous dessert, tous. L'absence de bancs convenables nuit à la femme enceinte, aux personnes âgées et aux infirmes. Les balises et poteaux pointus sont dangereux pour les enfants, les malvoyants et pour nous tous, comme ils l'ont été pour Negzzia. Cette architecture qui exclut nous encourage à nous méfier les uns des autres et nous dissuade de profiter des espaces publics, à tisser des liens, à faire des rencontres. A vouloir rendre les espaces publics plus sûrs, ces dispositifs nous rendent davantage solitaires et individualistes.

J'encourage les militants et artistes engagés contre cette violence à continuer de dénoncer, recenser et cartographier les dispositifs d'architecture hostile. J'invite nos sociologues, philosophes, journalistes et juristes à étudier et questionner ces dispositifs, ainsi que le contexte dans lequel ils émergent. J'invite également nos architectes-urbanistes, paysagistes et chargés de planification à repenser ces dispositifs et nos espaces publics afin de raviver et favoriser l'intégration et la mixité sociale dont nous avons tant besoin. Par faute de le faire, nous pourrions bel et bien finir par vivre dans des villes similaires au Londres d'Orwell.

Finalement, je vous invite, Madame la Maire, à prendre les mesures nécessaires afin de faire enlever les dispositifs anti-SDF et autre mobilier d'architecture hostile afin que l'histoire tragique de Negzzia ne se reproduise plus, et, plus simplement, pour rendre nos villes plus humaines.

Veillez agréer, madame la Maire, l'expression de mes sincères salutations.

Une citoyenne française.



Annexe explicative

Cette lettre ouverte est une réécriture de l'article de Robert Rosenberger, "[On hostile design: Theoretical and empirical prospects](#)", *Urban Studies*, 57(4): 883-893 (2020). Celui-ci est une courte introduction au phénomène émergent qu'est l'architecture hostile. L'intention de cet article est davantage une invitation à développer des théories afin d'identifier, comprendre, catégoriser et conceptualiser ce phénomène, ce qu'il implique, et dans quel contexte il émerge, qu'une critique de ce phénomène. Rosenberger porte ouvertement un jugement normatif sur l'architecture hostile et met des mots sur cette violence « passive » que j'avais déjà remarquée à Paris. Dans cette lettre ouverte, j'ai voulu pousser plus loin la discussion sur la violence qui se cache derrière l'architecture hostile, en particulier vis-à-vis des sans-abris qui sont les plus visés par cette architecture.

J'ai choisi de réécrire cet article en lettre ouverte en m'inspirant de la célèbre lettre ouverte d'Emile Zola, [« J'accuse »](#), ainsi que le discours sur la peine de mort de [Robert Badinter](#). La lettre ouverte permet un discours engagé, adressé à une personne en particulier (en l'occurrence, la Maire de Paris) et à une large audience en même temps. J'y ai incorporé des arguments moraux pour dénoncer le caractère immoral de certains dispositifs et certaines mesures.

En ce qui concerne l'ouverture de la lettre, je me suis inspirée de deux histoires réelles. Celle de Negzzia, une jeune femme venue se réfugier en France après avoir été condamnée à 148 coups de fouets par le gouvernement iranien pour avoir posé dénudée pour un photographe (Negzzia est mannequin). Elle a vécu quelques années dans les rues de Paris et a même écrit un livre dans lequel elle raconte son histoire et les difficultés auxquelles elle a fait face lorsqu'elle était SDF. Qui sait ce qu'il serait arrivé à Negzzia si elle n'avait pas été aidée pour se sortir de cette situation. Depuis, Negzzia a reçu le statut de réfugié et travaille désormais en France.

Je me suis également inspirée de l'histoire de Pawel Koseda, un jeune homme de



nationalité polonaise qui a été retrouvé mort, empalé sur une clôture entourant un parc de Londres en 2015. Pawel était sans-abri et professeur d'université lorsqu'il vivait en Pologne ce qui est, je pense, important de préciser afin de déconstruire les stéréotypes sur les sans-abris. Les clôtures à embouts pointus sont courantes dans de nombreuses villes et peuvent être considérées comme un exemple d'architecture hostile. Dans le cas de Pawel, la violence était physique mais la violence psychologique de ces dispositifs est également à prendre en considération.

J'ai également voulu donner des exemples concrets de dispositifs anti-SDF, législations et violences policières visant les SDF à Paris et en France. A Paris, cette violence est omniprésente. Par exemple en 2017, des rochers, balises et autres dispositifs anti-SDF ont été installés sous le pont de la porte de la Chapelle pour empêcher les SDF et les migrants d'y dormir. C'était un lieu très populaire où ils venaient se reposer, surtout lors d'intempéries. Les tentes des SDF sont souvent vandalisées et l'on recense d'innombrables violences- policières ou non-contre les SDF.

Finalement, j'ai également voulu mentionner le fait que dans certaines villes modernes, la menace d'un « Big Brother » qui nous surveillerait se fait ressentir. La surveillance y est permanente par les caméras de surveillance, les micros et l'autocensure générée par la peur d'être dénoncé (par exemple par un chauffeur de taxi à qui on aurait fait une remarque sur les autorités). Cette surveillance fait partie intégrante de l'architecture hostile et rend les villes non pas plus sûres et agréables à mon avis mais plus menaçantes et étouffantes.

[Featured image](#) by [Julian Tysoe](#) (Flickr, [CC BY 2.0](#)).



Lettre à France

Mathilde Pasta
March, 2021



[English Version](#)

Paris, le 22 Décembre 2020

Chère France,

Comme tu [i](#) le sais, j'ai assisté, sur tes recommandations, au Congrès International des Capitales du monde. Je dois admettre que, si c'est avec réticence et appréhension que je m'y suis rendue, je t'écris désormais avec



frénésie. J'ai en effet, tant à te raconter! Au-delà du rapport banal que je me dois de te faire, et que je te ferai parvenir sous peu dans un second courrier, je devais absolument me confier à toi au sujet d'une rencontre que j'ai faite, et qui fut des plus bouleversantes.

J'ai en effet eu l'opportunité de faire la connaissance du jeune Managua. Son nom doit vaguement te dire quelque chose. Il est le protégé de ton ami Nicaragua, bien qu'ils entretiennent une relation plutôt compliquée d'après ce que j'ai entendu. Toujours est-il que le nom du jeune homme était placé au bas de la liste des villes qui demandaient audience avec moi. Bien sûr Bruxelles était première de file, sûrement pour discuter de cette pandémie qui paralyse notre vieux continent, ou pour colporter de nouveaux commérages sur Londres et leur relation plus que bancaire. J'ai d'ailleurs aperçu la belle Anglaise, la larme à l'œil, cherchant auprès de moi consolation et soutien vis-à-vis de sa récente désolidarisation d'Europe justement. Seul Washington est venu causer urbanisme avec moi. Quelques réformes semblent de bonne augure pour lui depuis qu'un nouveau président est à la direction de son Etat. Bref, une jolie cohue vide de sens à mes yeux.

Sa question m'a donné une claque. Nous savons toutes les deux que je suis loin de correspondre à cette image de perfection qu'il me prêtait.

Restait donc sur cette liste, le mystérieux Managua. Je connaissais son histoire mais ne m'était que très rarement entretenu avec lui. Sa demande de rendez-vous m'a donc beaucoup intrigué. Je l'ai invité à me parler en privé. La raison de sa visite était de nature complètement différente des autres, beaucoup plus personnelle. Sa première question a directement attisé ma curiosité, et m'a fait faire un bond de plus de cent ans en arrière, me rappelant par la même occasion, mon rôle de « Ville Lumière ».

« Qu'a-t-il bien pu te demander ? », je t'entends marmonner ma chère France. Eh bien, Managua a tout simplement voulu savoir comment je faisais, moi la « Grande Paris » - comme il m'a si joliment dit - après tout ce que j'ai pu vivre, toutes mes métamorphoses, à toujours rayonner et avoir l'air si soignée. Sa



question m'a donné une claque. Nous savons toutes les deux que je suis loin de correspondre à cette image de perfection qu'il me prêtait. C'est donc ce que je lui ai tout simplement expliqué. Je lui ai dit que des blessures bien plus graves demeuraient toujours en moi.

Je suis peut-être belle, mais je ne suis pas en harmonie avec moi-même, je suis fracturée à l'intérieur et ce depuis de nombreuses années, malgré moult interventions par de soi-disant « grandes têtes » du continent. Je me souviens surtout de deux médecins: Napoléon III, et son protégé le Baron Haussmann. Mon héritage médiéval me rendait trop puissante, dangereuse, j'étais devenue inquiétante, incontrôlable. Ils m'ont donc réduit à l'Etat de chef d'œuvre amorphe, divisant mes propres murs, ma propre population, se servant de ma beauté pour s'engraisser au sens propre comme au figuré. Haussmann avait tout misé sur une greffe de nouvelles artères empêchant selon lui la coagulation de groupes pauvres et permettant un meilleur transit. Il a voulu connecter espaces publics et privés les rendant complètement interdépendants. Résultat aujourd'hui je suis certes une icône pour mon pays, pour toi ma France. Et j'en suis plus que fière. Mais au fond je suis démolie, cet incendie qui m'a réduite en cendres en 1871 a marqué la fin de moi.[\[ii\]](#) Et ces rapaces ont su en tirer profit. Comme des joueurs d'échecs ils se sont amusés à déplacer ceux qui pour eux n'étaient pas plus que des pions, s'amusant à faire tomber mes tours, ayant tout pouvoir sur mes couloirs et rangées. Zola était l'un des seuls à avoir réellement entendu ma cause, il disait qu' « on a coupé Paris en quatre. Une entaille là, une entaille plus loin, des entailles partout. Paris haché à coups de sabre, les veines ouvertes ».[\[iii\]](#) Ferry aussi a tenté d'user de sa plume pour me défendre face à la folie d'Haussmann.[\[iv\]](#) Au moins un, soucieux du Monde d'Après[\[v\]](#)! Puis il y a eu Picard, un homme qui avait compris les véritables effets secondaires de ces opérations urbaines: on m'estropiait de toute une classe sociale, tout un groupe de gens, ouvriers pour la plupart, que j'habitais en mon ventre[\[vi\]](#) et dont je fus forcée de m'éloigner.[\[vii\]](#)

Au lieu de me diriger vers la guérison, ils m'ont fait miroiter un futur de luxure. A quoi bon vivre cette vie si je ne peux en faire profiter qu'une infime partie de mes



hôtes? Cette question il n'était pas de mon ressort de la poser.[\[viii\]](#) Je ne pouvais que subir et observer l'élargissement d'un fossé intérieur.

