Rethinking Life at the Margins

The Assemblage of Contexts, Subjects, and Politics

Edited by Michele Lancione

Spine: Rethinking Life at the Margins · Edited by Michele Lancione · ROUTLEDGE

"*Rethinking Life at the Margins* demonstrates that Southern Urbanism is not a geographic concern but a much more profound epistemic act. This impressive volume, with its masterful introduction, is illuminating and essential reading for urbanists determined to rethink and remake the city anew."
Edgar Pieterse, *University of Cape Town, South Africa*

"This excellent collection brings a new focus to an enduring and vital question: how is urban marginality produced, lived, and contested? Inspired by poststructural and postcolonial accounts of the city, it provides rich accounts of how the heterogeneity of urbanity produces marginality. By investigating a wide ranging set of domains – architectures, publics, infrastructures, slums, waste, and others – a vivid and nuanced picture emerges of how people and things are sorted into particular urban geographies, and how they challenge and exceed those geographies. An important contribution to debates on urban life and inequality."
Colin McFarlane, *Durham University, UK*

Experimenting with new ways of looking at the contexts, subjects, processes, and multiple political stances that make up life at the margins, this book provides a novel source for a critical rethinking of marginalization. Drawing on post-colonialism and critical assemblage thinking, the rich ethnographic works presented in the book trace the assemblage of marginality in multiple case studies encompassing the Global North and South. These works are united by the approach developed in the book, characterised by the refusal of *a priori* definitions and by a post-human and grounded take on the assemblage of life. The result is a nuanced attention to the potential expressed by everyday articulations and a commitment to produce a processual, vitalist, and non-normative cultural politics of the margins. The reader will find in this book unique challenges to accepted and authoritative thinking and new insights to research life at the margins.

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GEOGRAPHY

The Assemblage of Life at the Margins

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Analytics of the Margins

Being at the margin means to be situated on the other side of a border, while someone else is on the 'inside' somewhere more towards the 'centre'. Borders render the margins at the same time possible and visible, tangible and effective, embodied and felt. They are heterogeneous in their nature and forms but they bear the same message: one of expulsion enacted by multiple 'centres' to preserve their own authority and standing (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Sassen, 2014). To say that the practice of bordering - of delineating what is right and what is wrong, what is in and what is out - produces margins, means essentially to state that through bordering specific spaces and people are produced as well; whether of the Mediterranean frontier and the migrants with their boats; a *maquiladora* and the exploited workers on their factory line; a xenophobic politics on gender and the stigmatised body of the queer; definitions of what is to be mentally healthy, a clinic and its 'mad'; etc. Not that these people and spaces did not exist before the powerful *oeuvre* of border-making. But it is only through that *oeuvre*, which usually comprises more than one border and more than one margin, that their representation as marginalised with the attendant struggles and unbalanced power relations become visible, possible and take place.

It is no surprise then that from Park and Stonequist's initial account of the 'marginal man' - where the 'border' was understood as the outcome of a conflict taking place in the mind of the

migrant (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1935) - social scientists have spent a great deal of effort in trying to define how particular borders work and on the effects that endure. The 'economy of knowledge' produced on the matter is overwhelming (Foucault, 2000, p.216). Almost every study that is related to a group, a practice, a cultural trait, a gender, a socio-economic role, a space, etc. - that is not considered to be 'central', 'acceptable' or 'right' could be defined as a work on marginality. The problem, as it has been argued (Del Pilar and Udasco, 2004), may well be that 'marginality' (as a concept) lacks scientific validity. It is simply too vague to be used as a category and thus not useful for sociological inquiry. Possibly because of its vagueness, most of the sociological and geographical literature tends towards 'adjective' marginalisation: either speaking of socio-cultural, spatial or economic forms of marginality (Billson, 1996). The rationale at play in this process is clear. Since 'marginality' is too broad, the concept is made manageable through unpacking specific (usually measurable) aspects that allow one to grasp, to define and even to manage deviance from what is considered to be the cultural/societal/economic or spatial 'norm'.

With *Re-thinking Life at the Margins* we move away from such compartmentalisations of knowledge - and of knowledge-production - since we believe that it reduces the scope and strength of a critical scholarship (and politics) of the margins. In focusing *a priori* on a definition of what the margins and borders are, or in trying to contain their heterogeneity into strict theoretical boxes, a whole set of fundamental things - like the nuanced way power and affects work in the everyday life of people and their spaces - get dismissed or not adequately acknowledged. Moreover, as post-colonial scholars have shown, to define (from the centre) what margins and borders are without a committed engagement with the people and spaces of the margins, unavoidably ends up in the (re)production of stereotypical and dis-empowering

knowledge (Spivak, 1990; hooks, 1994; Rose, 1997). In this volume we present an approach aimed at expanding this and cognate trains of thought, in order to acknowledge the complexities making up marginal contexts and subjects. A crucial starting point for us is to 're-think' how we understand and come at terms with 'life' and its unfolding. The hypothesis is that for too long social scientists have not adequately dealt with the heterogeneity of life and, in doing so, they have missed out potentially relevant aspects of how marginality comes together and evolves. Starting from this premise, the aim of the book is to offer a theoretical and empirical platform that stands as an invitation: to embark in a performative *minor-thinking* (see what follows) built on the refusal of meta-narratives and *a priori* definitions on marginality; on a post-human, grounded take on the assemblage of life; on attention to the potential expressed by everyday life's articulations; and on a commitment to produce an alternative cultural politics of the margins. This book is hands-on: it is provided as a source for inspiration to implement a critical re-thinking of life at the margins; to be dismantled and used; to be challenged and to push forward.

In order to clarify these last points, and at risk of being too simplistic, we can identify three analytics at play in how social scientists have been dealing with the margins so far. These are neither schools of thought, nor methods. The structural, grounded/relational and post-colonial analytics signal tendencies and blueprint for research. Briefly recalling them allows an appreciation of the particular take on the margins proposed in the present volume.

