

– TRANSLATIONAL GLOBAL PRACTICE: Rethinking Methods and Modes of African Urban Research

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Abstract

Advancing global urbanism depends upon making Africa's cities a more dominant part of the global urban narrative. Constructing a more legitimate research agenda for African cities, however, necessitates a repositioning of conventional modes of research. To achieve intellectual and political traction in what are typical African research conditions—where human needs are great, information is poor, conditions of governance are complex and the reality is changeable—we reflect on the experiences of the African Centre for Cities where (alongside conventional use of theory, methods and data) a translational mode of working has been adopted. The notion of translational urban research praxis captures more than the idea of applied research or even co-production, and encompasses integrating the research conception, design, execution, application and reflection—and conceiving of this set of activities as a singular research/practice process that is by its nature deeply political and locationally embedded. In this way we suggest that African urbanism can be both usefully illuminated by global theories and methods, and can simultaneously be constitutive of the reform of the ideas through which cities generally are understood.

Introduction

Questions of African urban exceptionalism, and the related but not equivalent issue of the incorporation of 'the African' into global urbanism, have theoretical, political and practical implications. Noting our own ambiguous standpoint on what if anything sets the African city apart from cities elsewhere,¹ the purpose of this intervention is not to resolve whether or what constitutes a universal urban condition, but to probe a more inclusive research agenda that makes African urban research legible and influential internationally. Given the clear uncoupling of urbanization and industrialization across much of Africa (Potts, 2009; Fox, 2012; Buckley and Kallergis, 2014), our notion of cityness is unlikely to ever align with that outlined by Scott and Storper (2015). Their somewhat dated position, like that of the World Bank's (2009) landmark report, centres economic agglomeration above all other expressions of urbanism and is, by implication, either dismissive or ignorant of most Southern urban realities, characterized by economic informality, multiplicity, marginality and dispersion, not agglomeration (Rigg *et al.*, 2009; Turok and McGranahan, 2013; Buckley and Kallergis, 2014; Turok, 2014). Foregrounding 'the (formal) economic' amounts to an African urban denialism that, if embraced literally, would be even more damaging for advancing the African urban cause than that which emerged from the urban bias thesis of the 1980s (Lipton, 1977), when investing in African cities was seen to deplete rural development, and which has since been roundly rejected by development theorists (Jones and Corbridge, 2010) and African urbanists (Simone, 2004; Potts, 2009; Myers, 2011).

What is useful in these provocations about the essential character of cities, however, is the quest to understand the drivers of city formation and change, and the insistence that scholars extrapolate from a particular case to a more general argument

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1 This 'contradiction' is not unusual in a middle-income context like South Africa, but even more generally we identify arguments that African cities need special treatment (Parnell and Pieterse, 2014) at the same time as we make the case that general urban processes manifest in African cities, and that they need to be more rigorously and robustly interrogated using conventional tools of urban analysis (Parnell, 1997; Pieterse, 2008). These should not be considered as mutually exclusive or contradictory positions, though clearly where one puts the emphasis in defining a research agenda is important.

that goes beyond the obvious assertion that all cities are different and must be understood on their own terms (Robinson, 2006; Jayne, 2013; Smith, 2013). Understanding the fundamental issue—of what ultimately shapes the city (and the associated question of the impact of a city or system of cities)—is also a prerequisite for knowing what can be done to effect city change. Theory is thus key to any transformative urban engagement. But because theory, method and data are an inseparable trinity, the contemporary African city presents particular challenges in working across the three elements of knowledge, no doubt in part because of the very different spatial and temporal urban contexts in which the methods of research were crafted.