Il m'a dit que ce masque de paillettes dont je me protège aussi, on tente de le lui faire porter depuis le début des années 2000, à coup de nouvelles routes bien plus sûres mais toujours plus cinglante

Le petit Managua écoutait tout cela sans broncher. Bien sûr il me comprenait. Il procéda à me raconter son histoire à lui. Lui aussi a subi bon nombre d'opérations tu sais, France. Nous avons suivi le même destin : un accident qui a tout fait basculer. Moi, j'ai été contrainte de renaître de mes cendres; lui, a dû se reconstruire entièrement à la suite d'un tremblement de terre dans les années 70[\[ix\]](#). Il a connu bon nombre de chirurgiens, des Sandinistes idéalistes d'abord, des droitistes postrévolutionnaires obsédés par la volonté d'effacer toute cicatrice de son passé ensuite. Résultat, aujourd'hui on le surnomme « la Ville Chaotique » vers chez lui. Il m'a dit que ce masque[\[x\]](#) de paillettes dont je me protège aussi, on tente de le lui faire porter depuis le début des années 2000, à coup de nouvelles routes bien plus sûres mais toujours plus cinglantes et notamment une: « la pista » qui l'a fracturé de bout en bout, d'Est en Ouest. A mesure qu'il s'embellissait et perdait son âme d'indompté, une partie de sa personnalité disparaissait, ségréguée à jamais. Il s'est fait apprivoiser, résigné face à l'inévitabilité de la chose.[\[xi\]](#) Il est difficile de s'opposer au progrès.

Je revoyais à travers le conte de sa vie, ma propre biographie. Le visage d'une Paris timide, naïve, rebelle, mal dans sa peau, idolâtrée d'un côté, vers l'Ouest, amputée et haïe de l'autre, en périphérie, où avait été relégué le « petit peuple ». Je dois admettre que j'ai aimé servir de muse à Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine et tous ces peintres impressionnistes qui, suite à ma transformation physique, ne cessaient de me flatter, de prendre inspiration de moi. Je me complaisais à ignorer tout un pan de ma personnalité, me dédoublant définitivement pour ne me concentrer que sur ce « moi » renaissant dans les arts, les sciences, la technologie. Toi, ma France, tu m'as rappelé que j'étais encore debout cent ans



après la Révolution, et tu m'as récompensée de cette tour du Champ de mars en métal que toutes les capitales de ce monde aujourd'hui m'envient.[\[xii\]](#) Je ne peux pas dire que je regrette ces heures glorieuses chère France. Mais j'ai admis à Managua que je me sens coupable car au fond, je n'étais toujours pas guérie. Je m'agrandi mais me dévergonde par quartiers et toujours souffre de violence nocturne.[\[xiii\]](#) Je ne suis pas convaincue que le jeu marqué par ces agressions structurelles en valait réellement la chandelle. J'ai fait part de ce doute au jeune garçon. Oui, « Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie n'a bougé ».[\[xiv\]](#)

Managua et moi, nous réalisons qu'en fin de compte, nous avons subi le même sort, avons été victimes des mêmes violences, et à moins qu'une prise de conscience ne se fasse à un niveau bien plus haut que le nôtre, jamais les choses ne changeront. Ces voyous ont bien fait leur travail. Ils ont divisé nos peuples pour mieux les contrôler. Chacun est désormais trop occupé à cultiver son propre jardin pour pouvoir s'imposer contre interventions d'une telle ampleur.[\[xv\]](#)

Comme tu le sais, ton ami Nicaragua est moins fortuné que toi ma France. Et si tu as pu m'aider à me relever de ces agressions structurelles de par ton chauvinisme et ton esprit révolutionnaire, Managua n'aura pas autant de chance que moi. Le sol sur lequel le petit marche, symbolisé par son passé, est encore bien trop délicat et risque de se briser à tout moment. Son casier judiciaire n'est pas aussi respectable que le mien, mais lui aussi souffre. Il souffre de cette schizophrénie grandissante, il ressent paradoxalement en lui cette violence croissante qu'il ne peut maîtriser, effet direct de ses transmutations forcées. Managua a subi une transformation très réfléchie mais qui ne sert pratiquement qu'à ceux placés assez haut pour tirer les ficelles.[\[xvi\]](#)

Ce n'est pas la perfection structurelle que nous devons rechercher, mais l'unité.

Alors que notre audience prenait fin, sur le quai du départ, j'ai réalisé avoir dévoilé à Managua mes plus précieux secrets. Jamais je ne m'étais confiée ainsi à quelconque autre ville. Nous sommes des monstres que nulle ne pourra complètement guérir. Chaque élément en nous interagit de façon à former cette



petite sorte de symbiose imparfaite. Et malgré ce qu'on tente à nous faire croire, « ce n'est pas la perfection structurelle que nous devons rechercher, mais l'unité », lui ai-je dit. Managua m'a regardé d'un regard songeur et m'a quitté.

Ce petit m'a fait réaliser, ma chère France, l'importance de ces échanges. Je souhaite désormais faire honneur à mon titre de Ville Lumière et continuer à éclairer les capitales de ce monde en échangeant davantage avec elles. Nous avons tant à apprendre les unes des autres.

Alors je te remercie de m'avoir envoyé à ce Congrès. Tu recevras mon compte-rendu officiel sous peu. En attendant, portes-toi bien.

Mes plus profondes amitiés,

Paris

Explanatory appendix

The story is inspired by Dennis Rodgers' article ["Hausmannization in the Tropics: Abject urbanism and infrastructural violence in Nicaragua"](#), *Ethnography*, 13(4): 413-438 (2012), which draws parallels between the urban developments of Managua and Paris, both intrinsically and in terms of their socio-economic impacts. More specifically, it traces how infrastructural "improvements", embedded in systems of public-private partnerships in both cases led to the division of the urban populations, and increased discrepancies between social classes. The article's argument according to which changes in cities' plans are equivocal to acts of abject urbanism, or infrastructural violence is mirrored in the story by Paris' resentment and animosity towards those who imposed a treatment that led to the mutation of a disease she has long been diagnosed with. This personifying of the city enhances the message, as does the letter format of the short story. Paris' point of view is reported through her epistolary correspondence with France, who is also her supervisor and friend. She



reports on her attendance to a Congress where she provided a younger generation of cities with useful advice as to surmounting obstacles she once had to face herself. In this piece, Paris recounts her encounter with Managua, a young boy entering the prime of his life, who has to make difficult vital choices. Managua indeed suffers a similar disease Paris once had, he has gone through identical struggles and asks Paris for recommendations on ways to deal with his profoundly anchored wounds on a daily basis. Paris guides us through this conversation, explaining her own battles and detailing her attempts for internal reconstruction and physical transformation. She mentions to Managua the name of her surgeon, a certain Mister Haussmann, whose questionable and controversial methods paved the way of her said “recovery”. Paris concludes by exposing the truth to Managua. She discloses her constant visceral schizophrenia and reveals that she never completely healed, finding comfort in denial and other aspects of her vivid life: A luxury Managua cannot afford. She eventually instructs the adolescent not to follow in her footsteps any further, guiding him towards a quest to wholeness and intramural unity rather than perfection manifested in corporeal fragmentation.

Footnotes

[i] Paris s’adresse à sa vieille amie inséparable, la France, qu’elle tutoie donc bien que cette dernière reste sa supérieure.

[ii] Incendie qui ravagea l’Hôtel de ville notamment.

[iii] Emile Zola, *La Curée* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1984 [1871]).

[iv] Jules Ferry, *Les comptes fantastiques d’Haussmann*, (1868).

[v] Ibid, « Nous le pleurons de toutes les larmes de nos yeux, en voyant la



magnifique et intolérable hôtellerie, la couteuse cohue, la triomphante vulgarité, le matérialisme épouvantable que nous léguons à nos neveux »

[vi] Allusion aux Halles, cf. Emile Zola, *Le Ventre de Paris* (Paris: Charpentier, 1878 [1873]).

[vii] Juliette Glikman, « [Les comptes fantastiques d’Haussmann, de Jules Ferry: Commentaire et extraits](#) », *Napoleon*, (2019). « Dès 1861, Ernest Picard, député du département de la Seine, dénonce des opérations urbaines chassant les plus modestes. [...] le prolétariat urbain a dû se déplacer. Le métissage social caractéristique du Paris de Balzac s’estompe. »

[viii] Dennis Rodgers, “Haussmannization in the tropics: Abject urbanism and infrastructural violence in Nicaragua”, *Ethnography*, 13(4), 2012: 420. “The city had little choice other than accepting new developments as fait accompli”.

[ix] Rodgers, “Haussmannization in the Tropics”, 415.

[x] Cf. Victor Hugo, *Actes et paroles IV. Politique Paris* (1985), 30-32. « Quand il est mécontent Paris se masque. De quel masque ? D’un masque de bal ».

[xi] Rodgers, “Haussmannization in the Tropics”, 427. “fatalistic worldview”.

[xii] La Tour Eiffel, construite à l’occasion de l’exposition universelle de 1889, en l’honneur du centenaire de la Révolution Française.

[xiii] Ouverture du Moulin Rouge et du Chat Noir par exemple.

[xiv] Charles Baudelaire, « Le Cygne », *Les fleurs du mal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996 [1861]).

[xv] Rodgers, “Haussmannization in the Tropics”, 422. “those who were dispossessed internalized new ways of being that were more egocentric and fragmentary”.

[xvi] Ibid, 414. “the highly purposeful and elite-oriented nature of Managua’s



transformation”.

Featured image by [Alex Mustaros](#) (courtesy of [Unsplash](#))

Legal Consciousness Compared: the Case of Botswana

Pnina Werbner
March, 2021



#5

Webinar
Series
in honour of

**Sally
Engle
Merry**
(1944-2020)



Pnina Werbner (Keele University) will speak about “Legal Consciousness Compared: The Case of Botswana”. Sophie Andreetta (Université de Liège) will be the discussant.

PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS WEBINAR TAKES PLACE AT



9.30am CET.

PLEASE ALSO NOTE THE *NEW ZOOM-LINK* FOR THIS EVENT

When: 26 February 2021 / 9.30-11 am CET

Link: <https://zoom.us/j/96385183041>

ID: 963 8518 3041

Password: 672357

Abstract

In her early book, *Getting Justice and Getting Even: Legal Consciousness among Working-class Americans*, Sally Engle Merry highlights working-class Americans' involvement in small claims courts, claiming that this is a peculiarly American tendency: 'The consciousness of legal entitlement and the consequent turning to the law are profoundly democratic, radically egalitarian, and fundamentally American. This legal entitlement is an outgrowth of a faith in the law, a faith observed early by Tocqueville and other commentators on the American scene' (Merry 1990: 181). Since the book was written, legal consciousness has become a 'vibrant research field' as a recent article, 'Legal consciousness reconsidered' (Chua and Engels 2019) documents, identifying three major trends in this field. The article neglects, however, the original emphasis in Merry's research on the everyday national culture of 'legal entitlement'. My paper argues, against Merry's stress on American uniqueness that in Southern Africa, and particularly Botswana, faith in legal entitlement and of going to law clearly prevails both in



interpersonal relations at village level and in relations with the state, in trade union legal activism against the odds.