The first group concerns what we can call the *structural* analytic. Through it, the margins are conceptualised as an outcome of structural processes of dispossession, exclusion and exploitation. One recent example in this sense is Loïc Wacquant's successful account of 'advanced marginality' (Wacquant, 1996, 1999, 2008). Wacquant offers a macro-level analysis

of urban marginalisation through the lens of two concepts: 'race' and 'class'. He does an excellent job of identifying the structural causes that have brought about an urban marginalisation that is moving away from its Fordist forms, clearly showing the different patterns followed by cities in the EU and the US. However, 'race' and particularly 'class' are not used by Wacquant to only identify the patterns of advanced marginality, but also to explain them, and to offer solutions for them (Tissot, 2007). This is what usually characterises the study of marginality from a structural perspective: one variable, considered to be structurally more important than others, is used to identify, explain and tackle marginality-related issues. This kind of approach is most evident in studies of urban marginality based on traditional political economy, where the 'hidden' force of capital is both cause and explanation of marginalisation (Castells, 1977; Harvey, 1973). It maintains its validity even in more recent and less orthodox accounts focused on the neo-liberalisation of city space and politics (Mele, 2013); on social exclusion dictated by the interplay of the state and the market (Mingione, 2004); through global macro-economic forces that shape the restructure of urban peripheries in the global South (Davis, 2006); neoliberal policies of containment towards the poor (Mitchell, 1997; Smith, 1998); to cite but a few examples. Reading the margins through a structural analytic can offer valuable macro-insights into the broader dynamics of marginalisation. However, it is arguably limited by its frame: it cannot see borders other than the one constituting the particular structural variable that is put into focus.

The second analytic is what we may call *relational/grounded*. With these terms I intend to signal approaches that prioritise the relational level of day-to-day interactions and makeshift reactions and processes in their depiction and analyses of the margins. This grounding can be more or less blind to 'external' or 'structural' dynamics. There are writings that one could name,

following Ash Amin (2013), 'human potential' urbanism, focused on the creativeness and resilience of the people living at the margins (Neuwirth, 2007; Saunders, 2012) that seem to lose touch with the macro processes influencing marginal contexts (for a critique, Obeng-Odoom, 2013). A more balanced view is offered by literature combining a rich ethnographic account of marginality alongside in-depth readings of the economic, cultural and social forces related to the condition of specific spaces and subjects. In Geography, Ayona Datta's *The Illegal City* is a recent example of this kind of scholarship. If Datta gives a very lucid account of the legal, judicial and cultural contexts of Delhi, 'within which the everyday negotiations of law and illegality acquire meaning and significance in squatter settlements' (Datta, 2012, p.14), at the same time she explores those settlements from within, offering a rich ethnographic account of Delhi's marginal spaces, which are rendered clearer through insight into the wider context. The 'poor' here are neither framed *a priori* nor celebrated *per se*, but situated and understood from the place-specific dynamics and logics in which they live. The literature offers similar accounts from a variety of fields: feminist studies (think of Radcliffe's work around indigenous women in Ecuador, who situate their claims for land in a broader field made up of traditions, law and prejudice; Radcliffe, 2014); research on the city of migrants and of related issues of hospitality (Darling, 2011); studies of populations affected by mental health issues that cast new light on related spaces of care (Parr, 2000); research around drug and alcohol abuse at the margin, enabling an understanding of this issue in non-stigmatising terms (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009); homelessness scholarship that confronts homeless people's street life from a performative perspective (Desjarlais, 1997; Duneier, 1999; Johnsen, Cloke and May, 2005; Gowan, 2010); investigation of 'slums' encompassing and challenging the canonical narratives of which I have spoken, both in cities of the North (Venkatesh, 2008) and the South (Weinstein, 2014); and more.

Although some of these works are focused on the micro, at risk of forgetting 'macro' dynamics and processes of oppression (which, for instance, is Wacquant's criticism of Duneier's work, Wacquant, 2002), the best of this scholarship is able to portray the margins from the inside-out and back again, connecting local issues and potentials with broader socio-political dynamics that are not there to frame the narrative, but to enhance a street-level understanding of marginalisation.

Last but not least, the literature on marginality has a huge debt to the *post-colonial* analytic. Although post-colonial studies can take either a structuralist or a grounded approach to the field, what defines and differentiates these from previous analytics is their explicit commitment to produce a non-normative kind of knowledge and to provide a critical and self-reflective account of the 'other' (Barnett, 2006). Central to the post-colonial analytic is a concern with cultural discursive formations - namely both with the practices of producing meaning and the production of knowledge through language (Hall, 1992). In this sense, for the post-colonial critique the experience of being 'marginal' is a 'consequence of the binaristic structure of various kinds of dominant discourses, such as patriarchy, imperialism and ethnocentrism, which imply that certain forms of experience are peripheral' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007, p.135). Post-colonialism is deeply politicised because its aim is not only to describe these cultural practices of border-making, but to challenge them and to provide alternative practices and knowledge (Hooks, 1989; Ferguson et al., 1990). Perhaps the most evident and powerful example of such politicisation is in the notion of the 'subaltern'. The Subaltern Studies Group introduced the Gramscian notion of the subaltern not only to account for, and to write differently for, the marginal subjects in Indian history, but to re-write that history entirely in order to fight dominant Western narratives. The subaltern cannot speak - says Spivak (1988) - if s/he does not

learn how to speak the language of the coloniser, but at the same time s/he can construct differential knowledge to challenge the dominant culture (for a concrete example in this sense, see Gunew's account of Aboriginal literature in the Australian context, Gunew, 1994). As Huggan puts it, what drives the post-colonial approach to the margin is 'an oppositional discursive strategy that flies in the face of hierarchical social structures and hegemonic cultural codes' (Huggan, 2001, p.20). Post-colonial geographers have shared this ethos in approaching and investigating the margins (Sidaway, 2000; Nash, 2002) and the same can largely be said of feminist and queer geography (Sharp, 2009). Within the latter, particularly in situated knowledge approaches, considerable effort has been put to theorise the researcher's own positionality in the field and ways to make research at the margins ethically sound and politically relevant (Katz, 1994; Rose, 1997; Besio and Butz, 2004). What post-colonial approaches and feminist geographies have in common is that the social construction of knowledge around the margins is not taken-for-granted but questioned, in order to transform the unequal and oppressive power relations characterising it (Staeheli and Lawson, 1995; Arabindoo, 2011).

