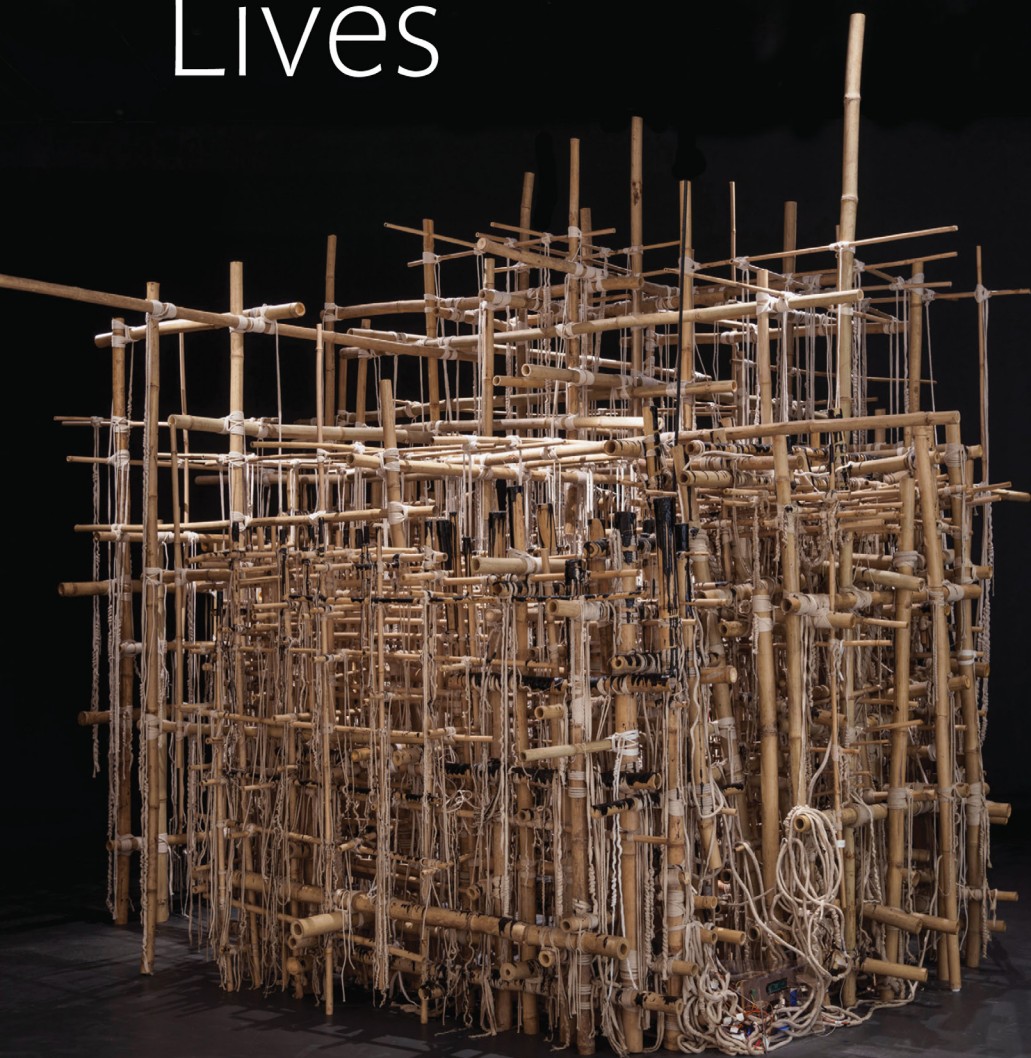


after the **postcolonial**

**Abdou Maliq
Simone**

Improvised Lives



Improvised Lives

After the Postcolonial
A series sponsored by the Smuts Memorial Fund
University of Cambridge

AbdouMaliq Simone, *Improvised Lives*

Improvised Lives

*Rhythms of Endurance
in an Urban South*

AbdouMalik Simone

polity

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For
Zaira Cheyenne Simone and Na'ilah Xazaar Simone

I

The Uninhabitable

The uninhabitable: those “lands of no one” (McKittrick 2013: 6). Lands that embodied inferiority and, once appropriated and settled through colonization, were further specified as the exclusive purview of those whose emplacement was to be considered “incongruous with humanness” (McKittrick 2013: 7). Katherine McKittrick asks, in the context of the plantation, whether or not that which was defined as lifeless perhaps points to simply a different form of life embedded in a range of “secretive histories” (2013: 10).