References

Merry, S.E. (1990) *Getting Justice and Getting Even: Legal Consciousness among Working-class Americans*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press

See you on Zoom!

Here is the full [schedule](#) of the webinar series.

You can also access the webinar videos on [Allegra's YouTube channel](#).

Cape Town through Time and Space: An Experimental Poem

Carolina Earle
March, 2021



Part 1: 1921

“Poison Tea, Colonial Imports”, by an Observer

[“Them nasty Malays can make it work](#)

[months after you take it”](#), quotes Lady Duff G.:

This, Cape’s white servants had said of the punks.

So, Mr ‘Malay doctor’ downs his tea



Then walks away: indignity. To his
spiced plates of Europe-Asia-Africa:
And, “exotic!” they’ll say, one day, of this...
Forget spice was brought by the trafficker.

*The Cape’s shining sea collects the city’s
tears.*

bredie, breyani, bobtie, sosaties.

broken, breaking, tied up, massacred slaves.

The Cape’s shining sea collects the city’s
tears. Mr ‘Malay doctor’ salts his soup, grave.

In his home built on the bones of black and
brown flesh. Calm, Lady G. walks in the sand.

Part 2: 1930s



“Expulsion to the City”, by a White Farmer

Sweet Earth — pure — how tender did you spring forth
grains for my *chakalaka* and *pap*, herb
for my aching knees, tobacco for my
hot pipe.

My Earth. My hearth. Thankful for my birth here
in the hills of my bountiful Cape. Here, I was God:
Yellow sugar and yellow grains turned gold
Once they'd run the rounds of the ocean deep.

But alas — as you sense it — I must mourn you.

Earth!, I now come
to announce to you my death. At the hands
of the machine. To the gold which runs from
mines and manufacture.

From where I was God, this churning Modernity comes to expel me
beyond my historic land. To the city,

Where nothing shall grow as verdant and blushed as your fruits and bountiful
leaves.



Modernity screams to our white race — pure as sea-froth
and white daisies —
that we must, need, shed ourselves of our
rurality.

*As we entomb ourselves:
to become men of the city.*

Fret not! We will leave our tender, civilised women to
guard you, sweet Earth. As we entomb ourselves:
to become men of the city. We go...
...’gainst Afrikaner female and black man
We had to fight, sweet sunshine Earth, to live
deservedly, akin to as the Gods we once were. Mixed close to
the coloureds who have taken your sweet, fragrant
tan, but nothing of the demeanour, I
am caught up in vying — as I search for new golds — for my
separation from this delinquent kind.



As I bury that part of me which longs for you, I report that there is hope yet, Earth.

Our protectors in Cape Town welcome our

rural, sun-blushed poverty.

Our protectors in Cape Town are set hard and fast against the decay

wrought by the criminal, drugged, slovenly native,

that your protector — sweet Sun — was right to burn for their sinning.

Part 3a: 1980s

“The Criminal Element 1”, by Michael-Welcome

According to the ANC, I am candy ripe for the plucking.

Yet, I’m the poison kind which will slit their throat as I go down.

We were stuck up high-rise style on the Cape Flats in the 60s. Because white man didn’t want to touch us.

Body a battleground. Body forced to the township. Body stabbed at 14. Body must be protected. So I kill.

Dark inky stars needled into my skin are my trophies.

Murdering puts me behind bars. From the Junior Young Ones I am upgraded to the 28s. Dark inky stars needled into my skin are my trophies. At 19 I stabbed a



prison warder to death: illuminating my skin for the first time: One-Star General. I force 2,500 inmates to sit and stand as I please, when I want to, if I want to, because I can.

I was warned that I will leave this place bloodied and cold unless I learn to survive. I make 500,000 Rand a month on prostitution, extortion, and protection.

I feel no pain.

Part 3b: 1990s

“The Criminal Element 2”, by Michael-Welcome

Serote said: [“AND](#)

[Words,](#)

[Make pain,](#)

[Like poverty can make pain.”](#)

Once upon a time, I was top achiever in Spes Bona high school, in Athlone, Cape Town, where I would one day leave so many dead: dead as the men whose spirits were doomed to reside in my ripped textbooks.

I felt death’s pain only when I imagined my daughter unborn.

It was my Colonel’s laughter which unleashed the imagining.

Ill, I conjured her into the woman he had murdered, the woman he had raped, the woman whose house he had emptied. He stood before me in Pollsmoor Prison.



Not far from the same Cape Town in whose streets we'd left bodies littered as we ran, pushing drugs, ruthless.

The same bloody spirit of survival we'd brought inside these walls, literate in knife and death, and drink. To survive was simply to harden yourself exponentially until death, unless some strange path led you otherwise.

A little brown girl running in the grass outside somewhere — un-barred — laughing like my Colonel, here, marked that path. Through her, I unlearnt my pride, as I began to imagine death as disease. This girl whose life should be spotless, who I'd call my own:

Could I — will I — be proud if she brings home a man like me, if she grows into a woman like the bloody man I am? If she dreams of stars like the ones etched into my chest, salivating after them, as I had in my youth, as alcohol burnt away any sense of conscience as I chased after them, lauded my fierceness, thanking my own daddy and granddaddy for their example,

which was keeping me alive when nobody else would.

To survive was simply to harden yourself exponentially until death.

I thought of my mother swinging her iron into my head when she was angry, again and again, bled dry of coin or help, she helped me feel criminal when I cried alone in a high-rise flat,



she alone, my daddy long gone. My parents were the dangerous tropes whose origin was not their dead hearts, but that push-out in the 60s, the visions by others of their abhorrence. Chased down by the State.

Today, too, I hear women having their maintenance grant taken by state: 'phased out'. They're told to come inform on us to police and government.

I imagine my iron-swinging momma doing that to my father. She wants him away, but she doesn't want him gone.

When the new Century comes, I want a little girl. Born of me.

But born of a new time.

Of innocence, divorced of history.

I used to like history.

Once upon a time, I was top achiever in Spes Bona high school, in Athlone, in Cape Town, where I have left so many dead, dead as the men whose spirits were doomed to reside in my ripped-up textbooks.

I make an appeal to the 28s to let me walk free from the gang. I'm naked and two men stand behind me with sharpened sticks ready to kill me if I should fail.



“...children in prison [are] highly traumatised, mentally unstable, and depressed by the environment.”



Part 4: Present

“Cockroaches (after Kafka)”, by Narrator

Police Man 1 woke up one morning from unsettling dreams: his daughter had found herself walking down a road in Lavender Hill.

Of course, she had been snatched from the pavement, by one black and one coloured man who were both quite ready to kill

her.



And whom, somewhere deep inside, he knew he was quite ready to kill, too.

Thankfully, he could hear that his daughter was downstairs, screaming delightfully. Far away from the hotbeds of those who chose callous, calculated violence each day. He was safe, behind hard gates. Locked windows. Patrolled peripheries. Far from all the cockroaches (as he'd told the Danish guy, Jensen) of the real-not-dreamed-of Lavender Hill.

Plastered all over his grotesque exoskeleton were the official logos of the gun he carried.

Shaken, he reached out to switch off the alarm which had roused him awake. Feeling strange, "[what's happened to me?](#)", he thought. He looked down, and found himself changed into a monstrous vermin.

Plastered all over his grotesque exoskeleton were the official logos of the gun he carried, and that of the [SAPS](#).

Somewhere in Lavender Hill, at a similar time to Police Man 1, the gang leader of the Junior Young Ones awoke flailing too-short too-thin legs. His tattoos were still faintly visible on his new, hard exoskeleton. As he looked down on his new ribcage, he saw the logos of the guns he'd stolen amidst the folds.



Narrator: Confined to their respective houses, they realise they are tools of the state, "[without brains or backbone](#)", or, a capacity for nuance.

Part 5: Present

"Poet", by Anonymous

["Here is a 3-bedroom double storey home nestled in a safe gated community in Wetton"](#), ZAR 1,099,000.

Does the "poet" write from behind bars of a different sort to Michael-Welcome's? If she does, should we pay heed to any word at all that she has written? Is her work at all worthy? If so, of what?

Explanatory Appendix

This experimental poem is a rethinking of Steffen Jensen's article "[The security and development nexus in Cape Town: War on gangs, counterinsurgency and citizenship](#)", *Security Dialogue*, 41(1): 77-97. This traces the historical development of gang violence in Cape Town through time, deftly examining how, after the end of apartheid in 1994, the "problem" of impoverished and crime-ridden townships shifted - in the view of the state - from deserving a



development-orientated solution to calling for an intensified securitization approach instead. This shift precipitated the emergence of a counterproductive binary whereby township citizens were either conceived as idealised victims of crime, or, “the embodiment of all evil” (Jensen, 2010: 83). In turn, this meant that the complexities of township life were reduced in such a way that entire geographical swathes and their inhabitants became criminalised. Due to this binary, and the concurrent myopic focus on security, the state has been exonerated from taking charge of its citizens’ welfare. Whilst the state pursues security measures, urban development projects in the city remain underfunded and the poor suffer enduring impoverishment.

Due to this binary, and the concurrent myopic focus on security, the state has been exonerated from taking charge of its citizens’ welfare.

Whilst Jensen’s study is powerful and thought-provoking, his article is nonetheless marked by a sparse inclusion of the voices of those citizens (“evil” or idealised) that he speaks of, and - necessarily, due to the short nature of the article form - it also does not deal with the long(er) history of violence and inequality within which the current gang dynamics that he deals with inscribe themselves. In response to this, my experimental poetic piece seeks to, firstly, meditate on individual voices, moreover in a way that explicitly contextualises them within a deep history. What I have sought to do is create a piece that counters the binaries which Jensen has highlighted as problematic and damaging for governance in Cape Town by voicing the messy, nuanced human. I do so in a manner that mirrors the chronological structure of Jensen’s article, offering different voices from different time periods, whilst highlighting the complex historical racial problematics that underpin the complex development of gang-related security and development practices in present day Cape Town.