The task of thinking abstractly or reflectively about cities is not simply an academic but also a political exercise, as the editors of this journal are only too aware (Boudreau and Kaika, 2013). The political power of ideas looms large in Africa, where the urban crisis threatens the lives and wellbeing of hundreds of millions and the long-term implications of the massive expansion of the continent's cities reverberates across ecological processes. Failure to inform the improvement in the conditions of urban residents or to uphold the integrity of the city–nature nexus should automatically call into question conventional research assumptions and unleash new ways of probing urban conditions (Swilling and Annecke, 2012). This has not happened, as the global urban community has largely stood by and ignored the African city. The scale of Africa's urban transition and its incomplete absorption into a globalized account of cities therefore demands careful collective evaluation and a reordering of the value base of the global knowledge machine (Oldfield *et al.*, 2004; Watson, 2009; Myers, 2011; Pieterse, 2013a). This essay considers two aspects of this: firstly the emergence of a translational mode of work in African cities; and secondly the unrealistic barriers that conventional methods erect for researching African cities. The concluding section draws together these imperatives to suggest that rethinking the methods and modes of urban research in ways that account for the real politics of knowledge would insert both Africa into global urbanism and global urbanism into Africa.

The politics of urban knowledge: imperatives for translational research

Maintaining the connection between urban theory and reality is, as Robinson reminds us (2002; 2006), a locationally specific as well as universal imperative. Jayne (2013: 5, emphasis added) goes on to argue that the influence of 'ordinary cities', or cities off the urban studies map, 'can only fully be understood with reference to a number of recently emerging bodies of literature which seeks to unveil asymmetric relations of power and influence across academic, policy, and *political realms*'. Taken together, the pointers offered by these ordinary city advocates amount to an injunction to define site- (and, we would add, time-) relevant ideas that engage the everyday politics of city change, as well as calibrate the overall significance of the urban transition in Africa. What is unclear as yet is how best to do this, though we argue that a global opening up of the modes of legitimate academic investigation to embrace the political imperatives of urban change would help.

Across the loosely connected debates of Southern cities/ordinary cities/global urbanism/planetary urbanism/the universal notion of urbanism is the foregrounding of the role of methods in a general theory of cities (Parnell and Oldfield, 2014). To this end, there has been a close discussion of comparative urbanism (Nijman, 2007; Robinson, 2011; 2015, this issue) even while there are regular calls to be mindful of the gaps in the relevant data, especially for African cities (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2013; Martine and McGranahan, 2014). Partly in response to the paucity of formal data and partly an outcome of the distorting preoccupation with individuals and micro-scale experiences, the African urban literature produced around the turn of the twenty-first century largely sidestepped direct engagement with broad theoretical discussions of the urban future (Parnell and Robinson, 2012). This is no longer the case, with key interventions

on African cities from Myers (2011), Pieterse and Simone (2013) and Parnell and Pieterse (2014), as well as a series of interventions from scholars consciously positioning the African urban against a global theorizing of the city that otherwise eludes the continent (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004; Pieterse, 2008; Watson, 2009; Bank, 2011; Lawhon *et al.*, 2013; Mabin, 2014). What this nascent African urban literature has at its core is the centrality of 'the political' in defining the objects of research, the process of research and the outcome of research.

The process of scaling up and translating city-scale African politics has a long way to go. The variation across the many nations, the vast uncharted territory of cities and towns, and the inadequate cadre of urban researchers all militate against quick intellectual progress. Africa runs the risk of being left behind in the quest for an account of global urbanism. But, while African urbanists might continue to punch below their weight, there are contributions that can and must be made. Reflecting on the apparently 'parochial' material being generated on the nature of urban knowledge co-construction in one research hub, the African Centre for Cities (ACC) at the University of Cape Town (www.africancentreforcities.net) shows that a more rigorous and self-conscious positioning of methods and practices of co-production, when constituted as a political act of research that is responsive to Africa's complex and problematic realities (as opposed to the conventional denigration of applied research), might usefully speak to the broader debates currently underway within the urban studies community as it seeks redefinition for greater global legitimacy.

The entry point of foregrounding methods, not findings, is widely practiced at the ACC (*cf.* Cartwright *et al.*, 2012; Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Pieterse, 2013b; Watson, 2014; Patel *et al.*, 2015) and has its roots in addressing the mismatch between the needs of African urban residents, decision makers and knowledge professionals—a longstanding gap which has generated an applied mode of scholarship elsewhere on the continent (*cf.* Frayne *et al.*, 2012; Napier *et al.*, 2013). The ACC work aims to extend the ambitions of traditional applied research and seeks a knowledge engagement that is more aligned to what the medical sciences call translational research (Woolf, 2008; Drolit and Lorenz, 2011).