How we live is finally not that important; that we live is...
(Moten 2017: 191)

It hurts to live always undone and unfinished. It is heartbreaking. It is heartbreaking even when the impossibility is joyful or you catch a glimpse of a life outside that inflexible weight. (McKittrick and Weheliye 2017: 28)

Districting Somewhere

For several decades, my stepdaughter has occupied a two-room flat in a dreary mass of apartment blocks in

the Algiers suburb, Les Eucalyptus. She is fond of pointing out that she lives in a world on her own surrounded by glassy-eyed neighbors with far-away looks. They are not really there; they do not adhere to any script, she says. Their eyes are on prizes somewhere else. Each neighbor has different destinations in mind. Even when they navigate the same routines of drudgery, going to useless jobs, to markets short on everything, and to municipal buildings rife with conspiracies, they never take the same steps twice; they always alter the route.

Even on the single hallway in her building of chipped concrete, the dealers, the Salafists, and those who are devout about nothing in particular don't so much carve out territory but allow paths to be constantly crossed so that there is nothing recognizable to defend. If the police and their bevy of hangers-on report infractions, then the proliferation of possible mistakes that residents make never repeating the same routine twice turn everyday life into something nearly impossible to police. Yet simple courtesies and signs of respect are offered no matter how profound the fundamental disagreements about the basic life orientations. The repetition of prayer, intoxication, petty scams, and household chores induces a haze of tolerance, allowing the most minimal of actions to provoke small but pliable alterations in the unfolding of a day or night and the prospects or dangers this might bring.

All of the residents are convinced of big people behind the scenes. They can even sometimes name names. But they are also skeptical of their convictions. Ever attentive of each other, regardless of whoever they have thrown their lot in with, the profusion of words, gossip, stories, and impressions make up their bets on shaping the near future, indifferent though they may be as to what that future actually consists of.

For, in such districts, existing under permanent suspicion and suspension, it is important to manufacture

evidence that can be sifted through for clues that point to culprits in all directions; where the attentiveness of gazes, so vital to keep everyone in line, can't look everywhere at once, and so small gaps open for a quick deal, a quick fuck, a quick way out. This is not a world, my stepdaughter says, that is inhabitable.

Those who wear the pants may be weakly united in their need to occupy the public sphere, to mark out a domain amidst a landscape of dilapidated cafés, mechanic sheds, and tin-can-laden corner groceries. But Les Eucalyptus is a district of endless favors, sincere and feigned respect for those with the semblance of any kind of connection. Silently, the occasional young woman keeps her head down, resists the temptations of domestic dramas and household problem solving to finish enough school to get salaried somewhere. The financing for a new mosque or two may suddenly appear from disputed sources, but the pipes in most flats leak and often run dry. There are few repairs. Neighbors hear everything and know little about what to make of it.

Again, it is not that collective denial or stasis rules. For despite the stereotypes, the public and private are subject to oscillating inversions. Sitting in a café may be the only opportunity to be alone, even when, especially at night, all of the tables are taken. "Holding up the walls," as is the common expression for unemployed men, may indeed actually hold something up, as in intercept, block, or sustain. For the walls that divide domestic spaces, the purview largely of women, are not just porous sieves of information but marks of complex geographies where bonds and cuts in webs of lateral relations are made.

All of the doors that open and close a hundred times a day where nothing tangible seems to be exchanged, all of the stairs that are climbed up and down even when no doors are opened, all of the turning of the next

corner, the hesitations between school, shop, mosque, and home, all of the shared taxis hailed to reach the next kilometer, all make up the rhythms whereby Les Eucalyptus is turned inside out and back.

The question of holding is important. No matter how improvised, lives need to be held, supported. They need a somewhere in which to take place, and places need to be assessed in terms of what they are able to hold. But to hold easily mutates into a form of capture, and if urban life comes to depend upon improvisation, the holding cannot take the form of a strictly notated score. It cannot keep a strict count; it can't make some lives count more or less than others. For when improvisation takes off, one direction cannot count as more generative than any other; this uncertainty is part of the risk of such composition. Additionally, a somewhere must hold the "secretive histories" that McKittrick refers to in the chapter's opening lines; it must hold a darkness that provides cover for experiments residents may initiate but are not yet ready to commit fully to. A somewhere must proportion exposure and opacity.

