

## Urban Margins and the Global Intimate

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### Abstract

The papers in this themed issue draw on the feminist analytic of the global intimate to center ongoing practices of world making and offer conceptual and emancipatory possibilities for feminist urbanism. Collectively, the papers interrogate and challenge scalar and discursive notions of the ‘center,’ analyze the significance and limitations of the urban as a site of aspiration, and present strategies adopted for world making and urban belonging. Looking from Ladakh and other Indian cities, Yucatán in Mexico, and the cities of Tehran and Mashhad in Iran, the papers facilitate a dialogue across South-South contexts and contribute to reframing the process of knowledge production.

### Keywords

Global intimate, global South, urban belonging, Iran, South Asia, Mexico

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## Introduction

I am honored to have been an interlocutor<sup>1</sup> in an enriching discussion on the potential of looking from margins within and across the urban South to understand socio-spatial belonging and envision (urban) futures.<sup>2</sup> Each paper draws on the feminist analytic of the global intimate to center ongoing practices of world making and to offer conceptual and emancipatory possibilities for feminist urbanism.

The experiences and perspectives of those located at margins within the global South, the authors show, dovetail with but also exceed familiar theories that shape what ‘we’ may expect to see, what we may expect to find, what is rendered visible, and what is legible to us. The papers strengthen feminist discussions on visibility and recognition through a focus on geopolitical power matrices, the global South, and margins therein, and extend our understanding of the political possibilities of the intimate; in its embodied and affective dimensions (Secor 2002; Gökarıksel 2012; Fluri 2011). The we/us here refers to academics, with the authors of the themed issue being primarily early career researchers located in global North institutions, who hold a complex and varying positioning vis-à-vis their areas of study, have a long-term research engagement with their field site, intertwined with familiarity borne of their experiences growing up in these locations, or diasporic, familial, and kinship networks. Such positioning is far from straightforward, and its navigation involves complex dynamics which shape the forms of knowledge obtained, rendering a necessarily partial knowing (Rose 1997; Mullings 1999; Cuomo and Massaro 2016; Parikh 2020). The rendering entails careful attention, in translating knowledge – linguistically, culturally, and geographically, probing and exceeding existing frames of reference.

Three important lines of insight emerge across the papers, which as I discuss below hold value for feminist geographic and critical urban discussions on interrogating the ‘center’ and extend ongoing scholarly concerns about subjectivity and belonging. Thinking across these papers also furthers the goal of looking from the margins and dialoguing across South-South contexts to reframe the process of knowledge production (Roy 2011; Robinson 2016; Lawhon and Truelove 2019). The latter is further facilitated through publishing in an open-access journal which opens broader possibilities for knowledge dissemination and circulation.

## Intimate Urbanism and Scalar Hierarchies

The feminist analytic of the global intimate considers the intimate as an entry point to interrogate the local-global binary, wherein the local and the global are positioned as mutually exclusive realms. Such partitioning is informed by scalar hierarchies, with the global located at the center, as the initiator of processes, which then shape or manifest in the peripheral space of the local (Peake and Rieker 2013). Such partitioning is imbued with power dynamics that structure differential forms of visibility and recognition of the periphery and the center. Instead, feminist scholars argue that the intimate is already global (Mountz and Hyndman 2006). In other words, processes of globalization do not precede intimate acts, but rather are constituted by them (Pratt and Rosner 2012). The proposed fungibility between the

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion began during two paper sessions entitled ‘Urbanism and Marginality in the Global South’ at the 2018 meeting of the American Association of Geographers and continued as we put together the themed issue.

<sup>2</sup> A big thanks to all at the ACME collective, especially to Rachel Goffe for her pivotal role as a co-editor. Thanks also to all the authors. I have learnt a lot from this process and the scholarship.

intimate and the global disrupts long standing scalar hierarchies and serves to rework what we understand as being global.

Within this paradigm, the papers in this themed issue show how the intimate serves as an important entry point to make visible and interrogate the production of *centrality* (and thereby peripherality) and its often-fragmentary nature, thereby reworking our understanding of what the center is. Such an analysis occurs in tandem with critical urban scholarship that has stressed the significance of social ontology (Ruddick et al. 2017) to challenge an assumed center (Kipfer 2018) and the presumed notion of its totality as a process (Ruddick et al. 2017; Jazeel 2017).

### **Subjectivity and Belonging**

Attention to the relational production of subjectivity and space reveals fragmentary and exclusionary processes (Probyn 2003), but also ways that differentially positioned subjects make claims to foment belonging within them. Such claims involve tactics of appropriation to make lively and joyful urban spaces (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011; Simone 2018; Parikh 2019), or ones that otherwise emphasize use value over exchange value (Purcell 2003). As such, we can see how those on social and spatial margins, against all odds, sometimes remake the urban spaces that they inhabit.

The papers in this themed issue open various ways to think about subjectivity, appropriation, and belonging. Ranjbar, in her paper titled “Soapboxes and Stealth on Revolution Street” shows the significance of embodied acts in explicating the link between subjectivity and belonging. Her paper looks at women’s decision-making around dressing in Iran’s urban public spaces to articulate questions of differential gendered subjectivity. Whilst similarly insisting on freedom (from mandatory hijab) to make claims to belonging at multiple scales, it is their dissimilar dressing choices (as opposed to what they are demanding) that gains hypervisibility and shapes their differential subject formation.

The other two papers focus on appropriation of modernization narratives to claim belonging, even while being aware that these may be only partially realized. In Fonseca Alfaro’s paper, based in Yucatán, Mexico, and titled “Feminist Lefebvre? Understanding Urbanization through the Global Intimate,” it is through the incremental building of a brick home that those on the margins carve out material spaces of belonging. Despite the long *durée* of its realization, these spaces lively with use value allow the restoration of dignity and the formation of an agential subject position. Gergan and Smith’s paper, “Theorizing the City: Racialized Minority Youth in India’s Global Cities” is focused on Ladakhi migrant youth who are positioned at national and global margins. However, they do not see their destiny as being pre-given and appropriate urban spaces, or attempt to, to fulfill their own aspirations. These processes, the authors argue, shapes the subjectivity of these youth as those whose reshaped sense of self form their foray into urban spaces, allows them to critically view both the city and their homeplace.

### **Knowledge Production and (Urban) Futures**

Finally, the fostering and reworking of multi-scalar center periphery relations provides important insights about power hierarchies and subject formation within unjust conditions. These accounts show how world making occurs while those at the margins navigate structural inequities. Across these grounded accounts – each in their contextual specificity – we see contingent forms of conjectural possibilities (Derickson 2017). In other words, looking critically from the margins not only ruptures

dominant forms of knowledge production (Katz 1996; 2017) but also offers new, non-unitary ways (Oswin 2016) of seeing, knowing, and imagining (Andrucki and Dickinson 2015).

The papers here provide insights about knowledge production that emerges from a focus on social and spatial margins within the global South. These include the significance of embodied and material engagements in understanding how individuals and groups fulfill their aspirations within and beyond systems that limit their capacities and subversively challenge the scripts that have been prescribed for their futures.

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