The notion of translational urban research praxis captures more than the idea of applied research, or even co-production, and encompasses integrating the research conception, design, execution, application and reflection—and conceiving of this set of activities as a singular research/practice process. Central to an alternative register of research is the assertion that (politicized) methodological approaches enabling urban transformation should be foregrounded.² Rethinking alternative and complementary methods alongside traditional ones to achieve translational modes of engagement is made possible by adopting a normative stance, committed to modes of working that are cognisant of local constraints in the design, execution and implementation phases of research. Research in fragile places (Africa or elsewhere) is thus able to take account of factors such as corruption or capacity constraints that might not apply to Northern cities in the same measure—where the thick institutional structures of academia, civil society and the state (while undoubtedly under threat) remain well established, financially endowed and functional.

It is not just anti-urbanism or fragile securities that threaten the integrity or autonomy of conventional research undertakings in African cities, though these are not exceptional challenges. In most African cities, politicians and officers do not share a professional or technical discourse; there is rarely common purpose on what constitutes adequate knowledge from which to make strategic planning decisions for cities,

2 We are absolutely not arguing that conventional methods should be abandoned. Indeed, there may be as much to be gained in the expansion of traditional research in Africa as there is in this parallel action-based research.

coupled with a rapid turnover of staff and politicians; and, of course, the data is sparse and unreliable. Outside of South Africa and a few other places, conventional research methods are either unviable or compromised (Potts, 2012), a point we will return to in the next section. To meditate the barriers to access and data, the tendency is to look to co-production or partnership-based research as an alternative to conventional theory-generated or evidence-based knowledge production (e.g. UCLG, 2013; UN Habitat, 2014).

The African context typically demands a research practice that is able to work without the stable institutions or flexibility or partnerships of co-production, and so research demands a responsiveness to change within normalized regimes and institutions (Pieterse, 2013a). The implication of this institutional fragmentation in African cities is a much greater imperative for academics 'at the edges of the global map' to take a step further than that of co-production, to engage directly the transformation of city practice, generating knowledge to inform change and producing knowledge from urban change (hence the logic of a translational mode of research).³

Having set out imperatives for urbanists to reconsider how Africa is taken up in global accounts of the city, and for (African) urbanists to adopt translational approaches to their work, we show that the way this is actually happening can be illustrated by the ways in which the ACC has sought (not always successfully) to (re)position the urban research agenda (Table 1). What started as a response to the widely acknowledged lacuna in evidence for documenting and analysing urban change in Africa, in ways that had traction for residents, policymakers and implementers, is slowly giving rise to new modes of research practice where staff are embedded in city institutions (and city officials come to the university to write up practice-based knowledge), research agendas are co-determined with NGOs, local-authority officials and politicians, and 'city labs' enable joint debate of relevant local research questions and findings. Alongside book and peer-reviewed journal publications that are framed by conventional research theory, methods and data, a new genre of writing is evident—sometimes the work is published in popular books but also in provocative magazines, exhibitions and tailored for social media platforms—outlets that are characterized by a concern to explore and grow alternative practices of urban knowledge that are tied to the fostering of multiple publics. Importantly, formal city and national policies have been conceived, approved and implemented with the direct engagement of academics at the ACC; there are also ample examples of policy failure and rejection.

By its nature the urban expression of 'translational research' is locationally grounded, if not site specific. What is equally clear is that translational methods are varied in both form and outcome. There are a number of different examples of the translational/practice-generated or co-produced wave of African urban research, including the work of Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) on generating community-based enumeration (Bradlow, 2013; Watson, 2014), numerous ethnographic community studies (Oldfield, 2000; Rao *et al.*, 2007) and academics recording participatory engagements in collaborative city, national and global urbanization policies (Pieterse, 2008; Watson, 2009; Turok, 2014). There is also critical reflection on what the urban journey from participation to co-production to collaboration actually entails (Watson, 2014). What stands out from this African experience is that the face-to-face engagement of scholars with communities and states (and to a lesser extent the private sector) from the moment of research design through execution, publication and implementation is familiar terrain, underscoring the importance of rejecting any old-fashioned notions of an ivory tower for urban studies in favour of a translational attitude (Parnell, 1997).

