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Afterword: Out there (or, do we have lift off?)

AbdouMaliq Simone 

University of Sheffield, UK

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‘It is about how to reach what is out there’, exclaims Mahmoud al-Bashir, a Brujani Sufi shaykh reclining in a corner wall of his dust laden compound in Mayo at the outskirts of Khartoum. In the midst of a prolonged account of how he came to occupy the leadership of this tariqa – a Sufi association – I had attempted to insert a quick question as to the aims of the *zikr* (worship) held at different desert sites each Thursday evening. It was something friends would describe as the Brujani disco, for it involved trucks carrying generators to power large mobile spotlights that would illuminate the sky as three lines with roughly 75 persons each would chant ‘Allah, Allah, Allah . . .’ long into the night with an entire line occasionally levitating several feet from the ground. As a frequent participant in these gatherings, I can attest to the reality of this vertical rising, which was always a collective experience for the line of persons as a whole, regardless of whether an individual sought this or not. Even al-Bashir who led the worship as an isolated figure from the front would always find his feet firmly on the ground, for as he went on the explain, one can reach the heavens never as an individual or neither as a point on a line, but as a marker of an interstice, a space so endlessly divisible that it always flees up and outwards.

For lines such as this – bodies shrouded in white, probably concealing gender and part chorus line, military formation, school yard line-up and marching band, concretise the virtual capacities of any location within the ambit of an apparatus of control, one that assigns proportionalities of value and use. This line marks a process of heterogeneous sites and actors composing relations in common, and holds the heterogeneity of new virtualities emerging from such a practice. Such lines of virtuality come and go, never seeking to institutionalise one particular mode of appearance. Instead of instantiating a narrative aimed at constituting and establishing itself within a specific audience, ineffable lines of virtuality always attempt to recompose lives with others, operate through an imperceptibility indicating their widening up to a proliferation of perceivers – different voices, activities, sensibilities and ontologies. These are lines of formless expression, the making felt of an experience that is always more than what can be identified at any given moment, a plenitude of possibility that continuously folds in upon itself as its mode of continuity

Corresponding author:

AbdouMaliq Simone, The Urban Institute, The University of Sheffield, 219 Portobello Street, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK.

Email: a.t.simone@sheffield.ac.uk

rather than being cut in the service of an imaginary or operating logics that enforce its articulation to an economic logic of efficiency, forward and backward resonances.

This plenitude does not constitute some kind of depth or underlying structure; it is not an ultimate 'real' behind the scenes. It is a plenitude that remains on the surface of things – a surface operation – but without the conceit of transparency. For, it is not a transparency situated in the interoperability of things; the ways in which optimal functionality is maintained in the harmonisation of computing, the optimisation of exposures to environmental conditions and 'nature' as a resource for 'good living', or the ways in which work, leisure, recreation, education and medical services are spatially integrated. In this line in the desert, never repeated in the same site twice, there are no words exchanged among participants. Everyone utters the same single word over and over yet according to oscillating rhythms in shifts whose origin is never identifiable. It is indeed conceivable that the vertical lifts are a function of the play of lights or the fugue states associated with deep trance.

As al-Bashir indicates, many have asked why the *zikr* does not enable the multitude to really fly, to ascend more than the few feet which seems to constitute a fixed limit. His response is always that it does not matter how far one is able to go. Rather it is the instantiation of a momentary state of groundlessness that matters; a simple gesture, or pointing to the experience of being suspended, of a lift-off. Again, he reiterates that what is important is how to reach what is 'out there', and that the necessary position is that very suspension. It does not matter how far or wide the body is able to go, but that with feet off the ground, no matter how minimally, it becomes possible to situate oneself with that out there.