In terms of style, I have purposefully chosen to write different parts of my experimental poem in different ways. Part 1 examines 1920s Cape Town through [the colonial form of the sonnet](#), to centre the damaging racism and complex



tensions of Cape Town's origins whilst also attempting to decolonise this particular poetic form. Part 2 considers the origins of apartheid through a [romantic pastoral elegy](#), examining the rural-urban dynamics of exclusion in Cape Town in a purposefully sycophantic tone seeking to highlight the absurdity of race politics that underpin the historic citizenship differentiation from the perspective of a white settler. Parts 3a and 3b draw on the real-life testimonies of [former South African gang members](#) to examine the cold-bloodedness of gang warfare in Cape Town, but also, the deeper roots which lead to gang violence, as well as the possibilities of redemption. Part 4 explores the absurdity of the entrenched binaries that Jensen highlights by paying homage to Franz Kafka's 1915 novel [The Metamorphosis](#), while drawing inspiration from [a news item](#) about the particular circulation of guns in South Africa. Part 5 brings the poem to a close by encouraging the reader to critically consider whether, I, as "poet" had any right to, or purchase on, the topics examined.

The latter was particularly important to me, because if any fictional approach is to (perhaps ambitiously) have a "positive" effect on the lives of those it approaches, we must avoid reducing or elevating authors or poets to being omniscient and irreproachable. So, whilst harmful binaries are in need of deconstruction - something my poem seeks to tackle - I must end by asking...

If any fictional approach is to [...] have a "positive" effect [...], we must avoid reducing or elevating authors or poets to being omniscient and irreproachable.

So, the "poet" writes from behind a MacBook in a "Development" Institute somewhere in Geneva. She had the luxury to visit South Africa once as a "tourist". She is "mixed-race". Herself, messy. Should we pay heed to any word at all that she has written? Is her work at all worthy? If so, of what? Personally, I am not convinced my work is of any earth-shattering kind, but if it has sparked some thought a little more colourful than the predominant one in black and white in someone, somewhere, then, perhaps, it is just alright that it has been published here after all...



Images:

Featured Image: Barbed razor wire around a school, near Cape Town - Photo (Cropped - CC BY 2.0) by [DJM Photos](#), [Flickr](#).

The sea as memory of slavery - Image by [Erik Mclean](#) on [Unsplash](#).

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A Tale of Two Value-Based Cities

Alma Weijia Chen

March, 2021



I am very fatigued. Since the first day of 2020, something strange has happened to me. Every day I wake up to a different place - well, technically speaking, in either of two cities. If I find myself somewhere in Geneva this morning, I will be in Hong Kong the next morning, so on and so forth.

I don't know why this is so and how it has come to be, but as my life unfolds ruthlessly, I have given up pondering over these matters. Luckily, I don't have many family ties or friends in either of the two cities, so no one really cares about



me and I don't have to explain myself to anyone. My everyday routine is the same in both places: begin with the unknown, wander around, shut-eye as the day comes to an end, and start life anew in another place the day after...

The other day, the first thing I heard on walking out of my flat into the streets of Geneva is the word "*canicule*". I think my French teacher taught me the meaning of that word, but I can't remember it. The real-time departure board at Geneva's Cornavin train station shows that it's 35 degrees centigrade, somewhat unusual in December. But as usual, trains come in and out, people of different shape, form, and colour get on and off, many having crossed the borders of France or Italy as if they were non-existent.

I need to get myself a cup of coffee, so I walk into an artisan coffee shop.

"Bonjour! Je voudrais..."

The words are stuck in my brain. I can't finish the sentence in French properly...

"Eh, a cup of latte, SVP."

I feel awkward, regretting not putting in enough efforts to learn French while studying at the Graduate Institute. To my relief, the barista offers me a friendly smile, says "Bonjour", and then switches to English: "Is this your first time in Geneva?"

"Eh, yes."

I can't tell him that I come to Geneva every other day...

"Welcome to the city! Unfortunately, today is rather strange, it's unusually hot. It's not normally like this here. Climate change has caused such strange weather, we really have to do something to save the planet, don't you think?"

"Oh? Climate change. Yes, it's terrible."



He gives me a quick glance as he is preparing the coffee and says, “there is a gathering in front of the Palais des Nations today. People will demonstrate to advocate for multilateral cooperation to deal with climate change. If you are interested, you should go and check it out.”

He gives me my coffee, and continues, “I recommend you take the route by the lakeside. The breeze off the lake may help keep you cool in the heat of the *canicule*.”

Surprisingly, the foam on top of my latte is more than perfectly made. He drew me the planet Earth, whose pattern is changing as the foam shrinks. Amazed, I thank him and head towards the lake.

On the way to the lakeside there are a lot of *de luxe* shops selling watch, expensive wine, or designer clothes. The festive December street decorations are dazzling and vivid, adding to the restlessness in the air. The high-quality leather jackets displayed in the windows would look more appealing if the weather were not that hot. But by the lakeside the gaggle of children do not care, they just jump into the lake and giggle non-stop.

Jean Piaget’s writing about childhood comes to me as I walk past a statue in his honour: children are not immature creatures that need to be made into adults, they are already individuals who are in the process of becoming themselves. But what will they learn as they go on to discover a world where there is a *canicule* in the Northern hemisphere’s December, I ask myself?

The Palais des Nations is not far away. There is already a big crowd under the Broken Chair when I reach it. There are also children, older than those I have just seen by the lakeside, holding posters and yelling slogans passionately.

“One, two, three, four...”

“...Our future is what we demand!”

A couple of minutes later, once more people have joined, the crowd calms down,



and someone begins to speak into a loudspeaker. It is yet another speech on climate change like many that I have heard before, but this young lady, against a background of two rows of national flags flying along a road leading to the Palais des Nations, seems to have a distinct moral voice and authority.

“We people of the world must be united! We can and will be the last generation to face climate change!”

The audience is made up of a variety of age, race, and gender, and they all seem to be convinced by the speaker’s rhetoric, cheering her enthusiastically.

Hesitant and sceptical, I mumble slightly cynically to myself, “but will this speech really help solve the climate change problem in any concrete sense?”

A young gentleman overhears my words and turns around immediately.

“Yes, of course.”

I must have looked surprised and confused, and my question to myself must have revealed my outsider identity. But while his tone is firm and unquestionable, he has the same smile as the barista that I met earlier, and explains:

“In Geneva, we really believe in the power of the word. You know what? People could be deeply changed by hearing the written word spoken and reflecting upon it. We believe in the value of humanity in order to face global challenges, and we believe that talking about this value is a means to its ends. This speech, like many others, is indispensable to get people to do something about climate change.”

He then proceeds to spend the whole afternoon talking to me about climate change and the role that the people of the world can play to mitigate and reverse it.

Suddenly, the sun is setting, and I take my leave of my new friend. The overwhelming heat begins to disperse a bit. As it does, I suddenly also feel more optimistic that it is not just today’s heat that is dispersing, but that perhaps



human beings will after all live up to the ideal of a promising future. It makes me suddenly realise that while I may think myself an outsider to Geneva, it's not because of my appearance or because I don't speak French - which, paradoxically, fit perfectly in this international city - but rather it's because of my values....

The next day I find myself in the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong, on the Canton Road, famous for its luxury shops. The road leads to the China Ferry Terminal, where inbound and outbound ferries connect with nearby cities in Mainland China and Macau. The digital departure board tells me that it's another 35 degrees winter's day. But strangely, I sense that the heat is way more unbearable than yesterday in Geneva. People are more restless, hurrying through the street while fanning themselves with whatever they have at hand, complaining about the weird weather and how it will negatively impact business. A crowd of impatient people is lining up outside the terminal. The immigration check takes on average thirty minutes as the passengers are crossing this particular border within China's territory. The long wait turns the vast crowd into a bomb on the verge of explosion, adding to the agitation in the air.

Even outside the luxury shops, the narrow space is packed with people queueing up to enter. I see only adults. The heavy make-up of female customers melts as they begin to sweat in the heat. Opposite the high-value brands shops are stores selling imitation products, with prices less than half those in the *de luxe* stores. This tableau, intuitively, projects a sense of vanity and hollowness, making the products on show seem somehow less shiny.

Eager to find an air-conditioned place to sit down for a while, I enter one of the cheap stores. I get an attack of the shivers on pushing the door - it's as cold as inside a refrigerator! Before my body can get used to the sudden change of temperature, I am met by an overly smiling face.

"Welcome to our shop! How can I help you, miss?"



The sales clerk speaks so passionately that it makes me feel honoured - or perhaps just flattered.

“Eh... I’m just looking around. Is that OK?”

I speak in Cantonese.

To my shock, the clerk’s face has changed before I can finish my sentence. Her toadying face suddenly becomes cold and full of disgust, a shift swifter than the temperature, provoking another shiver in me. I immediately realize that it’s because my Cantonese accent has exposed my Chinese mainlander origin, and mainlanders are deemed anything but affluent and civilized in Hong Kong. To the clerk, I simply don’t bring much value to her and her business as a mainlander.

She doesn’t bother talking to me anymore, going straight to greet another customer.

I persuade myself to ignore her impoliteness and sit down in a corner, shivering a little bit. I see another clerk nearby and ask,

“Do you think we really need to set the indoor temperature this low? Overuse of air conditioning can exacerbate climate change and make the weather even more unbearable.”

That’s what the young man told me under the Broken Chair in Geneva the previous day...

This time I speak in English, the clerk’s looks at me less rudely, but still responds rather indifferently: “Who cares about climate change, as long as we can keep our business running and make money? There’s no value talking about those high-sounding words such as protecting the Mother Earth.”

Confused, I leave and roam about the narrow streets of the city, walking in a forest of high-rises. In this city, everything is gauged by value - the land, the businesses, and the people. The feeling of being an outsider strikes me once



again. I don't belong here, because of my appearance, because of my language, and above all, because of my lack of value in the eyes of the city dwellers, who judge purely in monetary terms. Like and unlike Geneva, Hong Kong is also a value-based city.

Today is December 31, the last day of 2020. I wake up in Geneva, only to find nobody around. It takes me little while to realize that everyone is literally gone! The latest newspapers scattered in front of unattended newsstands suggests that a pandemic has hit the world hard, killing billions of people.

The city is still in the grips of a *canicule*, but the empty world sends a shiver down my spine.

Has the history of humanity come to an end? I ask myself this a thousand times before I begin allow myself to drown in sorrow and despair.

No way! How can humans become extinct!

I want to cry my heart out. I want to scream loudly. But, for the first time in my life, I find that I can't burst into tears, despite being filled with exploding desperation.

What's the point of screaming if it is not to be heard?

What's the point of a city if it is not to be lived?

All of a sudden, I realize that value is not a given, it is created, by people. The contrasting values of Geneva or Hong Kong do not matter, in both cases, a city is nothing when its people are gone. There are no value-based cities, only value-driven citizens.

I think that, for the rest of the day, the only meaningful thing to do is to tire myself out by walking and running ceaselessly, to exhaust myself so that I will



physiologically need to sleep. I just hope that I will wake up in a different world when I wake up.

