

BOOK REVIEWS—SYMPOSIUM

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Jennifer Robinson 2022: *Comparative Urbanism: Tactics for Global Urban Studies*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell

Galvanizing spatial imaginations otherwise

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Jennifer Robinson's *Comparative Urbanism: Tactics for Global Urban Studies* is an ambitious and inspiring manifesto to recalibrate the field of critical urban studies. I first encountered Robinson's *Ordinary Cities* when I was finishing my PhD in Urban Planning in the United States. At the start of my studies, I was told that to contribute to the field I had to engage with a case from the parochial United States and with a well-established debate in Anglo-Saxon academia. The complex urbanization dynamics of Colombian cities and urban Latin American thought seemed quite extraneous to conventional authoritative urban knowledge production. *Ordinary Cities* became a powerful tool for me to reassert my (dis)jointed location in the daunting academic world and it gave me a language with which to frame my contribution. In a way, what has been at stake in Robinson's intellectual journey is a deep commitment to the de/post-colonial project that pushes us to recognize/imagine/produce urban knowledge otherwise. *Comparative Urbanism* offers a carefully crafted repertoire of tactics to enact multiple comparative imaginations. Here I will illustrate how I have been in conversation with three of Robinson's key ideas on comparative urbanism.

Every case matters: thinking through elsewhere(s) allows us to reassess the difference, diversity and distinctiveness of the urban

My work has examined what the reformatting of global urban studies as introduced by Robinson can offer to the field of urban design. I have proposed a 'comparative urban design' approach to think across the multiplicity of spatial agencies at work in different settings and to frame future-making strategies in the search for spatial justice. Using research-based design, we explored the potential of border-making practices in Medellín and Beirut. To engage with the multicultural background of our Master's students at University

College London we prompted a set of pedagogical provocations centred on a relational enquiry of the urban. We combined a genetic (urban processes) focus with generative (research-led) comparisons as part of the studio pedagogy. On the one hand, we explored how to think with the materiality of urban space by focusing on the constantly shifting physical and symbolic construction of borders in the privatization of public spaces in Beirut and the exclusions brought about by urban growth management in Medellín. On the other hand, we traced the spatial agency of actors contesting those bordering practices so as to ground context-specific yet trans-local strategies of design intervention. This pedagogical experimentation enabled us to reveal possibilities for transforming the power dynamics that were embedded in their spatial configurations in conflict-prone contexts. Comparative urban design can thus become a method of both design inquiry and pedagogy, enabling us to share learnings between cities in order to foster global understandings of difference and to serve as a basis for enacting trans-local communities of emancipatory praxis.

Positionality is crucial for new conceptualizations and methodological innovation

I acknowledge that my space of enunciation is as a migrant mestiza from Colombia located in an elite university in the belly of the former British Empire. I am speaking from the privilege of this place and detached from the collectives that are on the front lines of anti-colonial practices imperilling their lives in this struggle. This (dis)location gives me grounds to propose the concept of 'cardinal insubordination' with which to reimagine theory-making as a linchpin strategy that can foster epistemic and restorative justice to heal the 'colonial wound' arising from urban practices. This provocation calls for thinking anew not only the palimpsest of urban relations across contexts, but also the constellation of actors that remain at the margins of who is considered a theory-maker and the myriad trans-local solidarity networks we need to learn from.

The essence of cardinal insubordination is to problematize the way imperial domination uses cardinal points to portray a Western-centric understanding of the world and locks us into seeing the world through North/South and East/West binaries. Following the Cartesian tradition, the separation of the body from the outside world has also permeated our understanding of knowledge generation, which is based on a logocentric perspective and a dualistic ontology. Latin American scholars of decolonialism have discussed the notion of 'relational ontologies' for engaging with the links to/between the human, non-human and spiritual worlds in order to address the de-sacralization of territorial relations of meaning-

making. This approach reframes a 'grammar of the surroundings' that goes beyond a cognitive understanding of spatial relations. Although Robinson's work does not engage directly with the Latin American decolonial school, I recognize the echoes of conversations with postcolonial debates that nurture her work around how we can remap urban theory-making.

The intellectual future of urban studies is being rehearsed in myriad collective experimentations of collaborative work across places inspired by Black, feminist and anti-racist studies

For comparative urbanism to thrive, it requires a different way of framing research. In my engaged scholarship I have used the notion of 'trans-local learning alliances' for knowledge co-production across cities with academic and non-academic partners. These alliances are understood as a collective space for enabling an ecology of knowledges where all the partners are active learners using the authority of their universities to work towards cognitive justice. Notwithstanding the power/knowledge asymmetries and contradictions of any collaborative project, I have worked with partners in cities of the so-called global South committed to fighting for the right to the city. We have explored how urban design and planning can foster cognitive justice as a necessary condition to advance urban equality, using storytelling as a pivotal means for bridging the ecologies of urban knowledges.

As with any collective experimentation, social bonds, trust and joy are required. In the context of our project on urban knowledge co-production for urban equality, and inspired by post-colonial feminism, we coined the term 'affective infrastructures' to refer to the unspoken relations that sustain trajectories of joint research that concatenate feelings and experiences when working across continents. Nonetheless, if we want to continue to successfully navigate the challenges of trans-local collaboration and the political economy of higher education/publishing, it is essential that we enact new ethical protocols for co-authoring research. In other words, to crystallize the comparative imagination that Robinson invites us to enact we need to change many of our everyday practices of knowledge production.

In sum, Robinson's book brings an all-encompassing critique to urban philosophy and opens many windows—not only onto ways to theorize the urban from anywhere, but also onto the fertile ground of methodological innovation. This book is indispensable for all urbanists!