For the 'out there' may captivate us with its expansiveness, the unfathomable distance

of far stars and galaxies, but this sense of exteriority, of something beyond is also intimate, proximate, something possibly 'right there' in the midst of us but not discernible given our situatedness in matrices of geometric formations, points of lines, curves, equations and proportions. Yet, at the same time, the suspension attainable through the *zikr* emerges from the horizontal linear formation. The shaykh always reminds the congregants to stand shoulder to shoulder, to straighten the lines, to stamp feet in unison. For al-Bashir, the momentary lifting of bodies is the realisation of a larger 'body', the space of inhabitation of that body, the moment when the individual bodies in the line become more themselves, or become what they 'really are', that is, an extensionality beyond the details of their histories and personalities. This is an extensionality made possible by the singular focus on the collective repetition of the name of God. It is an enunciation that obviates the need for negotiation, consensus or translation. It is an enunciation that exceeds the need for counting and measurement. While such a body may not endure, may not be institutionalised in any concrete or useful form, there is a method for its momentary realisation. But when and if it ever comes within the ambit of a single Thursday night is always a question, and never a question of mistaken practice.

The notion of 'out there' has long been a problematic conundrum for considerations about where persons might appropriately put their bodies and what the implications of such positioning might be. Cognitive proficiencies have always relied upon upending the status of corporeal positions so as to ward off atrophy, and this has been accompanied by a perhaps innate restlessness in humans, an inclination to always go beyond. There is always the persistent task of drawing the spatial lines that indicate what 'out there' is salient to what I need to do to keep myself secure. What is it taking place just

beyond me that I need to pay attention to in terms of being able to do what I need to do at any given occasion? Perhaps coinciding with Goffman's *umwelt*, a decision has to be made as to what to pay attention to amongst all of the many things that are taking place simultaneously within any environment. We may know intellectually that the terms of ecological relations make it impossible to draw any determinant line, especially given the physics of localisation and the ramifications of even the smallest distant events on what transpires in front of me. But even when we make the 'needed' decisions as to what to pay attention to or not, a nagging uncertainty persists that there is something important 'out there'.

While the desire to experience, to extend, to follow the lines of implication and immanent connectivity etches out various trajectories of flight, as does the possibility of simply walking away from intractable problems, the anxiety associated with the 'out there' has often been compensated through a determination to render that 'out there' both as something capable of being domesticated in well-worn and safe notions and as a space of exception, where all kinds of transgressive, experimental and extractive manoeuvres might take place without having to adhere to the moralities of 'home'. The 'out there' becomes a locus of plunder, which in many cases only seems to amplify its capacity to haunt and trouble.

Blackness comes into the world for many reasons. But it is a means of constituting a specific prototype of an authentic human being, seeped in the delusion of the utter transparency of the Cartesian *cogito*. A self-reflecting subject whose expressions of thought and feeling are to be consonant with a divine correctness is set against a form of existence entirely ensconced in neediness and instinct, yet capable of being rendered into labouring flesh. It is story well known and obdurate. Yet Black people were also

attributed with a particular capacity to not only straddle an ambiguous line between the human and non-human, but also a special attunement to the 'out there'. Deprived of genealogy and selfhood, and thus also the need to speak and act from a position of a self-sufficient individual, Black people were often seen as possessing an inordinate capacity to extend themselves across a vast landscape, to communicate with distant spirits – in other words, to know and occupy an 'out there' just over the hills, across the tracks, on the other side of the swamps and rivers.

So, the 'out there' is not only a vague directionality of multiple lines of flight, not only an incentive and object of coloniality and plunder. It is also something that must be kept a bay, in part because it is the very purview of Blackness. It is an abyssal space of utter unknowability and contingency that threatens to engulf everything known and valuable. At the same time, it becomes impossible to completely turn away as that very engulfment is at times something desired as some kind of awesome force capable of putting everything to an end, to suspend everything as if it were possible to either completely disappear or start over again.

In contrast, the line of worshipers seems only to seek a momentary enlivening of collective flesh without clear boundaries; a body that refuses inhabitation or purpose; something that takes (its) place just for the joy (or anguish) of it. Here the horizontal and vertical work together to configure an 'out there' that is less out over there, over the hills at some distance, but immanent within the very practice of worship. Yet as al-Bashir insists the 'out there' is also really 'out there' for in the small vertical lift, the smallest suspension, the worshiper experiences a space of disorientation, where it is not so much that inner and outer collapse but where the distinction becomes irrelevant. Nevertheless, whatever that is out there which threatens is

already proximate, while the body that seems to be right here, is already long gone, somewhere else.