Will I be able to fall asleep tonight?

Will there be a tomorrow?

Explanatory appendix

This short story is a rewriting of Hugo Slim's article ["Geneva's future: Reflections on the role of a values-based city", *International Affairs*, 83\(1\): 109-125 \(2007\).](#) Slim associated Geneva with eleven core values, and in my story, I wanted to try to express the particularity of Geneva's identity as value-based, internationalist city. I decided to do so by comparing and contrasting Geneva with Hong Kong, to highlight the unique nature of the former's values and how they are manifested in day-to-day lives in the city. Due to space constraints, I decided to focus on four of the eleven core Genevan values identified by Slim:

- *Freedom of movement*: people of all kinds move freely between Geneva and neighbouring countries, in contrast to the strict immigration checks at Hong Kong's border.
- *Childhood*: children have fun in the lake despite the extreme weather; children are entitled to political participation as shown in their involvement in the mass demonstration.
- *The power of the word*: as reflected in my conversation with the young man under the broken chair.
- *High-value products*: the otherworldly luxury shops by the lake of Geneva, in contrast to prevailing materialism and consumerism of Hong Kong's equivalent.

Finally, I used people's attitudes towards climate change to reflect the faith



in *internationalism* in Geneva.

At the same time, my short story also aims to draw attention to the definition of value. Value can be ideational. It can also be monetary. Personally, I think that the logic of the world is increasingly driven by the latter, while people only pay lip service to the former, which may or may not constitute a challenge to the city of Geneva. Essentially, what do people really mean when they say that a city is value-based? How are we to deal with the incompatible aspects between laudable ideals and the call to capitalist accumulation? In reflecting on this, I was also drawn to think about the relationship between the built environment and human beings. As David Harvey famously put in his article on [“The Right to the City”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27\(4\): 939-41 \(2003\)](#), in making cities humans remake themselves. People are not just the means to the city, but also the end. By depicting an extreme scenario where Geneva becomes an empty city, I stress that a value-based city - whatever its values - cannot exist in the absence of its people, who are the real vehicle of specific value systems.

[Featured Image](#) by [Klaudia Piaskowska, unsplash.com](#)

You are John

Cienna Reed
March, 2021



1.

There are two twins sat on the beach but one is farther up the shore, closer to West Point, or right inside it, depending on which twin you are focusing on at the time. Do not yet pick a side. For now, we will remain impartial. Both twins are sat with their legs crossed beneath them. They both have dark hair, yellowing teeth, and hardened hands. The one in front wants to make a living for himself, earnestly. His calloused hands flip the discoloured pages of a tattered book as he memorizes ways to repair broken radios. The other brother wants to rob you blind. The waves crash on the shore. The sunlight shines through the harmattan haze. Do not yet pick a side.



2.

There are two twins sat on the beach but one is farther up the shore. We'll call them John. And because the first John is in front let's consider him older and wiser. He is thus responsible for earning money and taking care of the family. Forward-thinking and ethically-minded, this John will always think of what's right and wrong when it comes to earning income. Unfortunately for him, it doesn't always come down to right and wrong when it's a matter of life and death. John is thinking of his brothers and sisters in their shabby hut in the slums on the shore behind him. He is thinking that only if he could find permanent employment, he would be able to not only feed them but send them to school, then they could enjoy a childhood unlike his own: educated, limitless, free.

3.

There are two twins sat on the beach but one is farther down the shore, closer to Mamba Point, or just before it, depending on which John you are. It could have been so beneficial - you read learn the skills and I will find the tools, what could be but never will be, the space between what is right and what is necessary - but neither John wants to be the other one. My name is John and I'm tired of you trying to pressure me. My name is John and I'm tired of you thinking you're better than me. Listen, my man, I'm telling you I don't want any trouble, I mean it, etcetera. Look, my man, you're either with us or against us. They look the same but they are not the same. They want the same and they hate each other for it.

4.

Your name is John and somewhere down the shore your brother is standing against a palm tree, leaning back and waiting for you with a smug look on his



face. O how he waits for you, Johnny-boy. O how, as usual, he waits with his arms crossed in front of him on the tree that is the in between, like the X in the sand to mark the hidden treasure, to keep this ritual from becoming ever lost. When he sees you, he moves toward you. When he reaches you, he clenches his fist and pummels it in your direction. It's almost as if it moves in slow motion. You close your eyes, expecting impact, but the fist never reaches you. It hangs in the air between you. Hanging there like a threat. Or a promise.

5.

You are in an ordinary shack room with floors made of discarded cloth. You are on your back in between your smaller siblings looking up at the piece of aluminium that serves as the roof. The room is completely dark, save the sliver of moonlight the spills in between the gap between the aluminium sheets. Inside you hear your sister, snoring very softly. Outside you hear the voice of a man, screaming very loudly. The sound radiates through the aluminium, but you can't make out all of the words. It almost sounds like John. Your heart begins to pound as you know this shelter can't keep him out. Is it John? Is he calling to you? Is he coming for you? You're not sure if it's his voice or the fear taking over your subconscious. As your heart beats louder, the screams begin to fade into the night.

6.

Two brothers are fighting on the shore of the beach. They have fallen into the sand, leaving blood in their wake as they wrestle for control. Pieces of a shattered electronic device litters the ground around them. You watch through the tinted window of your parents' Mercedes as your driver speeds by. You are fifteen years old and on your way to your American International school. Your father owns a telecom company. Your mother works for the Government. You have never had to worry about where your next meal would come from. You have never seen an



interaction so violent or deliberate in your life. As they fight in the sand, it is clear they have forgotten about God, and God has certainly forgotten about them. The car moves faster. You fiddle with a loose string on your uniform. After a moment, you turn your head and look out of the other window.

7.

You are standing at a busy intersection with three men named John. One begs a passer-by for spare change, one performs a quick exchange in the form of a handshake, and the other mumbles to himself and stares at you in a way that makes you feel uneasy. All of you have families to feed. All of you left wherever you call home with empty pockets this morning. All of you know what it is to go to sleep hungry, multiple nights in a row. But none of you have access to legitimate work. All of you have been discarded by society. So, none of you have any other choice. All of you got to this intersection somehow and eventually, one of you will get to leave. Who decides which one of you is the right one?

8.

Let's say this time, you were able to find enough parts to repair a broken radio. Let's say this time, you knew for sure that it would sell for at least 20USD and that this would feed your family for at least a week. Let's say this time, you felt a sense of hopefulness as you left your shack to go to the nearest technology store to sell it. For the first time since both of your parents died, you allowed yourself to smile. This time, everything seemed like it would work out. Until you were almost out of West Point and accosted by someone demanding your radio or your life. How would your younger siblings survive if you died protecting a radio? Who would provide for them? Your name is John and you're not sure how much more you can take.



9.

Two brothers: one of them wants to live ethically. Two brothers: one of them just wants to live - by any means necessary. The time has come to pick a side. Morality or vitality? Right or wrong? Life or death? There is no in-between. You do not get another choice. You only get two choices; you only get two brothers. There are only two Johns. Pick one. This is how you find survival. Who do you want to be? John or John? Who do you have to be, John? You just wanted to protect your family from the outside world, but you don't know where this world begins or ends. You wanted to find one safe place for them, a place where they could survive. You have not created this place yet. This place does not exist. You are here. You are in West Point. You are still right here.

10.

Your name is John and somewhere down the shore you see your brother. O how he walks toward you, Johnny-boy. O how this time, unlike the others, he walks straight toward you. Chin up, shoulders squared, unwavering. You clench your fist, but you don't dare raise it. Something is different. Something has changed.

There are two twins standing on the beach, both of them under a palm tree. Maybe this can be beneficial - you learn the map, I find the tools, and we both go do what we have to do. What could, will now be. The coalescence of our skills and wants as we transcend the space between what is right and what is necessary. My name is John and I'm tired of fighting to survive. My name is John and I no longer wish to struggle. They are not the same but they are the same.

11.



There are two twins standing at the bottom of the hill that leads to Mamba Point Hotel, Shoulder to shoulder, regardless of which twin you are focusing on at the time. Both twins have made their choice. Both twins have to subsist by some means, or starve. They both Have dark hair, yellowing teeth, and hardened hands. The one on the left has given up his morality to preserve his vitality. He has a gun in his hands, it feels hot. The other one on the left has accepted this as the only way. He has a gun in his hands, it feels oily. Let's say that what is right is the space between the two brothers and what is wrong is the space between the Two brothers. I will be all of them: John and John and John and John are sat on the beach, four fists pummeling in the air, four guns sweating in clammy hands. Two Johns want to live ethically, two Johns just want to survive, and all of these John's are trying to tell you something.

Explanatory appendix

This poem was inspired by and follows the style of Richard Siken's poem ["You Are Jeff"](#). It seeks to illuminate elements of Loïc Wacquant's article ["Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium"](#), *Urban Studies*, 36(10): 1639-1647 (1999), but transposing them to Monrovia, Liberia. The poem attempts to grapple with how accelerated economic growth in the richest neighbourhood of Mamba Point has led to the rise of urban inequality and marginality in one of the poorest slums of West Point, even though the two are less than 3km away from each other. The poem begins by establishing the idea of two brothers, both called John, on the beach in between West Point and Mamba point. Although they are initially identical, the reader is asked to choose between them as the different ways in which they seek to survive their poverty is revealed, ostensibly on the basis of what is morally right and wrong. The poem however slowly shows how the two brothers seek the same ends but through different means.

The poem puts forth the perspectives of both "Johns" and at one point introduces two additional Johns to reveal how urban exclusion can lead those who are



marginalized to resort to different means by which to survive. It also does so to highlight the probability that those who have been excluded from the working class will most likely never find regular work again. Part 4 and 5 serve to depict how due to these new forms of marginality, there is little sense of community within slums. What should be a community of those in similar circumstances has evolved into an “empty space of competition and conflict, a danger-filled battleground for the daily contest of survival”, to quote Wacquant’s article. This is depicted in the first three parts as well, as the two Johns are jealous of each other, leading to violent confrontations.

Where Wacquant’s article does not go into depth of what daily life is like for those who are marginalized, my poem attempts to put the reader in the shoes of them. In each stanza of the poem, the reader is forced to be a bystander or a participant and in effect, one of the marginalized. This was done in an attempt to raise the question of which John are you, if there is even really a difference between the two Johns? Like Siken’s poem, this poem attempts to evoke questions that surround the choice of picking one of them. If the John you choose is you, what does that mean about you, and what choices would you make in a situation in which you don’t really have much of a choice? Finally, part 6 attempts to depict how those who are marginalized are often ignored not only by the government but those citizens who benefit from the marginalization of others, whether they are cognizant of it or not.