These three analytics are far from being exhaustive. Many approaches to the study of the margins have risen from disparate academic fashions, cultural paradigms and contextual traditions (O'Connor, 2001). Moreover, many scholars have mixed one or more of the above analytics. In Geography this is evident in the seminal works of Gibson-Graham (1994), Cindy Katz (2001), Doreen Massey (1993) and Anaya Roy (2009), to nominate just a few among many that have combined the critique of socio-economic structures, committed fieldwork and post-colonial ethos to question borders and their margins. Nonetheless, outlining these analytics allow us to clarify the ground upon which we have decided to write this book. With *Re-thinking Life at the Margins* we are interested in developing a critical approach based on the latest

advancements in social theory, offering a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of bordering and marginalisation. This is not done in opposition to what has come before. Rather, the approach that we advance in the book is linked to a fourth analytic that is largely built upon the *relational/grounded* and *post-colonial* take on the margins. This is what one could call a 'vitalist' analytic because its aim is first and foremost to account for the many lives that make up the social and hence the many forms of life that construct, sustain, demolish and re-build the borders we so incessantly study and write about. We argue that re-approaching the margins through a vitalist analytic allows both a focusing on issues of marginalisation in more nuanced and politically relevant ways *and* to see things previously unseen.

In what follows I will first introduce the fourth analytic and illustrate how it relates to - and how it aims to expand - the three just outlined. Second, I will introduce assemblage thinking, namely the approach that, at least in Human Geography, has been more effectively implemented to study the margins from a vitalist angle. I will then illustrate the two points that we consider at the centre of the *oeuvre* for re-thinking marginality, namely re-assessing the contexts and subjects of the margins. From this re-assessment it will then be possible to highlight the ethics and cultural politics that fuels our common effort.

Towards A Vitalist Approach To The Margin

In recent years social scientists have exerted considerable energies trying to conceptualise how the social world is made up by (what has been usually conceived as) non-social matters: non-human beings, artefacts, natural forces, atmospheres and so on. These things have of course always been part of the social, but they have rarely entered social theory's concern. Although there have been exceptions (think of Tarde's monadology, Latour, 2001; or of Reclus' anarchism,

Clarke and Martin, 2004), it is only more recently, and in particular with Haraway's cyborg feminism (1991) and Callon, Latour and Law's Actor-Network-Theory (Law and Callon, 1992; Latour, 2005), that the non-human takes centre stage. These cognate approaches in a variety of disciplines - think of 'socio-materiality' in Organisation studies (Orlikowski, 2007) or the more-than-human in Geography (Whatmore, 2002) - bring to the fore three main points. First, there is attention to non-human agencies and the role they play in changing the state-of-affairs of things. The social world is 're-populated' with non-human matter, leading to the re-writing of established social categories and knowledges around subjectivity, space and place, social relations and organisations. Second, things are investigated in their unfolding and not from a pre-established paradigm or *a priori* explanation. The cause-effect model is rejected in favour of a processual approach aimed more at showing *how* things are organised than at explaining *what* things are (Murdoch, 2006). Third, there is a general call to encompass the limits of canonical forms of representation, in their being exclusively human and rational-centred, in order to account for the power of emotions (Bondi, 2005), shared affects (Anderson, 2009) and the unconscious (Thrift, 2005).

The stances expressed by ANT, socio-material and non-representational approaches form the ground of the fourth analytic this book relies upon. This is what we can call a 'vitalist' or 'post-human' analytic because it does not only acknowledge non-human agencies, but it moves human and non-human *onto the same ontological plane* (this is what, in the end, distinguish a 'vitalist' scholarship from the 'more-than-human' approach). Vitalism puts a stronger stress on the need to decentralise the human and its assumptions in order to re-imagine *how* the social comes together and falls apart. Things - human and non-human - are approached through a rejection of subject-object distinction. What gives things prominence is not their being a 'subject'

or 'object' of action, but their being 'alive', namely the fact that they share a common ground for their existence. Building on the Spinozian idea of nature and of conatus, Deleuze has called this ground 'a life': a plane free from subject-object distinctions and permeated by a power that does not belong to something or that can be found in something in particular (Deleuze, 2001, p. 26). The power of being alive and becoming - namely the immanence of a life - is of everything, in everything, through and over everything. It is, as Bennett puts it, 'a restless activeness, a destructive-creative force-presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body. A life tears the fabric of the actual without ever coming fully "out" in a person, place, or thing' (Bennett, 2010, p.54). The immanence of a life is what human and non-human share. It is their common ground, which 'occurs before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities and in-between distinctions between body and soul, materiality and incorporeality' (Anderson and Harrison, 2010, p.13).

Importantly, this common ground is at the same time about potential and actualisation. As Deleuze and Guattari would have it, things acquire their perceptible status but they also bear the potential of becoming something else (Massumi, 1992; DeLanda, 2005). For Deleuze and Guattari this potential is not something volatile or unintelligible but it is as much real as the actual form. The actual and the potential take place at the same time and in the same space, in the becoming of things through a life. In other words, everything is real and therefore everything is (potentially) possible: 'The real is not impossible; on the contrary, within the real everything is possible, everything becomes possible' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977, p.27). A vitalist approach is therefore not only interested in understanding life as a shared feature of human and non-human, and in tracing and depicting its articulations, but also in encompassing the actual form of things to take into account their possible, differential, becoming.

The most profound point of rupture with the analytics listed above concerns precisely this *holistic* and *in-potential* understanding of life. On the one hand, as Braidotti has highlighted, post-human accounts reject 'the opposition nature-culture and stresses instead the self organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter' (2013, p.3). On the other, vitalism is not only interested in 'this or that plane, nor this or that realized system of relations, but [in] the potential to produce planes, the "planomenon" and our capacity to think or encounter that potential' (Colebrook, 2004, p.6). This does not mean discarding matters of structure, relations, class, gender, colonialism, and race, to cite just a few of the categories at the centre of the previous analytics. It does mean that one needs to reject their status as 'social fact', or interpretation as only human-dependent. The task of a critical vitalist/post-human social science is to re-imagine these and other matters taking into account the countless non-human elements and entanglements making up life in order to re-imagine politics as well (see below). Structures, relations and cultural politics are then reconsidered from the immanent, the potential, and the ubiquitous nature of life.