Verticality as a descriptor or disposition of built environments and the subsequent stacking of populations and functions might be partly seen as an expression of such an inclination to reach an 'out there', to bring it within the ambit of everyday transactions and discourse, while, at the same time materialising possibilities to be gone, to be away from the anchorages of the ground. But in this repetitive formatting of urban built environments there also seems to be a depreciation, even a commodification of the out there.

I am sitting on the 79th floor rooftop bar in a mega-SE Asian city. It is a rare clear night and it is possible to walk around the circumference of the bar and see the entirety of the city and beyond. Like all such panoramas there is a feeling of hyperreality, of confronting an object so vast that it is impossible to have an orientation, to have anything to say about it. It is as if one is in the middle of the 'out there' that one has been lured to these heights to observe. Indeed, as people emerge from the elevator they are immediately inclined to whip out their phones to take a slew of pictures. But most hesitate, almost as if in a moment of paralysis, not sure where to aim the camera. Some even slink away without having taken a single photo, as if uncertain what to do. Such reluctance seems inexplicable in a city where everyone seems to spend a large proportion of their time taking photos wherever they are without a second thought. Such a profusion of photographing seems to reflect a heightened sense of the importance of an 'out there' but without the curiosity, diligence or need to investigate its contours; simply compiling an interminable archive of images that may never occasion more than a rapid glance.

In the multitudes of high rise condos that accommodate thousands of mostly young aspirant professional workers, co-residents are never accorded more than a rapid glance as they line up in front of the large tables in the lobby where various delivery services have left the meals they have ordered. In the hundreds of uniform small air-conditioned units, the near-entirety of domestic lives are managed on-line, and many in their daily lives will never transverse the ground, as condos are attached to elevated ramps leading to skyways whose exits often lead directly into office towers and shopping malls. In a city increasingly paralysed by floods, the 'out there' is increasingly viewed as the urban street itself.

Still vertical developments become the locus of many different potentials. For example, in the *rusunami* (subsidised lower middle income housing development) at Kalibata in Jakarta, one Muslim association has acquired and manages fifteen floors of apartment units in one building, while gay and lesbian residents are concentrated in the building next door. Just how such clustering is curated is a process that has taken place in less than three years and largely facilitated by the diversity of operative brokerage.

What unites different kinds of residents is the tendency for them not to consider this place as a 'home', at least in the sense that is culturally syntonetic to what they have known in the past. The stability of home itself, at least in Jakarta, is something that has been slowly diminishing as an overarching value in favour of the importance of circulation, of being able to spread out across various provisional affiliations no longer locally based. In this way, one could look at these complexes in Jakarta as the mostly 'silent' contestations among various kinds of residents and lifestyles: Islamic, LGBT, young professionals, nascent (barely) middle class families, immigrants, sex workers, for

control over floors in specific buildings – so segments, clusters emerge. Yet, the densities of living-*with* ensure circulations of stories, rumours and information. There are so many variations of people passing through, staying long, coming in and out, that it is never really clear who is who, what is what.

In this way vertical complexes, for example as a generic form, act as a means of compression – an arena that has no particular definition, something that can show up in various formats without contradiction, that does not need to be realised empirically according to specific criteria but which engenders a sense of being-in-concert. Here many different trajectories and futures are compressed in a generic form that does not allow a definitive sense of the differentiation of its components, where many different ways of doing things are at work but where it is not possible to clearly distinguish amongst them. Each explanatory possibility attains ‘lift off’. As such new forms of opacity are generated that may enable residents

to conduct a wide range of lives under the radar.

Not that subterfuge or experimental collective life necessitates opacity in order to exist. The most efficacious form of hiding often operates in plain sight. Just before the Brujani disco ends for the night, the shaykh always instructs the multitudes to smile for the satellites.

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ORCID iD

AbdouMaliq Simone  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1630-1997>