3 That said, there is of course no reason why scholars in such contexts may not choose to conduct pure research or philosophical exploration for its own sake (and legitimately so).

TABLE 1 ACC's multiple modes of explorations at the knowledge–practice interface

Research Mode	Methods	Example	Purpose
Pure research	Data design, collection and analysis using established research theories and methods	See UCT research reports (http://www.researchoffice.uct.ac.za/research_reports/annual/)	Understand past legacies; analysis of different aspects of urban complexity (e.g. politics, design, welfare, culture, resource flows, social identities, labour markets, regulation, curriculum reform)
Applied research and advisory services	Driven by the client or partner, but nominally including conventional literature reviews, qualitative and quantitative methods	South African National Urban Framework; position papers for UN Habitat or Cities Alliance; advice to donors on urban issues and urban/planning curriculum and professional reform	Engage with decision makers; influence the development agenda to advance a stronger urban focus; assert the normative base of African urbanism; impart useful knowledge and skills to urban practitioners
Embedded researchers and practitioners in co-production	Driven by practitioners' generated data and policy imperatives	City of Cape Town indigent policy, green economy, energy and climate policies	Language for understanding the current constellation; legitimate analysis of what needs to shift within public institutions; learn by using academic and local knowledge of practice
City labs	Mixed methods characterized by a strong inter- and trans-disciplinary focus	Urban health, ecosystem services, human settlements, culture, ecology, alcohol, violence as well as area based city labs	Create epistemic communities or action networks within the academy and between the university and other knowledge actors; transdisciplinary and action research evident
Professional networks	Translational (see text)	Hosting and enabling large comparative projects, e.g. MUF (http://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/en) or AFSUN (http://www.afsun.org) or Professional urban Networks e.g. AAPS (http://www.africanplanningschools.org.za)	Insert an African component into international research and activities; build African urban research capacity and African networks; stimulate published research
CityScapes	Combining long-form reportage with visual methods; story-telling; opinion pieces to promote considered polemic	http://www.cityscapesdigital.net	Foster a compelling discourse across the global South between informed and lay urbanists that is trained on the emergent contexts in all of its richness
Exhibitions	Articulating research findings through story-telling and visual method connected to research by design studios; gaming with youth to generate emergent insights	Draws an evidence base from all of the above	A creative means to engage a popular audience and instil a deeper societal interest in the city and urban policy issues and clarify where academic research remains obscure and unsure in its applications

While new for urban studies, there are precedents elsewhere in academia. The blurring of the roles of practitioners and intellectuals was initially renamed and legitimized as co-production by economists (Ostrom, 1996). The logic was taken further by health professionals, insofar as they sought to redefine what was done in service delivery based on the knowledge generated. This translational understanding provides a more radical and grounded politics within urban research, especially for contexts like those across Africa, and helps to overcome some of the other methodological difficulties encountered by the continent's research community.

The wicked question of method in urban research

Despite the universally acknowledged importance of method, there is little consensus as to when individual methods have been effectively deployed, which research methods are appropriate or when entirely new methods should be sought. Yet the issue of methodological innovation both reflects and is formative of a new global urbanism. One reason there is so little debate about the transferability of research methods is that methods, like theory, lie at the heart of different philosophical approaches and are thus ideologically contested. Expanding or amending the research mandate to incorporate a translational urban agenda that works in African contexts implies the need for a paradigm shift in urban studies more generally. Put more boldly, it is inordinately difficult, using only established research methods, to research the African city and use the findings of research from Africa to destabilize urban theory formation. Either Africa must be ignored or the theory, method and data of urban studies must change. The former is not possible and so we need to better understand the barriers to finding appropriate new methods of (African) urban research.