Thinking Through Assemblage

In order to approach the world through a vitalist lens one needs a different way of thinking and performing research. What is needed is a *methodological sensibility*: if 'vitalism' signals a particular take on *a life*, we need a set of propositions, insights and theoretical tools to enable us to navigate the vitalist plane. The scholarship that in recent years has been produced under the umbrella of 'assemblage thinking' holds the most promise to this end. This is because 'assemblage thinking' is interested in tracing human and non-human affiliations in their becoming, highlighting both potentialities and limitations, without giving prominence to the

'human' component in the process. It is worth highlighting that in this book we do not consider assemblage thinking a theory but, as Law has also argued for ANT/material semiotics, we interpret it as an approach, 'a sensibility to the messy practices of relationality and materiality of the world' (Law, 2009, p.142). This sensibility is what interests us in *Re-thinking Life at the Margins*. We read the notion of assemblage (or *agencement*) as an invitation to a particular kind of processual thinking, one able to read the margins in their post-human entanglements without reducing their predicaments to pre-established theories or narratives. The people and spaces of the margins are confronted from the thick, grounded description of humans and non-humans in their making (McFarlane, 2011a), with the double political aim of overcoming the formalism and structuralism of canonical thinking (Jacobs, 2012), and of acknowledging the actual and potential multiplicity of any composition (Dewsbury, 2000).

Greenhough has pointed out that we can distinguish three ways by which assemblages are implied in the current literature: the anticipatory, which sees assemblages as a way to depict the world yet to come (Deleuze and Guattari); the fabricated, which uses that concept to trace the processes through which the world has already been achieved (ANT, especially in its latest Latourian take); and the response-able, which sees assemblage thinking as a tool informing the political intervention on the assemblage that is created (Haraway). In other words, if 'Deleuze and Guattari ask "what is possible?", actor-network theory […] asks "what is required?"' and Haraway asks how one can '"become worldly and respond" to world's complexity' (Greenhough, 2011, p.135). These different takes on assemblage thinking are not incompatible but form the evolving, experimental, and patch-worked vitalist sensibility that we embrace with our book (Harrison, Pile and Thrift, 2004). Indeed, despite their differences these ways of approaching assemblage thinking share a morphogenetic view on reality, seeing it as a set of dynamic

non-linear processes of human and non-human relations that lead to 'the production of life forms' and their related problematisation and potentialities (Escobar, 2007, p.107). The geographical scholarship emerging from this school of thought has fruitfully informed, to cite just a few, the analysis of world city topologies (Smith, 2003), the inter-scalar becoming of social movements (McFarlane, 2009; Davies, 2012; Vasudevan, 2014), policy transfer (McCann and Ward, 2013) and geopolitics (Dittmer, 2013), the codification of consumption (Dodge and Kitchin, 2005), understandings of feminism and the body (Colls, 2012), as well as fundamentally re-writing our epistemological understanding of the urban sphere (Farías and Bender, 2010; McFarlane, 2011b; Amin, 2015; and, although they do not explicitly buy into the assemblage metaphor, Amin and Thrift, 2002). Yet, assemblage thinking has still to prominently enter the geographical study of marginality and bordering.

An exception has been the work of Colin McFarlane on Mumbai. McFarlane investigates how the city is learned through an incremental process of assembling with the urban machine and in doing so he reveals a world made of 'unequal relations of knowledge, practice and power' interlinked one to another and assembled with the post-human fabric of the urban (McFarlane, 2011b, p.176). This world is explored in its becoming-urban, becoming-learnt, and becoming-marginal. It is a world traced in its unfolding, in its being trans-local, not fixed, stretched in space and time. The insights given by this perspective are far from being only theoretical. They inform practical matters related to education, public space and, most importantly, they offer reasoning around contextual political change (McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008; Desai, McFarlane and Graham, 2014). On the same line we find the vivid ethnographic account provided by AbdouMaliq Simone, who investigates the urban margins to show the provisional assemblage of the urban economy (Simone, 2011), portraying the potentiality of life

in the contemporary city of the South (Simone, 2010); the work of Ash Amin on the racialised other (Amin, 2010), encounter with difference (Amin, 2012) and on urban infrastructures and the 'slums' (Amin, 2014); the theoretical contributions of Dovey, who speaks of informal urbanism as a 'complex adaptive assemblage' (Dovey, 2012); and a few other scholars interested in development studies, homelessness and race (Saldanha, 2006; Swanton, 2010; Lancione, 2013, 2014; Grove and Pugh, 2015).

In *Re-thinking Life at the Margins* we build on this scholarship and also on the structural, relational and post-colonial analytics described at the beginning of this chapter. Although the structural analytic is possibly the farthest from assemblage thinking, in this book we do not reject the existence of 'structures' per se, but we understand them as relationally built, always contested, and not dependent upon any specific variable or force. They are, as Chattopadhyay has put it, an 'infra-structure': territorialised material and immaterial relationships between human and non-human, flows and ideas, emotions and power, which contribute to the definition of a particular course of action (Chattopadhyay, 2012). From the relational and grounded analytic, we take the need for a direct engagement with the spaces and people of the margins. Taking inspiration from the best ethnographic work available, our aim is to link the grounded dynamics of the margins to their structural elongations, without aiming to explain these relationships on the basis of pre-established knowledge or social categories. Rather - and this is what we draw from the post-colonial analytic - established knowledge is criticised and challenged through the production of alternative knowledge aiming at the constitution of a differential cultural politics of the margins.