If the John you choose is you, what does that mean about you, and what choices would you make in a situation in which you don’t really have much of a choice?

[Featured image](#) by [Brittany Danisch](#) (Flickr, [CC BY 2.0](#)).



Nina was here

Clare Maxwell

March, 2021



“Miss Nina, time to wake up! First bus leaves in half an hour!”

Nina opened her eyes halfway, and nodded assent.

“OK honey, I’ll check on you in a few minutes,” Laura replied. Or maybe her name was Jean, or Miriam. All of the social workers at Thibault Memorial City Shelter, also known as “Teebo”, or just “the shelter”, knew Nina’s name by now, but she



couldn't seem to keep them straight. This one was one of the nicer ones though. She would let you sleep a few minutes past wake-up. Some of the others would scream in your ear or pull your blankets off if you were still in bed after 5:30am. As soon as the social worker moved away, Nina buried her head between her pillow and the flimsy, plastic-coated mattress. If she could eke out a few more minutes of sleep, might as well try.

By 6:15am, Nina had grudgingly gotten out of bed, dressed, stood in line for ten minutes to pee, wash her face and brush her teeth, and had stripped her mattress of the used blankets, sheets and pillow. Some of the other women were mopping the floors or wiping down beds, chores that they were not paid for but would earn them a cup of coffee from Laura/Jean/Miriam. Nina badly wanted a cup of coffee but scrubbing toilets in exchange for a weak brew with powdered milk still felt too undignified, especially before the sun was even fully up. She slipped outside to wait for the bus back to the Teebo building downtown and smoke her first cigarette of the day.

The original Teebo building was in the middle of the city, just a few minutes from the football stadium and the city hall and the outdoor shopping mall, an open plaza ringed with designer handbag boutiques and imported wine stores. There was a time when Nina had gotten quite good at nabbing a bottle or two from those stores, but now the mall was too full of police and cameras for her to try.

The bus pulled up, a worn-out, old school bus that read "Municipal Directorate of Human Services" on the side. These days, more and more people were stealing wine and begging for change downtown, and the original Teebo was getting dangerously overcrowded. So, the "Municipal Directorate of Human Services" had leased a space in the industrial district, and every night from 6:00-8:30pm they bussed 200 homeless women out of the city and into a big building that they called an "overflow shelter".

This short story offers a street-level view of a city in the midst of both economic



growth and a population boom, but a city that has also neglected its long-term residents in order to make ways for luxury tourists and a new generation of urban professionals.

A “human warehouse” is what Nina called it. As the bus pulled out, they drove past other storage facilities, fish-packing plants, chop-shops, parking lots full of eighteen-wheel trucks. This part of town was where you put things that you didn’t need, the perfect place to put panhandlers, shoplifters and anyone else who was priced out of a hometown.

Nina felt an urge to smoke another cigarette. Instead, she pulled a marker out of her bag, doodling on the back of the seat in front of her.

Nina was here

She retraced the letters absentmindedly, until they were about to pull into the original Teebo parking lot. Then she scribbled out her name, just in case the driver saw it and reported to the shelter that someone named Nina was destroying municipal property.

■■■■ was here

She shoved her marker back into her bag and checked under the seat before she got off the bus. She couldn’t afford to leave anything behind, not even a name doodled on a headrest.

Breakfast, consisting of more weak coffee, toast and fruit salad, was over by 8:00am. That meant at least five or six hours until she could expect to start her usual enterprise, of drawing quick caricature portraits of tourists or of couples celebrating their three-month anniversary. She had nothing to do until then, and she knew already that she would work better if she could sleep for a few more hours. She weighed her options as she smoked another cigarette. One could try and sleep on the lawn outside of the Teebo building, but everyone knew you risked getting your backpack snatched there. There were also a handful of parks within walking distance. When Nina was younger, and she felt the need to spend



a night or two away from her Dad and her stepmom, she had crashed on a park bench. Only these days the benches had been replaced with individual stainless-steel chairs that were bolted down, and just like in the downtown mall, police were patrolling them much more regularly. The public library was usually your best bet for an undisturbed, daytime snooze, but the nearest branch was temporarily closed for renovations.

Eventually, she wandered by the stadium. There were a series of alcoves built into the exterior wall, where one could have a modicum of privacy if you were lucky, and today she was. The third alcove Nina inspected was empty, and she dropped to the pavement, wedged her bag into a corner, and curled up against it to snatch a few more hours of rest.

It felt like only a few minutes had gone by when she suddenly felt a shock run from the sole of her foot up her whole body. She gritted her eyes closed, but again something knocked, hard against the bottom of her shoe, rattling her whole leg. When she opened her eyes, it took a moment to adjust to the sun, and she made out the shape of a security guard, who was in the process of drawing his heavy boot back to kick her in the feet again. She scrambled halfway upright, drawing her legs into her chest before he could kick her again.

“Come on, street rat, get up and get out,” the guard growled.

“It’s only for a few hours!”

“Don’t care. There’s a game today, and that means we gotta get this place cleaned up. No trash lying around.” He tapped his boots against the pavement and rested his thumbs on his utility belt. Nina noticed a nightstick hanging from the side of the belt, inches from his hands. When the guard saw her staring at his weapon, a slow grin spread over his face. She decided that it might be a good idea to take off.

The protagonist, Nina, feels alienated in a city that has been redesigned to render homeless and working-class people invisible, or, when possible, to remove them entirely from the city centre.



It was still early, but Nina was feeling a lot less sleepy, and she felt the need to get away from the stadium and the security guard. She headed west, away from downtown and across the river to the Edgewater District. When she was little, when the city was really more of a town, and the Teebo Human Warehouse had not yet been built, Edgewater was the industrial part of town, a place full of mechanics shops and canning factories and cobbled-together housing where you could be sure that two or three families were squeezed into every apartment. But at some point, the canning factory had been converted into loft apartments, and the apartment buildings had been bulldozed to make office buildings. Some of the mechanics shops were still mechanics shops, but others had been turned into bars, or in one case converted into the offices and printing press of the biweekly Edgeside Arts Digest, a newsletter that featured interviews with burlesque dancers and slam poets and held annual cartoon contests. Nina had entered the cartoon contest twice, but after her work was rejected a second time, she hadn't bothered again.

There was a small crowd clustered around the Edgeside Arts Digest building today. When Nina got close, she could see the crowd was watching an artist as she threw, sprayed and slapped paint along the side of the building. She had a transfixing way of working, jumping around on ladders and bits of scaffolding, adding a bit of the picture here, and another there, and slowly letting the image emerge of a trio of tuxedo-clad musicians playing guitar and violins and singing, surrounded by dancing couples and families with smiling children. Nina watched, at first transfixed, and then slightly jealous as she thought of how this woman was openly decorating a two-story building in broad daylight while she'd to scratch her name off the bits of graffiti she'd left on a bus seat this morning...

Then Nina shook herself mentally, recognizing that the growing crowd constituted a good opportunity for her to make some money. She found a place to sit, and pulled out her sketchbook, markers and carefully preserved "Caricatures: \$5, Five Minutes" sign and waited for customers to roll up.



By the time night had fallen, and the artist had finished painting for the day, Nina had sold enough drawings to buy a double bacon cheeseburger, a six pack of beer, and fresh art supplies, and still have some cash left over. She lingered late near the half-finished mural, sipping her beer from a paper bag, even though she knew it meant missing the bus back to the shelter for the night. The day had left her with an itchy feeling in the pit of her stomach, the sort of sensation that portended a sleepless night. So instead of the promise of a bed, she gnawed on her burger and attacked the mural with her eyes.

The picture was beautiful, she thought, though hardly a great and profound work of art. And that rankled her. No matter how much she enjoyed the colors, no matter how she could envision the next steps of the dancers or hear the beat of the music, it seemed too simple, too digestible, too inoffensive to deserve free rein over the side of a whole building. Too meaningless to live up to the stylized, spray-painted, street art style. The more she looked at it, the more annoyed she became. This was art for people who lived in converted lofts, drank imported wine and shopped at designer handbag boutiques, not art for people who slept in a giant room with hundreds of other people and had to beg or steal to get necessities.

How dare this woman with so much talent, with such a canvas, waste it all? If only she could have such a space to work... She would fill it with pictures of children hanging out the windows of rickety apartment buildings, parks full of people napping on benches and mechanics sipping drinks together after the end of a workday, grease-stained and foul-mouthed and cheerful.

Nina stood up quickly and pushed her remaining cans of beer into her backpack. Thinking like this wouldn't get her anywhere. Yet, as she tore her eyes away from the mural, Nina noticed that some of the paints that the artist had used were still sitting out, forgotten for the time being. She stalked over and quickly picked up a can of spray paint. It was still half full. She stuffed it into her backpack as well. Then she grabbed the remaining cans. There were more left over, but she didn't have space to conceal them all.



Cradling her pilfered paint cans and glancing over her shoulder, Nina turned back the way she had come that morning. Being homeless in a city like this had given her plenty of experience in making herself scarce when necessary, but the discomfoting feeling of running away was a lot to bear twice in one day. At least she had chosen it the second time around. Or had she? Stealing the paints had felt less like a choice, and more of a compulsion. Anyway, it was less stealing, and more rebelling against the pleasant but impersonal, this impostor mural artist?

Her turn to street art is an attempt to make herself relevant again in the social fabric and daily discourse of the city. Her actions are both inspired by and in spite of the laws, property rights and economic norms that have removed her from common space.

No, it was stealing, but all the same Nina relaxed by the time she had made it across the river. No one seemed to have seen her swipe the cans, and she knew from experience the police wouldn't follow up on a such as petty theft as some half-empty bottles of spray paint. She relaxed momentarily, then contracted again when she caught sight of the stadium. It was late now, the game was over, and the security shift would have changed. Still, she imagined the guard she had encountered earlier stalking around each corner, brandishing his nightstick.

She steeled her shoulders and forced herself to make the pragmatic decision. As long as the stadium was quiet, it was still the best place to hunker down for the night. The alcove where she had sought shelter earlier was still empty, and she lay down, resting her head again on her backpack. But tired as she was, sleep wouldn't come. She was too tense, remembering the security guard kicking her awake, too annoyed at what she thought was a pretty waste of a wall on the side of the Edgeside Arts Digest building, and she couldn't get comfortable against the clanking cans of beer and paint in her bag. She pulled them out, cracked open another beer. Then she started painting.

It took the better part of the night to get the hang of the spray paint, to figure out how to layer the colours, and to decide exactly what she wanted to leave behind,



but just before the sun came up, the wall of the stadium now had “██████ was here” painted in letters that were almost as tall as a person.