There is in fact considerable appetite within the urban research community to move the epicentre of urban research from the global North to the South (Miraftab, 2011; Parnell and Oldfield, 2014). But this geographical reorientation brings with it considerable methodological and ethical challenges. For example, in Europe and North America the study of cities has long since moved beyond description. Given the dearth of knowledge about cities in Africa, however, the old-fashioned practice of the description of the urban condition must be reinstated whilst other sophisticated analytical techniques are adopted. The acknowledged mismatch between theory and the grounded urban experiences of the cities of the South raises the dilemma of whether new theory or new 'facts' should lead the way in illuminating a more general understanding of Southern urban processes. The logic of translational research begins with description and the co-construction of a knowledge base to provide a legitimate and shared understanding of the state of the city and its needs.

Associated with overcoming the *terra incognita* of many African cities is the question of what methods and ethical protocols are most appropriate for researching new, hidden or under-theorized urban issues such as conflict and informality interwoven with multiple and shifting lines of illegality. The tendency thus far has been to let individual- or household-scale research protocols dominate, but methodologically such data are not much use in exposing structural injustices or in scaling up understanding of how cities and systems of cities operate. One danger in translational research is that it gets caught up in immediate imperatives and is bounded by perceptions of what can change, rather than tackling the longer-term and more structural issues of the drivers of urban development. In part for this reason, some scholars have pursued both empirical and theoretical research in Southern contexts from within the traditional or conventional ambit of political-economy research (*cf.* Seekings and Natrass, 2011; Crankshaw, 2012). What their work highlights is the methodological challenge of managing weak or missing data in the African context. This is not just a technical point about data gaps and data cleaning, though the importance of putting massive effort into these routine tasks can become much more significant to the overall research burden where there is no secondary literature from which to draw. There are similar issues as to what is possible for the researcher of the African city to achieve in contributing to international trend analysis given data cost, coverage and reliability.

Given the global shifts in urbanization making Africa and Asia the most significant centres of urbanism, methodological concerns affecting the regional distortions of what might be assessed as world-leading research (or even just research worthy of publication) lie at the heart of how these regions are treated in the global urbanism project (Roy, 2009; Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010). Rejecting African urban research

because it describes the uncharted territory rather than contribution to existing debates on urban change, or objecting that African analysis does not fulfil conventional methodological criteria (such as in big data or quantitative analysis) when these criteria are unattainable, could be seen as a methodological syndrome of exclusion. Ironically, it may be that the absence of clear methodological protocols in urban research renders it harder to make the case for the innovation in African case studies, a situation not helped by a lack of focus among African urbanists.

There has never been a methodological consensus in the way cities or city regions are researched, and tensions over what the focus and mode of research should be is compounded by the huge range of disciplines studying cities. This problem is not unique to African cities, but across the continent contestation over urban identity and the definition of what is (or is not) a city is pronounced, with almost disproportionate attention given to studying the peri-urban, circular migration and fluid city identities. By definition, research on 'the urban' traverses disciplines, scales and philosophical and methodological paradigms. But without a common object or frame of analysis, as is commonly the case for Africa, the judgement on the quality of the methodological component of the research either becomes more contested or, worse, issues of method are just ignored. The absence of debate about methods within African urban studies, in part the reflection of the chimera of 'the urban', then has the unintended consequence of: either relegating issues of methodological integrity to an arcane concern, acting as a decisive element of quality assurance for a smaller and smaller proportion of research; or, because methods used in African urban research are not clear, replicable or robust, the value of published work is diminished, thwarting critical reflection on what these urban realities say about city research findings more widely.