To summarise, the principal traits of the approach developed in this book can be listed as follows:

A) We propose a vitalist perspective on the margins, deployed through assemblage thinking. The latter is the preferred approach to field research and theory construction, as it rejects over-arching theories of the margins, of their spaces and subjects. Rather, it invites a grounded experimental encounter open to the multiplicity of life and to its differential potential of becoming;

B) We promote a processual approach, interested in the unfolding of action, in tracing how things are assembled and in the thick description of their articulations (what Deleuze and Guattari call territorialisation - deterritorialisation - reterritorialisation);

C) In the articulation of life, human and non-human are on the same ontological plane: there is no prominence of one or the other. A clear re-assessment of non-human agencies in the production of life at the margins is a central point of re-thinking marginality through assemblage;

D) The scope of a critical approach to assemblage thinking is to take the potential of *a life* back into the representation of life at the margins, in order to assess how different articulations may be possible and to highlight what currently impedes them;

E) This is a critical approach because its *oeuvre* is about the search for an affirmative and liberating cultural politics of the margins. Coherently with its immanent stances, it does not provide a once-and-for-all recipe for political action, but invites the cultivation of a minor politics, where 'minor' has to be interpreted in a Deleuzian sense as a politics characterised by its capacity to become, to articulate difference and to be open to new articulations that are not to be subsumed by 'a redundant majority' (Conley, 2010, p. 167).

On This Book: Context, Subjects and Politics

The above points enlighten a path but do not establish a strict route. Re-approaching marginality through assemblage thinking means first and foremost to experiment and to explore, and it requires a high degree of theoretical and empirical eclecticism (Rankin, 2011). None of the authors presented in this book would consider themselves to be strictly a 'Deleuzian' and some of the chapters in the book do not address the notion of 'assemblage' explicitly, nor refer to one specific post-human philosophy. This lack of explicit reference or over-theorisation *has been a conscious choice*. The idea of the book is to provide an accessible and heterogeneous collection of essays that, although sharing the same ethos summarised by this introduction, articulate it with due difference and respect to contextual circumstances and cultural traditions.

In what follows I expand on the specific theoretical foundation necessary to re-approach contexts, subjects and politics and I also present the contributions making up this volume. Although the chapters are organised into three parts, contexts, subjects and politics are obviously only analytically separated. Each of the chapters touch upon all of these elements, sometimes stressing one more than the other for the sake of argument and clarity. Dividing them is simply a strategy to show the possibilities offered by the proposed approach.

Re-Contextualisation

The first necessary step is to promote a vitalist understanding of the contexts of marginalisation. This is necessary in order to trace and represent the heterogeneity of the components, processes and forces that make up life at the margins. One promising resource toward this end is a specific 'branch' of assemblage thinking, namely the literature on urban assemblages, which sits at the intersection of Deleuzo-Guattarian thinking and Actor-Network

approaches (Farías and Bender, 2010; McFarlane, 2011a). Assemblage urbanism conceives the city as a mechanosphere of vitalist entanglements always open to possibility and change (Amin and Thrift, 2002). If one takes these articulations seriously the city cannot be a place to which we - as humans - react to by means of practising it, but as a co-constituted space of what Thrift calls 'outstincts' (as opposed to the more deterministic 'instincts', Thrift, 2014). The city - like any other context - is *alive*, and the marginal subject is alive *through* and *with* it. One could say, in this sense, that the urban comes for the first time to be seen precisely as a 'web of life', in which human and non-human 'are bound together in a vast system of interlinked and interdependent lives' (Park, 1936, p.1). The difference from the traditional account of urban ecology is, however, vast. It is no longer a matter of understanding urbanism as a way of life - hence as a 'way of behaving' linked to a typically urban way of 'thinking and conduct' (Anderson, 1959, p.1) - but of understanding the many lives that make up the urban. The ecology is not read through human eyes and it is not human-dependent, but emerges from the entanglements that make up the world and that *may make up the world*. This is, in other words, an echo-logic: a constant refrain of heterogeneous machinic affiliations (Guattari, 2009), a productive reverberation of the multiple forms of lives taking place in the urban (what Farías calls the 'ecological process' of the urban, 2011, p.368).

Drawing from this take on the urban, we understand marginal contexts both as relational spaces and as a rhizome of eventful post-human 'crossroads' (Simone, 2010) within which multifaceted experiences of the margins are constituted. The margins cease to be just a matter of places ('slums', side-walks, waste-fields, informal camps), services (soup kitchens, shelters, drop-ins), institutions and procedures (asylum, social housing and minimum wage bureaucracies), and so on. Rather, they become a matter of entanglements between objects and bodies,

discourses and power, performances and blueprints for action - a universe of capacities that need to be traced in their contextual deployment in space and time. The task of the critical assemblage thinker is to re-contextualise marginalisation through the careful analysis of the multiple capacities making up the contexts of the margins. Contexts are never easily depicted and borders are always shifting, overlapping, made up of matter that resembles a patchwork more than a neat cartography of exclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Re-approaching the context of marginalisation means to understand that these contexts are 'founded on the blurring of boundaries rather than their repeated delineation' (Gandy, 2005, p.29). It is within that vitalist mingling and blurring that a micro-politics of reverberation, an echo-logic of dispossession and expulsion but also of affirmation and capacitation take place, and it is there - within those post-human entanglements - that marginality needs to be traced and understood.

The first four chapters of this book illustrate this point. They re-imagine their specific marginalised context with the aim of highlighting things and processes previously unseen or not fully put into focus or problematised. These chapters offer insights into how to re-write our understandings of the visions, architectures, public artefacts and infrastructures through which borders and margins are lived and performed. Kavita Ramakrishan reads a resettlement colony in Delhi through the urban aspiration of its people, showing how the 'centre of Delhi' acts as a vitalist catalyst of dreams, visions and aspirations affecting how people live and perform their marginal condition. What Ramakrishan does is to re-contextualise mainstream readings of peripheral re-settlement colonies via bringing the 'city' - as assemblage of design, practices and vernaculars - into the relational constitution of the margins. The most important insight that we gain from this chapter comes from the voices of Ramakrishan's informants. They are the ones

who, from the margins, are re-contextualising the city and it is only taking their re-contextualisation seriously that one may be able to re-assess marginals' political claims.