Nina grinned. Even if anyone else saw a yawning black space where a word should be, she could always see that the writing there was for her, a tiny mark of permanence, of ownership on the walls of a city that barely seemed to tolerate her. After all, who better to be represented by a black and empty box than her?

“██████ was here” tags soon proliferated all over the city, in alleys behind shops selling designer handbags and imported wine, on fish-packing plants, the Thibault Memorial City Shelter, mechanics shops and even on the side of a Municipal Directorate of Human Services bus. Sometimes, other people would paint it in later, adding their own names in the empty black space. #BlankWasHere racked up hits on Instagram. After a few months the Edgeside Arts Digest even ran a cover story under the title “The Mystery Artist Was Here”, which speculated which of three prominent local artists might have been the graffitist behind the series of “interactive art that invites the viewer to question the anonymous nature of the city, of the passer-by who may carry a dark but beautiful secret”. The Edgeside Arts Digest article did not consider that a homeless caricaturist who had not been featured in its cartoon competitions might be the responsible party. Shortly after the article was published, though, the Edgeside Arts Digest staff were shocked to find that “Songs of Summer”, the commissioned mural on the side of their own building, had been partly covered by the words “ **NINA** was here”...

Explanatory appendix

This story was inspired partly by David Harvey’s article on “The Right to the City”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(4): 939-41



(2003), partly by Robert Rosenberger's article "On hostile design: Theoretical and empirical prospects", *Urban Studies*, 57(4): 883-893 (2020), and partly by my own experience working in emergency homeless shelters in Denver, Colorado, and Boston, Massachusetts (USA). My short story offers a street-level view of a city in the midst of both economic growth and a population boom, but a city that has also neglected its long-term residents in order to make ways for luxury tourists and a new generation of urban professionals. The protagonist, Nina, feels alienated in a city that has been redesigned to render homeless and working-class people invisible, or, when possible, to remove them entirely from the city centre. For Nina, this means being separated from the fabric of a city where she has lived her entire life. Finally, one night she turns to art in order to remind herself that she is a resident of this city, and to leave her mark on it. To her surprise, her artistic vision is celebrated so long as its origins remain anonymous. Emboldened, she again uses her signature art to occupy space that she feels has been squandered on lesser art, and finally claims credit for her own statement.

The everyday challenges that Nina faces in considering where to take a nap, the correlation not only between design choices that prevent her from being able to use public space, but also to the increased security presence in the city, and the way in which she feels that she is being actively removed from visible areas of her hometown, are all reflections of points that Rosenberger makes in his article. However, the trend of relocating homeless shelters and populations from city centres into industrial areas or working-class suburbs was a trend I saw replicated during my own time as a social worker, and seemed to be the logical conclusion of both the private and public hostile design choices that Rosenberger describes.

The effect of this planned alienation is clear: Nina no longer feels accepted or permanent, despite the fact that her relationships with her hometown has become excruciatingly intimate as she experiences homelessness. She understands that her right to participate in an urban society is restricted because she is not a property owner, and because her presence is seen as detracting value in spaces that are constructed for the benefit of the affluent, and oftentimes the affluent



outsider. Her turn to street art is an attempt to make herself relevant again in the social fabric and daily discourse of the city. Her actions are both inspired by and in spite of the laws, property rights and economic norms that have removed her from common space. The effects of her artistic protest are in the eye of the beholder.

Featured [image](#) by [Jon Tyson](#) (Courtesy of [Unsplash](#))

Citizen Insurgency

Brady Nevins
March, 2021



Sing, O Muse, the anger of urban citizens upon whom
countless ills have been brought by the City. Many a brave soul
did the City send hurrying back to the countryside life,
and many a hero did the City condemn to a daily struggle
for the right to a citizen's dignity.

And which of the powers of the unequal City was it
that climbed down from the lofty gated Olympus



to venture to the forgotten edges of its domain and challenge those who must fight for a right that does not exist as a right? It was an unfortunate official from the courts, for the City was angry with the citizens of the urban periphery and thrust unto them a notice of eviction, since their land was owned by a fraudulent deed. Now the unfortunate official from the courts had found himself at the mercy of a mob of men who had built their homes with their own callused hands and paid for their land in honest instalments.

Its dark tentacles continuously wrapping around our throats, wrenching us down, ensuring we may never rise to challenge the system the City has created for itself.

The mob augmented in size as news of the eviction burned through the neighbourhood like unrepentant fire in a forest in drought, with each newly engulfed branch adding strength and heat to the blaze. Fathers joined sons who joined brothers who assembled on the streets between the houses they had built and grown



their families within. As the crowd of incensed hearts encountered the unfortunate official from the courts, the man ceased his door-to-door journey and was chased from the neighbourhood, his scattered documents littering the dusty street like new-fallen snow.

It was on this day that the City and the great André first fell out with one another.

When the news of the eviction notice befell André's piqued ears, the valiant young man was making his return to the neighbourhood after a taxing day labouring for his family's bread and wine. A messenger appeared before him on that well-trodden path.

The messenger's familiar face creased and distorted with anguish, breaths tumbling, as a waterfall over a cliff, from his strained breast.

The very homes that our fathers did construct with their own blood have been given a date of demise.



“André, most noble son of Pelaio,” he spoke forcefully. “I fear I must burden your honest heart with pieces of news most devastating, that I must beg you to take compassion upon me. The City has cast down a sickness upon our neighbourhood: the sickness of injustice to which the working class is predisposed. The City toys and entrenches these most pitiful souls in a regime devoid of recognition of the rights inherent to all citizens, to the security of everyday resources. Now, noble André, the very homes that our fathers did construct with their own blood have been given a date of demise, and that date ticks closer with the passing of each serpentine minute. Worse still, my friend, is the heavy news I carry of Pelaio. The principled and bellicose gentleman was a leader of the righteous crowd that forced an incessant City representative from our streets. But that indignant scoundrel from the court returned soon after his expulsion with the indigodressed strong arm of the City’s will, steeped in intolerance and lust for power. Your dear father, Pelaio, was murdered at their hands, as he fought until his last breath for the justice that the City has stolen from us.”



André, the son of Pelaio was fuming and answered, “My father shall not answer for the sickness that the City has inflicted upon us. As it gazes down from Olympus and deigns to cast its heedless eyes in our direction, as we toil under the yoke of the system designed to perpetually hold our noses to the mud, the City sees only land, for which it has an unrelenting and ravenous appetite. It sees not our world of metropolitan ingenuity, where we urban citizens have laboured endlessly to chip away our sliver in the stone of modern life — a sliver of hope



that the life of my son might be more heartening than my own. Lady Justice shall be on our side, and law shall no longer be a humiliation reserved for the enemies of the City; law shall be the pillar that hoists us and our brothers from the mud to stare eye-to-eye with the throne of Olympus.”

With this, André, pounding heart black with wrath and fire flickering in his eyes, dashed for the neighbourhood’s main boulevard. A distressed group of fellow citizens still lingered in the shadow of the day’s traumas.

“It is a truth,” the son of Pelaio addressed the crowd, “that a great sorrow has befallen our neighbourhood. Surely the City would rejoice in the murder of my father and the other valiant soldiers before him, who have proven the sacrifice we citizens are forced to make in order to scrape out a life in the unbridled metropolitan monster that the City has nursed into existence. Its dark tentacles continuously wrapping around our throats, wrenching us down, ensuring we may never rise to challenge the system the City has created for itself. My father and these valiant soldiers were among the most potent men



ever born upon these streets. And they have made sorely evident that no man can stand against a king.

We must use the beast that the beast created.

And this is the reason that — as much as my heart aches for the blood of our oppressors to soak the soil like a monsoon rain, as they did with my father's — we must attack with the law as our legitimate weapon.

'For friends, everything; for enemies, the law.'

And I can imagine no comparable enemy to that, the glutinous City, who continues to take even when we have nothing left to give."

We must use the beast that the beast created.

"I am moved by your words." The plump silhouetted figure of a dear comrade emerged from the attentive crowd. "And I wish to help this brave son, who has offered himself as a representative



to the plight of these humble citizens. As a local politician, I am known to many of you, just as I am known to the sickness that the City has inflicted upon our precarious neighbourhood. I wish to offer my legal services and, behind the valiant leadership of the noble André, I wish to join my fellow man in court to remedy the grave injustices that have transpired here and fight for the cause for which the honourable Pelaio gave his life: the matter of the unlawful eviction of this prospering and established neighbourhood.”

Once an interminable number of days had passed, the moment that the angry urban citizens had awaited finally arrived. The judge, seated atop his lofty bench, dressed in a torrential downpour of black silk, had heard their case. With one voice, the urban citizens of the neighbourhood had proffered their deeds, recounted their narratives, pled for their sliver in the stone of modern life to be maintained.

The granite face of the judge neglected to crack



with emotion as he handed down his ruling.

The granite face of the judge neglected to crack with emotion as he handed down his ruling, but the words fell from his lips like drops of sweet honey.

“The citizens of this urban periphery shall not be evicted.

The court rules that the residents have legal claim to the land that they inhabit.

The City has no power to evict them from their homes.”

André strode from the courthouse beneath a sun that he may as well have experienced for the first time. Its gentle warmth caressed his tired but victorious face. He thought of his father and what the principled and bellicose man had fought for.

Pelaio had decades ago made the journey to this metropolis in the hope that André would have a more heartening life than he had had. With this imperishable thought held delicately in his brain, André barely felt the bullet as it entered his heart. The sneaky intruder of a coward and not a warrior.



He fell to his knees as the thunder of gunfire reverberated
off the white pillars of the courthouse. With the sound still ringing
in his ears, blood began to trickle upon the marble steps
like crimson rose petals lain upon the snow.

‘The only law is might.’

No man can stand against a king.

No citizen can stand against the City.





Explanatory appendix

Inspired by Homer's *Iliad*, my poem offers an epic spin on James Holston's article ["Insurgent citizenship in an era of global urban peripheries", *City & Society*, 21\(2\): 245-267 \(2009\).](#) In it, Holston describes the ways in which the rapid urbanization of the 20th century has left many people living in abject poverty on urban peripheries. He explores the struggles of citizens who are often the victims of immense inequalities in systems built to benefit the rich and powerful. He discusses what "insurgent citizenship" means in the context of modern urban São Paulo (Brazil), and what constitutes a right.

Insurgent citizenship is grounded in all of the achievements that the urban poor have fought to accomplish, particularly in Brazil.

For Holston, the idea of "insurgent citizenship" is grounded in all of the achievements that the urban poor have fought to accomplish, particularly in Brazil, where Holston's research took place. As people flocked to the cities and set up residences on the peripheries, they had to continue to fight to win rights that were necessary for life. They became literate so they could win political rights, they built houses to certify property claims, they campaigned for the right to have access to city infrastructure, and they became skilled at using the law to fight against evictions. All these experiences transformed the meaning of rights associated with urban citizenship and dignity. They continue to transform the relationship between citizens and the City.