In seeking to delineate a new global geography of cities, we should not anticipate methodological cohesion (Robinson, 2011; Roy and Ong, 2011; Sheppard *et al.*, 2013; Parnell and Oldfield, 2014). One of many tensions generated by translational (as in inter- or trans-disciplinary) research space is how to foster mixed methods within (and across) particular contributions and philosophical paradigms. Fostering an ecumenical stance on method ensures parallel threads of specialist method traditions within the overall suite of methodologically diverse interventions and leaves open conventional quality assurance mechanisms. The trouble is that few authors (or reviewers) have sufficient methodological expertise to authoritatively assess the application of mixed methods, let alone expand this to be in a position to judge the ethical and methodological robustness of an overtly political intervention—as the translational approach implies. For example, while quantitative research has clear, if demanding, protocols for the use of models, qualitative research is typically much more open and difficult to assess for methodological robustness, but there are nevertheless useful protocols and procedures that ensure quality and consistency. Extending the debate about research ethics and methods to a translational urban study is essential if individual political positions and values are not to predominate. The methodological imperatives of critical realism and complexity science already deal explicitly with issues of agency, but the emphasis on causation is difficult to satisfy, especially in paper-length publications on cities that few scholars have heard of. Nevertheless, integrating theory, method, data and outcome is precisely the meta-concern that should guide the global urban studies project.

Urban research methods cannot be disassociated from the wider context of knowledge production which, as we are acutely aware, is not just in flux but also under considerable fiscal pressure. Cuts in research funding and the massification of higher education have reduced academic opportunities for original research and led to a disproportionate dependence on postgraduate students in generating primary research. One concern is that, because of the time and capacity constraints associated with dissertation-driven research, new knowledge production is increasingly based on

generative methodological approaches, not innovative ones. Another is that translational research assumes local knowledge and credibility—something that students take time to establish. There are biases towards cost-effective methods and empirical research or case studies being undertaken in cities that have universities, a facility rarely present in Africa's university-scarce environments. The case of the ACC is germane, with an increasing proportion of South African work focused on Cape Town at the expense of other less well-documented urban centres.

In building up a new literacy of cities beyond the West, it might be useful to undertake systematic reviews of African urban research based on its allegedly more robust synthesis of existing knowledge and the fact that systematic reviews have been known to generate high-impact papers that actively advance debate. But first we need to build the necessary capacity to get some of the basic information on the urban process in these little-known places (some of which are actually large cities) into practice and into peer-reviewed formats, and this (as indicated earlier) is not so simple given the pressures and institutional assumptions of the global publication system.

A serious concern is the shift by funding agencies in Europe and North America to making a few large grants rather than smaller individual grants, thereby changing how research is organized. The emphasis now is on large-scale, multi-site, multi-partner projects, with methods defined at the scale of the project or programme, not the individual investigation. This might give greater profile to African cases, but inappropriate methods of comparative projects hold their own dangers. It could be that the more deliberate collective consideration given to the methodological issues will increase methodological accountability, but the more common outcome is that the strength of research design is diluted by collective research efforts and applications. The manner in which research universities assess outputs has changed profoundly over the last decade, especially in the UK under the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The issue is whether only summative papers achieve the highest levels of recognition, or if foundational empirical investigations or methodological assessments can also be judged as being of the highest value. More generally, driven in part by the global university ranking systems' dependence on citations and also the more active involvement of publishers seeking to increase their impact factors, there is a focus on publishing in highly cited journals rather than books. It may be that some methodological approaches, especially those focused on practical change in Africa's cities, will be marginalized in this restructuring of scholarly outputs; this exclusion, like others identified here, must have a direct bearing on an emergent global urbanism.

Inserting Africa into global urbanism and global urbanism into Africa

At the risk of being simplistic, producing urban knowledge means undertaking systematic, robust and useful work wherever cities existed, exist or are likely to emerge. This is uncontestable, but what a number of recent publications and the debate in this issue make clear is that the ideas and modes of learning that inform enquiry into the massive expansion and range of urban conditions that have proliferated over the last half-century are deeply contested and may, as currently configured, even be exclusionary. The extent of the incorporation of cities of the South into the core of urban research (content and method) will define what has come to be termed global urbanism (Robinson, 2011; Roy and Ong, 2011). For this revamped global urbanism to have traction in Africa, we need to do more than change big ideas—we need to transform our cities too, and this activist mandate means expanding the mode and not just the scope of urban research. It also means creating a cadre of urbanists—practitioners and scholars (Watson and Odendaal, 2013). Embracing translational research is one possible way forward for a more Afro-centric global urbanism, but this requires a global repositioning and a shift within the continent's research culture and scale of operation.