In Francesca Governa and Matteo Puttilli's chapter the often overlooked power of urban architectures and public spaces is brought into focus to describe the changes underway in post-revolutionary Tunis. In their account the city is fully into the scene: streets, walls, buildings, fences, squares and more are not seen as a platform of the revolution, but as co-constitutive elements of old and new practices, habits and use. Re-contextualisation here operates at two levels. The first is the level of what Tunis - as a mechanosphere of people and matter - *has done* in re-configuring its political grounding. The second is the description of this re-configuration by Governa and Puttilli, which is done through the lens of the built city showing the centrality and hybridity of space in the (re-)doing of marginalisation. Another important layer to this contribution is methodological, since the chapter originates from an extensive video engagement with Tunis, which may offer further insights into how to re-conceptualise the contexts of the margins[1]. Moving further 'down', into the granularity of spatial practices and vitalist entanglements, Mark Tirpak's chapter on the ethnography of food trucks in San Antonio (Texas) re-contextualises the marginalisation of public spaces through the thick description of small assemblages of power. What we see here is the grounded and vitalist re-writing of the bordering practice of gentrification through dog fences, contradictory regulations and expensive tacos. What Tirpak offers us is a way of looking at an over-studied process of bordering (gentrification) through a fresh, grounded vitalist lens, which achieves two important results. First, it allows him and us to understand where, when and how marginality is assembled on the ground - pointing to

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1   See the web-documentary 'Al centro di Tunisi', which can be accessed at the following page: http://webdoc.unica.it/ (In French and Italian).

specific devices and designs that border things in and out. Second, it clearly connects these micro-assemblages to established (molar, in a Deleuzian language) patterns of exclusion in US cities.

If Ramakrishan, Governa, Puttilli and Tirpak render the contexts of the margins alive through its visions, spaces and micro-assemblages, AbdouMaliq Simone's chapter concludes this section showing that these and other things are not exceptional - but they are *just* what the city is: a complex repository of human and non-human agencies entangled one into the other. Within these entanglements injustices and borders are made and re-made continuously, escaping any over-arching understanding, definition or politics. What instead is needed is an appreciation of the power enmeshed in the day-by-day doing of city-making, in the repairing and re-making of relations between inhabitants and places. It is there, within the unfolding of those assemblages, that according to Simone a 'just' city could be imagined and crafted: one able to build upon the repository of experiences, opportunities and vitalist energies continuously making and re-making life in the urban. What this chapter and the previous show us is the main point of this first part of the book: in order to re-imagine the margins politically one has to re-imagine how things assemble in contexts. It is only in re-contextualising the margins that new grounds for equitable ends could again be seen and argued for.

Re-Subjectification

To re-approach the margins from a vitalist perspective human subjectivity does need to be re-thought alongside context: it has to be opened up to its wider environment, to acknowledge its hybrid constituency. In this sense the human subject should no longer be seen as the 'disengaged first-person-singular self […] self-reliant for her or his judgements on life, the universe and

everything' (Pile and Thrift, 1995, p.14), but as an assemblage made up of many different assemblages shaped by countless 'lively' encounters. The marginal subject does not only live *in* context, but s/he factually becomes *with* and *through* the mechanosphere of that context. In order to navigate this intricateness one needs a non-reductive, non-Cartesian account of subjectivity. Examples can be found in the work of diverse philosophical thinkers, such as Lefebvre, Derrida, Butler and Foucault, who move away from the Freudian and Lacanian subject - a subject locked into phallocentrism and textuality - in order to account for the variegated 'contextuality' of the self (Wylie, 2010). However, with Deleuze and Guattari that 'contextuality' is fully rendered visible and its complexity is taken into account: the subject ceases to be only matter of text, body, rationality or power relations, but becomes understood as an ongoing, never-finished assemblage of the human, non-human, discursive, technical and potential matters making up the world (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

The subject is just one of the parts (breakable into smaller parts) of the contexts described above. It is defined by it, it is made by it, it is constituted through it and it does constitute it: the subject is not determined by the strict boundaries of the rational self because rationality itself is just a product (and a producer) of countless other machines (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977). Deleuze, and more particularly Guattari (Guattari, 2010, 2013), do not bring to the fore a definitive theory of the subject but allow us to navigate the broad rhizomatic canvas where the subject becomes with the other assemblages of the world. The key point is to understand the (marginal) subject as being 'collective': meaning by this that the subject is the expression of 'the heterogeneity of the components converging to produce subjectivity' (Guattari, 1996, p.193). This does not mean that the subject disappears in a collective mist, but simply that in order to grasp the subject one needs to look at the collective process of machinic affiliation through

which subjectivity is constituted, challenged and re-assembled. This means to understand the inner-self as an elongation of the mechanosphere and vice-versa, in their productive constitutive tensions. Rosi Braidotti has depicted this process very clearly:

> [S]ubjectivity is a socially mediated process of entitlements to and negotiations with power relations. Consequently, the formation and emergence of new social subjects is always a collective enterprise, 'external' to the individual self while also mobilising the self's in-depth and singular structures. (Braidotti, 2011, p.18)

The shift from canonical scholarship on marginalisation is considerable. The experience of marginalised people cannot be understood any longer as a matter of personal culpability or lack of will, nor simply as the outcome of broader economic causes, but can only be grasped as an ongoing process of subject formation where the latter is always a collective endeavour - a matter of contextual material and discursive arrangements to be addressed in their heterogeneous becoming. In approaching the marginal subject from this perspective we are looking for performances of a more-than-human kind: pre-cognitive and cognitive; rational and machinic; emotional and affective; diagrammatic and enabling. This is a contextual endeavour because it is made in-context, through-context.

Think for instance of an hypothetical inhabitant of a 'slum'. Her subjectivity is constituted at the level of day-to-day operation with the multiplicities making up life in the 'slum'. She is related to the materiality of the place; its internal rules and power dynamics; the encounter with foreign aid; the law; traditions; social customs; the lack of facilities and the opportunities offered by what is at hand; affects and fears; the aesthetics of life in the overcrowded 'shanty' town; plastic bags filled with water; wood; petrol; recycled tins; sunshine; ugali[2]; rain; mosquitoes; etc.

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2   Stiff cornmeal porridge, a common staple food in east Africa.

These machinic-assemblages operate, as Guattari would have it, at 'the heart of human subjectivity' (Guattari, 2009): they mould desires, constantly reconfiguring *how* the subject is - in becoming. The subject has a voice, so a minimal humanism is still there (Thrift, 2008). However, this voice is not individualised and cannot be understood as such: the voice is a chorus (a refrain, an echo-logic) made up of all the above entanglements. In short, from a vitalist perspective the marginalised subject cannot be separate from the wider social machine that co-constitute 'her' subjectivity: from the influence of external capital in shaping the price of staple foods in the 'slum', to informal economies of subsistence; from the role of the law, to the relevance of ghosts, traditions, and customs; from the galvanised steel of the roof under which she sleeps to the social-aid campaign advertised with the face of George Clooney. The challenge of instantiating a vitalist take on the margins *is to describe this complex machinic subject without reducing its dramatic complexity*.