So, improvised lives require a somewhere, and in this book I will look at this somewhere as *districts*, as places capable of holding an intensive heterogeneity of lives and ways of doing things, but which also do not hold residents down to specific regimens of discipline or anticipation. Rather, they attempt to hold residents to each other just enough to enable an atmosphere of mutual witnessing, to hold residents to an ethic of letting others go their own way without that way being seen as having dire implications for anyone else. Residents are then held in an atmosphere of things continuously being worked out and proportioned. An atmosphere of countervailing, complementary, and incommensurable measures that gives rise to a specific, yet changing sense of place.

This is a book situated in districts. Or more, precisely, it is a book about *districting*. By districting, I mean a process of creating a platform for operating in the world using a repertoire of available classifications and administrative categories to set out a terrain that is then turned into something that exceeds all efforts to definitively pin it down, to contain what it can do. This surfeit of experience provides the opportunity for residents to write themselves into a milieu that otherwise might seem to marginalize them and their ways of doing things. It is a process that aims less to make a particular place uninhabitable than it does to enable residents to spiral in and out, propel themselves into the larger urban surrounds and then bear back down again into the familiar places now rendered unfamiliar. It is the creation of a rhythm of itineraries that are themselves uninhabitable.

Let us take a well-known example of districting in the work of Sun Ra. For Sun Ra, going back in time, Egypt was the touchstone for what would become a complex interweaving of mythology, numerology, space travel, theosophy, Black nationalism, and the occult. Nominally a jazz musician who managed huge “arkestras” over a long career that folded in every type of music and sound imaginable, Sun Ra’s commitment was to a “Black knowledge society” – a technical capacity for going into the future as an extra-planetary urbanization. While the metaphors of Saturn and outer space permeated the representations of such an urbanization, what was intended beyond such metaphors was the technical realization of the imaginations and capacities Blacks honed in their great migration to the cities of the North from the hardscrabble rural tenancies of the South and the repressive Jim Crow practices that sought to keep them at the peripheries of Southern towns and cities.

This movement between the mythic pasts of Blackness and its future realization beyond the earth seemingly unable to accommodate it was Sun Ra's persistent practice of districting. But he was also engaged in much more prosaic efforts in this regard. When Sun Ra showed up in Chicago after the Second World War, there had already been several decades where Blacks of different residential histories and class backgrounds had worked hard to use the sheer presence of Black bodies in the city – their looks, voices, movements, rhythms, appetites, sexualities, and strivings – to build economies that enabled some measure of autonomy from subservience and resistance to marginalization. Racialized apparatuses of control came down hard on these efforts, and Sun Ra encountered a Chicago that put a squeeze on trade unions, the political left, radical organizations, as well as outlets of popular culture – show venues, media, and radio.

It was at this point that the emphasis on Black knowledge as technical operations took hold in Sun Ra's project. Black people did not go through all they went through just in order to be integrated into the terms of an American society that did everything possible to keep them out. After having acquired a substantial history of being in cities, of proving that there could be something like a "Black city" itself, extra-ordinary, "extra-planetary" efforts were required in order to concretize these attainments.

From street pamphleteering, small book imprints, records, and performances that crossed swing, bop, blues, show tunes, and experimental improvisation, appearances at strip clubs, weddings, concert halls, street parties, jazz clubs, circuses, and universities, and the intersection of intensive musical and philosophical experimentation with novelty entertainment and nods to the full gamut of Black associational life, Sun Ra and

his large bands and associates tried to become a *district* in themselves. This was not just improvised expression, but a process of intensive study (Sites 2012).

For Sun Ra, then, districting referred to an incessantly inventive practice of operating in the discontinuities between having a location in which one is identified and from which one can identify and speak to others *and* the capacity to address others, call upon them, and implicate them beyond the specificity of any location. As such, Egypt did not hold anything in itself, it was not a promise ready to spring into any kind of revolutionary action, but more a device that could relay the knowledge Sun Ra said that Blacks needed toward aspirations that continuously had to find different masks under which to operate, and also away from the strict codifications of what could be counted. For Sun Ra, it didn't matter that much if Black people were missing from inhabiting American urban life; what was more important was that they went "missing in action."

A Human Surge

Amidst the competing choruses of exaggeration and indifference, of longings for extinction and desperate boosts of immune systems, something surges forward and back. The surge is both power failure and inexplicable excess; it jumps scales while sometimes eliminating anything to fall back on. It is a strange rhythm neither reconcilable to ancient cyclic times nor acceleration. This is a rhythm perhaps best exemplified in Eduardo Williams' film, *The Human Surge* (2016). Wavering indiscernibly between documentary and fiction, youth in Buenos Aires, Maputo, and Isla Bohol (Philippines) are depicted as incessantly in motion, seemingly aimless even as many of them have steady jobs. They search for