One anecdote detailed by Holston in his article pertains to a neighbourhood in São Paulo in the 1970s that was visited one day by a court official who told the residents that they were being evicted - the result of fraudulent land deeds held by the inhabitants. The people of the neighbourhood, like most neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city, had built their own houses through a process of "auto-construction", and they had believed that their land deeds were genuine. After running the court official out of the neighbourhood, he came back with the police, and several people were arrested. Eventually residents were brought together by



local politicians who hired a lawyer for them. Unfortunately, however, the lawyer was then murdered. One neighbourhood resident recounted the incident in Holston's article: "at the time, it was a war, between us and the land-scammers. The law didn't exist. The only law was might; it was violence". The article by Holston does not describe what happened to the residents of this neighbourhood - presumably their hopes died with the lawyer - but it does talk about a court victory by a resident in a similar neighbourhood years later also concerning an eviction.

This character of the City represents the system that oppresses the urban poor while simultaneously lifting up the rich and powerful.

My poem inspires itself from these two episodes and seeks to fill the gap left in the juxtaposition of these two stories in order to personify the reality of the struggles of the citizens against a similarly personified "City". This character of the City represents the system that oppresses the urban poor while simultaneously lifting up the rich and powerful. Many allusions are made between the City and the gods of Olympus, which is meant to signify - while also nodding again to the history of Greek epic poems - the power the system has over the people who are forced to live with it. Even when there is justice, there is still injustice. Even with small victories, the system will always continue to benefit the rich because they created it.

Featured Image: Sao Paulo from the air. Photo (cropped) by [Mike Peel](#), as found on of [Wikimedia Commons](#) (CC-BY-SA-4.0)

Pigeon and roof: Photo by [Danilo Alvesd](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Grey City: Photo by [Fernando Stankuns](#), Aerial view of Sao Paulo. Found on [Flickr](#) (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Just Transitions

Anna Bettini
March, 2021



November 2018. A wave of nearly 300,000 women and men in yellow vests floods France. A protest without leaders or spokespersons, rises from the poorest regions affected by the increased costs of fuel implemented with the objective of achieving a low-carbon transition. Protests marked by tension, with barricades and roadblocks on highways, roundabouts, state roads, overpasses, with burnt vehicles, culminating under the windows of the Elysée, surrounded by



demonstrators singing the Marseillaise and shouting “Macron, resign”. Anger that comes from injustice to the detriment of workers in precarious conditions, who see their future threatened. Images that have shocked many and that have opened the debate further and more publicly towards a just energy transition.

In the last years, among nations and within countries, debates have emerged about how we see and produce energy. But how can we shift our dependency on fossil fuels in our consumerist culture? What are the most effective strategies for creating an equitable system? And what are the challenges stakeholders are going to face as the energy landscape changes? *Just Transitions: Social Justice in the Shift Towards a Low-Carbon World* by Morena, Krause, and Stevis, helps us navigate the future of energy, illustrating what is meant by just transitions, the origin and different meanings of the concept, as well as the uses and misuses of the term.



Just Transitions

Social Justice in the
Shift Towards a
Low-Carbon World

EDITED BY
Edouard Morena, Dunja Krause and Dimitris Stevis

The book offers a series of case studies through the voice of academics, researchers, and activists, presenting different perspectives and obstacles faced by communities and individuals with different economic and social backgrounds. We embark on a journey from Australia to the United States, from Argentina to South Africa, to Germany and Canada to understand what has worked and what has not in just transitions projects and further steps that we should take. Although the book struggles to bring us on a linear trajectory in terms of organization of its chapters, it offers critical insights on the social understandings toward an equitable, just

transition approach. The reading highlights the economic and technological complexity of energy systems and how this process represents a steep but necessary path that we ought to take.

In the first three chapters, the authors lead us into an in-depth analysis of what is meant by just transitions and events that have marked its creation and associated



narrative. The notion of “just transition” emerged as a response from trade unions wanting safer jobs for workers while fighting against environmental and social injustices. Finding a space and ensuring that the voice and demands of unions were heard has not been an easy process. This battle has triggered ideological clashes. With the early 2000s, the concept seemed to have been put on a back burner, but its re-emergence years later has led to the creation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and close collaborations with green think tank foundations. Their goal was to make sure workers’ voices would be heard in policy circles such as the UN Environment program (UNEP) and that bridges would be built with other actors engaged in the international climate debate. Although nowadays the popularity of just transition initiatives are the outcome of a more positive progressive thinking, Stevis, Morena, and Krause and Rosemberg argue that, the term - just like other popular terms in the past (e.g. sustainability and sustainable development) - is often incorrectly used and often mobilised with “greenwashing purposes” (Stevis, Morena, and Krause, p.22) by corporate business and individuals not interested in greener solutions. Moussu emphasizes how the win-win rhetoric typical of a business in transition and ‘corporate just transition’ strategies, have become dominant narratives, often characterised by contradictions and ambivalences. Such an approach leaves unanswered fundamental questions on who “will bear the costs of the transition toward a low carbon economy” (p.70). The authors reflect on this aspect and on the improvements that can be made, what has worked and what has not worked over the last 30 years of just transitions approaches. A timid tone of hope pervades the book, perhaps as a result of the persisting reluctance of petrochemical companies to fully actualise a process of transition.

The notion of “just transition” emerged as a response from trade unions wanting safer jobs for workers while fighting against environmental and social injustices

Good’s account addresses this by catapulting us into the contrasting Australian landscape where a just transition approach struggles to become a reality in the



country. Similarly, Alvarez Mullally, Cabrera Christiansen, and Maffei's chapter recount struggles in the agricultural region of Rio Negro, Argentina, where the government encourages the development of hydraulic fracturing and the continuous use of fossil fuels. Corporations' controversial and dismissive attitudes toward climate change have "weakened the counter hegemonic forces that are seeking to embed a just transition in a radical transformative agenda" (p. 90). Although the low-carbon transition appears as a distant landmark into both the Australian and Argentine horizon, Good states how a transition can be only achievable by ensuring justice for workers and their communities, and not prioritising financial interests over them. Álvarez Mullaly, Cabrera Christiansen, and Maffei encourage a change of mentality, whereby people remain at the center of just transition toward a more socio-environmental sustainable life.

The example of Jackson, Mississippi, illustrates how grassroots movements can be of help in shifting the current situation where the existing economic-political system has proved to be ineffective for its residents, due to a long history of oppression, environmental and racial injustices. Cooperation Jackson, an emerging network of worker cooperatives, demonstrates how "the construction of an interconnected and self-sustaining network of green worker-owned cooperatives and supporting institutions secure a just transition that empowers communities, developing autonomous, self-reliant spaces of power" (p.96) . In a city characterised by vulnerabilities, climatic and environmental risks and consequent health problems, and where the level of poverty among the black community is a lacerating reality, Cooperation Jackson succeeds through the organization of campaigns, a network of activists, and alliances, and policy efforts at a local and national level. Obstacles and roadblocks are unfortunately part of a change in people's mindset and behavior, a task that, as Akuno states, requires patience and commitment (p.111)

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The rest of the book takes us to South Africa, Germany, and Canada, and Australia - four countries whose economy primarily relies on coal. In South Africa, the privatization of Eskom, the main company responsible for the generation, transmission, and distribution of energy, has led to increased social inequalities, with a large part of the population unable to use electricity and relying on coal as a substitute. Among the many problems identified by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, a number of problems stand out: lack of accountability toward poor communities, corruption and fraud, poor financial management, and scarce skills. Such problems still exist today due to successive governments' failure to address inequalities and a general paralysis of the political system. We need a radical change leading to a "new and more socially, environmentally and politically just electricity system" (p.146), where Trade unions can secure a fair transition for workers in the coal sector and for the population unable to tap into electricity. Finding a common agreement, uniting everyone "around a common vision of a people's energy system" has become the greatest challenge (p.146) for both South Africa and Germany, an undisputed leader in the low-carbon movement. Despite the successful policies aimed at encouraging renewable resources, Germany seems unable to reduce its dependence on coal, as Reitzenstein, Schulz, and Heilmann argue. Coal has shaped the economic history of Germany, modified its social and cultural fabric, and has remained a fixed variable for the economic growth in the country both pre- and post-unification. The authors criticise the usefulness of a multi-stakeholder approach through a specially created commission, the Commission for Growth, Structural Change, and Employment, commonly referred to as the 'Coal Commission', whose mandate "was to agree on an action plan that would enable Germany to meet its domestic emission-reduction targets for 2030" (p.152). By privileging established stakeholders over new ones, the Coal Commission failed to make radical changes and bring about a transformative plan. Reitzenstein, Schulz, and Heilmann wonder whether this initiative was not a way for the German government to shy away from acting on coal "by outsourcing the problem to others"(p.167).



Mertins-Kirkwood and Hussey delineate a practical example of a just transition model in Alberta, Canada. The Alberta province has actively intervened to implement policies and support the communities that will be negatively affected by the Government's decision to phase out coal by shutting down coal-fired generators. This will lead Canada to achieve its climate policy goals and contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This strategy can be interpreted as a way to distract from "the need to phase out oil and gas production" (p.174) given how much coal contributes to energy generation in Canada.

In the last part of the book, Snell points out how the concept of just transition and its repackaging and appropriation by different stakeholders has led to a "dilution in its original conceptualization by trade unions" (p. 198). Trade unions have instead always tried to remain pragmatic. The closure of the Hazelwood Power Station in Australia, in March 2017 is a good illustration. Through the direct intervention of trade unions, mobilised to ensure work for former employees, a series of transition initiatives have been implemented. Unfortunately, the ideological paralysis resulting from corporations' denial of climate change hinders such processes, with the government avoiding to interfere in companies' decisions. Coming to agreements is a constant struggle where one of the two parties [in this case the coal industry] tries to snatch the victory, hence slowing down policy making processes for fair and practical transitions.

A strategy that can be applied internationally is still unclear, but not impossible to achieve

Readers willing to find the perfect formula for a fair transition in this book will be disappointed. Indeed, the authors are not aiming to provide clear cut answers to the complex issue of just energy transitions. Rather they aim to encourage involved parties to bring workers back to the center of decision-making processes, to empower affected communities to take over the environmental debate, so as to encourage workers of polluting industries to accept the need to



transition, and to support green strategies. As we read the book, we realise that it is not an easy straightforward path. A strategy that can be applied internationally is still unclear, but not impossible to achieve. *Just Transitions* tries to make us understand this. The book is animated by a social and environmental justice spirit, not idealistic but pragmatic, and takes the reader on a journey toward collective morality.

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