Tawhanga Mary-Legs Nopera's account of the Maori subject in New Zealand fully embraces this collective notion of subjectivity. Far from being 'simply' post-colonial in its claims, Nopera's chapter shows us how it is possible to re-think one's own marginality via the re-consideration of what makes up one's own subjectivity. Importantly, Nopera does so via re-appropriating Deleuze and Guattari's thought through traditional Maori knowledge - namely through the notions/praxis of *whakapapa* and *raranga*. The subject that emerges in this account is a machine-of-machines, assessed in its own contextual (cultural and political) terms. This is a subject that is hard to distinguish from its context because the two are just in-becoming, constantly re-writing their marginality, in a mist of traumas, powerful affects and displacements - as Nopera's chapter so beautifully shows.

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The following two chapters, by Tatiana Thieme and Gaja Maestri, are united by the same effort of re-approaching the subject through detailed accounts of how life-at-the-margins constantly re-writes itself. Thieme offers a rich ethnography of the changing aspirations and internal conflict that young 'hustlers' living in Mathare, Nairobi, face in their struggles to improve their life conditions. Thieme's work is able to show the granularity of the re-subjectification process through the story of a young woman, Eliza, who passes from the struggle to affirm her identity in the male-centred waste economy, to having to balance her aspiration to do 'well' with her belonging to the 'hood'. The struggles of Eliza are traced as assemblages constructed with and through the wider 'mechanosphere' of the 'hood', thus offering a rich ethnographic example of how it may be possible to re-write subjectivity following a non-normative approach. In a similar vein, Maestri's work on Roma people in Rome, Italy, powerfully shows how Roma people themselves - again, in their struggle for dignity and affirmation - are able to re-write their own subjectivity. Pivotal in this process is the assemblage that these people make with various urban machineries - policies, police interventions, abandoned factories, etc. - which eventually brings them from being defined, and perceived, as 'Roma' to becoming 'squatters'. According to Maestri, it is thanks to assemblage thinking that scholars can trace these processes of re-subjectification, giving them theoretical (and political) resonance, as her chapter clearly does.

Last but not least, Jean-Baptiste Lanne brings us back to Nairobi, this time to the 'slum' of Kibera. His aim is not to show processes of re-subjectification of the people he looked at, but to question the process of re-subjectification that we - as researchers - bring about in re-approaching life at the margins. According to Lanne, we need to marginalise ourselves in order to re-centre the margins that we aim to investigate. It is only by doing so that a true vitalist

ethnography of the margins can be brought to the fore, as the powerful 'recordings' Lanne presents to us clearly show. His chapter brings into focus the underlying issues of positionality and methodology that the previous (and following) chapters have implicitly dealt with, offering therefore a valuable platform from which to think about the concrete 'doings' of re-thinking life at the margins and of re-doing subjectivity from a vitalist perspective.

Re-Politicisation

The previous chapters do not limit themselves to contexts and subjects but are deeply connected to the third part of the book, which is about re-politicisation. The acts of re-contextualising and re-subjectifying the margins are, indeed, related to the particular cultural politics that we aim to promote with this book. There are three main points making up the ethics fuelling this politics, which should also render clearer why we have decided to focus the first two parts of the book on re-thinking 'contexts' and 'subjects'.

First, a post-human ethics on the margins is always contextually-driven. Without diminishing the importance of basic fundamental and universal rights, it is not in the light of these rights that we are moved politically, but in their contextually-based (de)construction. If the former are usually deployed around human-centred meta-narratives of what is considered to be good or bad, the latter mean to re-approach these universals from the day-by-day enmeshment of human and non-human alike (Braidotti, 2013).[3] In other words, the political relevance of

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3   It is worth stressing that 'context' does not equate by any means with 'local'. A context is 'a plural event which is more or less spatially extensive and more or less temporally specific. It is, in other words, a parcel of socially constructed time-space which is more or less elongated' (Thrift, 1996, p.43), which essentially means that a context might be stretched along considerable relational distance (Latour, 2005), as is usually the case at the margins.

re-thinking life at the margins is found within, and not outside, the particular context of action. This is coherent with the overall Deleuzian-Guattarian ethical project, centred around the notion of affects - the capacity of something to affect something else (Colebrook, 2004). In short: 'Because affective relations are variable and contextual, and power is simultaneously a force of composition and of decomposition affecting participating bodies at multiple sites of engagement, *the "rightful" limits to the impact of one body's powers upon another can only be decided according to the context of the situation in which their meeting occurs*' (Bignall, 2010, pp.96-97 emphasis added).

Second, a post-human ethics of the margins is about a vitalist take on life and its subjects. Preserving and raising human life is not a matter of human life itself, or defined by it, but on the recognition that *life* is only *one* and it is shared by human and non-human alike (as, indeed, 'a' plane, or common ground). Bennett has, in this sense, called for a vital materialism that is able to 'raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed' (Bennett, 2010, p.12) in order to give it and thus give us, together, prominence and value (on a similar vein, see Stengers' notion of 'cosmopolitics', Stengers, 2005). In this sense, a post-human ethics of the margins is about what Grosz has called 'partial objects': 'organs, processes, flows, which show no respect for the autonomy of the subject. *Ethics is the sphere of judgements regarding the possibilities, and actuality of connections, arrangements, linkages, machines*' (Grosz, 1993, p.172 emphasis added).