Much of the debate around the nature and form of global urbanism has eluded scholars and practitioners on the African continent, in part because of the limited absolute urban research capacity needed to process the opaque complexity that is found in the largely 'informal'⁴ and undocumented cities of Africa (Simone, 2004; Murray and Meyers, 2006; Pieterse and Simone, 2013). A less glamorous explanation for Africa's marginalization from the mainstream of urban studies is the preoccupation of university-based academics with the steady supply of paid applied research that emerges from funder-led agendas. In its worst form, donor research projects are short-termist and oblivious to local imperatives, and they are certainly not accommodating of long-term reflection. Few academics actually publish from the consultancy work, which then remains trapped in grey literatures. Thankfully the situation is shifting; the imperative of promoting independent peer-reviewed African urban research capacity is gradually gaining traction and the sheer scale of peer-reviewed African urban research is expanding steadily (Cities Alliance, 2013; Duminy, 2013).

Caught up with what is important for the here and now, African voices have been somewhat muted in the wider discussions of global urbanism (Parnell, 1997; Pieterse, 2008; Myers, 2011). The whole point of the ordinary-city framing was to create an inclusive and comprehensive platform for urban dialogue that not only embraced hidden places, like so many cities and towns in Africa (Robinson, 2006), but also revealed the internal and external workings and flows of urban spaces beyond that of global-city networks (Amin and Graham, 1997). A generalizable or comparative understanding of 'the city' is rarely the overt concern of the continent's urbanists. Nor have African urban registers been taken up elsewhere, other than possibly with regard to the fluid migration-based lifestyles of city residents, where African accounts have been internationally influential largely through the work of Simone (2001; 2004), de Boeck and Plissart (2004) and Mbembe and Nuttall (2004). There is thus not much evidence of African interventions in the international discussion of ordinary, or comparative, urbanism, although Africans are far more in evidence in discussions on Southern urbanism (Pieterse, 2008; 2013a; Watson, 2009; 2014; Mabin, 2014; Parnell and Oldfield, 2014).

Speaking back from the African experience to mould emerging debates on global urbanism is however imperative, as we shift the rationale of scholarship to take up wicked questions such those thrown out by Pieterse (2013a) in his recent IJURR lecture at the AAG. How best can meaningful knowledge about the urban be produced? What should we produce knowledge for? And, echoing Jayne again, what do these questions mean for the politics of knowledge production in the global South?

In response to these critical questions, we have suggested that constructing a global urbanism has to embrace divergent methods, not just concepts and values, in order to ensure greater representivity. More specifically, legitimizing translational methods alongside more traditional approaches may enable greater African visibility in the global urban debate. Responsibility for undertaking a global recalibration must lie with urbanists who are already familiar with African urban complexity, but the absurdity of the claim to a global urbanism that eludes Africa makes clear the need for a scaling up of collective engagement with the most elusive and challenging cities of our age, a disproportionate percentage of which are located in Africa.

In addition to a closer engagement with the content of African urban scholarship, we have shown that the Africanist engagement with an experimental form of methodological pragmatism or translational research is forging new ways of populating the global urban. This highly political form of working is as much grounded in the messy experiences of city government, civil society organizations and everyday politics

4 The notion of 'informality' is a term very widely and loosely applied to a range of conditions that is so large and complex.

as it is in academic concerns to explain and offer fresh insights based on robust observation and analysis.

Positioning and populating an alternative 'translational global urbanism' rests on embracing fresh ideas to inform urban theory-building that are already taking place and now need to be recognized. This includes looking at overly political methods of working in cities that may unlock theoretical insights. Viewed thus, African researchers need not be thought of as missing in action. By consciously working with what African urbanists do in and through the translational research genre, a much richer body of knowledge about contemporary cities becomes apparent. Herein lie the antecedents of a cosmopolitan urbanism that need only to be allocated an appropriate intellectual place for a more flexible theorization of cities.

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