To summarise and to clarify, killing, violating, exploiting and all sorts of actions that do not allow for the full and positive expression of all life are to be considered unacceptable *a priori*. But one should not stop at this assessment. Rather, we are interested in showing how the positive and negative articulations of life take place in the contextually-based post-human entanglements

making up the margins. If humans are just 'dividuals' - 'who for the most of the time are simply part of a combination of bodies or parts of bodies, resonating around a particular matter of concern' (Amin and Thrift, 2013, p.50) - for us acting politically is not about building universalising knowledge and grand-narratives of the good and the bad, but about tracing that 'combination of bodies or parts of bodies' and revealing the nuances of power in-its-making. It is about learning how to 'inhabit' the struggles of the margins and then 'find new languages and registers with which to name and possibly displace it' (Piertese, 2013, p.29). In doing so, we work toward an unfinished and shifting alternative cultural politics and cultural geography of marginality. The four chapters comprising this third part of the book - like the eight that preceded - are examples of the numerous ways through which re-thinking life at the margins entails politics. Their core aim is not, once again, to provide a theory of what is 'political' at the margins, but to offer various examples of how, tracing and rendering visible the 'partial objects' making up life at the margins, one is able to reveal new political stakes as well.

This part of the book begins with Eszter Krasznai Kovács' powerful ethnographic account of marginalisation processes in rural Hungary. It is only thanks to her careful tracing of how humans' claims and desires assemble with 'nature' and the EU's policies that Krasznai Kovács is able to show the 'out-of-place'-ness of Hungarian and EU laws and rules. This is an 'out-of-place'-ness made political through a grounded re-contextualisation of what is considered to be urban and what is considered to be rural in contemporary Hungary, *and* a re-assessment of how marginalised subjects are produced within the powerful diagrams activated around normative understandings of rural. In a similarly grounded and embodied way, Francisco Calafate-Faria takes us amongst Brazilian waste pickers in order to substantially challenge canonical scholarship on the matter. Besides the production of alternative knowledge,

Calafate-Faria shows us the potential for a counter-politics of waste that starts from an understanding of the post-human constitutive forces at play in movements of recycling and counter-cycling. Giving full agency to rubbish - and differentiating this agency according to different materials, contexts and subjects - Calafate-Faria properly shows what critical assemblage thinking is: a quest to trace life in its own place, in order to show where and how it could be re-articulated.

Again through long-term ethnographic fieldwork and engagement, in the next chapter Elisabetta Rosa brings us within the day-to-day practices of Roma people living in Turin, Italy. Rosa's account is political from the outset: she aims to re-frame marginality as a 'resource', in order precisely to re-construct that oppositional value-set to which hooks was referring to (1994). To do so, Rosa shows us the constitutive mingling of bodies and urban machines through which being marginalised can be re-thought in terms of unexpected capacities, re-appropriations, alternative cartographies and powerful non-human agencies. The margins, according to Rosa's reading, are not opposite to the centre - an understanding that reproduces normative paradigms and policies - but a repository of practice-based resources that need to be assessed from within.

If the previous chapter has shown us how the vitalist analytic can render things political and can show the nuance of politics at the margins, the last chapter adds another important touch to this picture. Cheryl Gilge brings us to an apparent virtual context: that of web 2.0. She shows the potential of assemblage thinking to identify political issues where apparently there are none, within grounds where it seems that there are only gains. To do so, Gilge carefully analyses the disturbing way through which open source and the web 2.0 marginalises labour, carefully revealing how this process is a matter of *micro-fascism*. Her contribution shows how thinking through assemblage can let one see - describe and understand - the production of contemporary

ubiquitous borders, showing also the potential of critique in challenging them. Gilge - like Krasznai Kovács, Calafate-Faria and Rosa - *does* the politics-of-the-assemblage: the unfinished work of showing the mingling of differential agencies within which alternative lines-of-flight can be enacted.

Minor Thinking

The best way for this book to go further is to question itself and ourselves. That's why the book has no conclusion, but a self-critical opening. In it, Darren J. Patrick poignantly challenges all of us by asking: why do we bother speaking of the 'assemblage of life at the margins' in the first place? What is that for? For whom is it for? And on what grounds do we do it? Patrick does the fundamental job of bringing 'assemblage' back to where it came from and in doing so he discusses the premises upon which this book is built. Through this account, Patrick implicitly re-assesses an important point: that re-thinking life at the margin is about sharing an ethos and is neither about building (or looking forward to) a definite statement around marginality, nor about establishing 'assemblage thinking' as *the* approach to enquire the margins. The book is about challenging those statements in the first place and, as Patrick shows us, to challenge our own positions, institutions and established knowledge too.

To build this book we have drawn implicitly and explicitly from established analytics of the margins and emergent vitalist ontologies. Marginal contexts and subjects are understood as a set of post-human articulations that are always open to the emergence of new events. This is not about romanticising life at the margins, but about widening the scope of what we look for when we approach that life in the first place. The task of re-imagining it is as urgent as it is messy, but it is also possible, as the authors of this book show. The key is to be ready to accept the intrinsic

multiplicity of life itself. And here lies the contribution of this book: it proposes a concrete way to begin the necessary *oeuvre* to acknowledge and be able to investigate the multiplicity of life. It does so through a vitalist lens, applying assemblage thinking as a tool to re-approach marginal contexts and subjects. These are re-framed to more precisely consider the entanglements of bodies, matter, knowledge, power, affects, etc. always (re)making margins and borders. Moreover, re-contextualisation and re-subjectification are not academic exercises but must lead to re-politicisation: of matter, of bodies, of borders - of *a life* at the margins.

As editor of this volume, I'd like to think of this as a micropolitical effort, a minor theory crafted to push our understanding of the margins and their borders a bit further (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986; Katz, 1996). 'Re-thinking' does not stand as a finalised action. We have not 're-thought' marginality with this volume. What we have done is provide some solid case studies around how it may be possible to look at the contexts, subjects and politics of the margins differently, in a way that may invite people toward the performative act of constantly 're-thinking' what is taken-for-granted around marginality. We hope that this minor thinking may allow readers to articulate new political questions and strategies. The book offers insights in this sense from at least two levels. The first is at the level of each singular chapter, with its own contextually-based and relevant insights on specific cases of marginalisation offering a wide array of rich ethnographies written from the North, the South, the body, the square, the park, the rural, the virtual and much more - an heterogeneity that is there to connect, to be used, to be multiplied. The other is at the level of the collective subjectivity enacted by these chapters: a tool, an assemblage, the sketch of a cultural politics that we hope people will criticise, take apart and bring forward to enhance alternative understandings of life and its margins.

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