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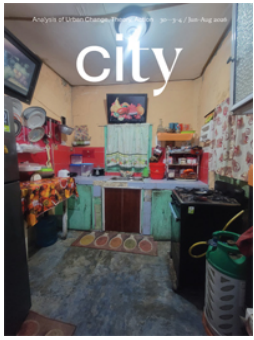
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Unknowing São Paulo: life beyond capture in the economies of small clothing businesses and the fragility of the urban

Simone Toji *

Urban Institute, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Based on extensive engagement with interlocutors in the small-scale garment industries of São Paulo, this article builds on the notion of the radical unknowability of urban life as developed by AbdouMalik Simone and Vanesa Castán Broto to discuss urban processes that make cities dynamic and ever-evolving. Through considerations and experiences from varied actors within small garment businesses, the article examines how urban life in São Paulo is conceived and lived in uncertainty. By tracing the everyday routines of garment workers and entrepreneurs, the article uncovers contingent and ephemeral practices that resist stabilization or definitive categorization. It questions the impulse to fully 'know' the urban, encouraging instead an approach grounded in an epistemic modesty that attends to relationality and what remains elusive. The article in this way

*Email: simonetoji@gmail.com

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argues that by acknowledging these urban processes as fragile, the ephemerality of urban life can be glimpsed in its unanticipated potentiality.

After a lively discussion about their first impressions of São Paulo upon arriving in the city, the students in the Portuguese course for non-Brazilians—where I volunteered as a teacher—began submitting their written assignments. Most were young and middle-aged nationals from neighboring countries such as Bolivia and Peru, for whom São Paulo was their first international destination. During the discussion, their descriptions vividly conveyed a profound sense of estrangement: one mentioned ‘becoming breathless,’ another described feeling as small as ‘an ant,’ and yet another compared the experience to ‘being on another planet.’ For them, São Paulo was no ordinary encounter.

When Leo¹ read his assignment aloud, he characterized his arrival as a moment of ‘overwhelming emotion.’ As he handed in his written work, he apologized for the crossed-out opening sentences he had abandoned while drafting his piece. One of these incomplete sentences caught my attention: it began with, ‘In São Paulo, the first thing I saw was mist,’ with the word ‘mist’ underlined. Intrigued, I couldn’t resist asking if he had actually seen mist upon his arrival or if it was an image he tried using to express his emotion. He confirmed that he had literally seen a light mist when he arrived in the city at night. I then commented that São Paulo was once known as the ‘land of the drizzle’ (*terra da garoa*), where mist was a common part of the morning or evening landscape. However, as the city expanded at the expense of its green areas, drizzle had become a thing of the past, and mist was now a rare happening. I jokingly remarked that he must have arrived on an unusual day. Developing his point further, Leo noted that mist, to him, also conveyed his impression of São Paulo’s vastness, a sense of never being able to fully see the city in its entirety. This made me wonder why he had decided to abandon the image of mist in his assignment. He explained that, as I had just confirmed, whether there was mist or not, the ‘feeling’ of standing before a disorienting city was what had stuck with him. That, he said, was the ‘overwhelming emotion’ he sought to convey in his written exercise. I thus asked whether São Paulo, afterwards, had become a knowable place for him. He pondered for a moment and replied, ‘I would need many lives to know it.’

While this sense of not being able to completely grasp a city such as São Paulo can be viewed as a natural reaction from recently arrived migrants to any large city, I revisit Leo’s sentiment as a starting epistemological provocation. Pile and Thrift argue, ‘[i]f we know one thing about cities, then perhaps it is that they are too vast to be imagined in their entirety,’ because ‘[c]ities are never static, or complete...’ (2000, xix). For these authors, each scholarly approach simultaneously frames ways of seeing and missing what is conceived of as a city, revealing in fact how cities are made as objects of knowledge. In tandem with Leo’s amusing enunciation about the need for someone to undergo ‘many lives’ in order to know São Paulo, Pile and Thrift (2000) also recognize the density of cities in the multiple urban renderings that attest their profusion

and complexity. Inspired by Leo's invitation to yield to the impossibility of fully knowing a city like São Paulo, this article follows the 'many lives' that such an epistemological stance opens up. Rather than seeking to stabilize the city as a coherent, knowable object, I approach São Paulo through the urban worlds that inhabitants like Leo bring into being.

Leo's puzzlement about São Paulo, as I see it, is largely due to his immersion in the economic intricacies of the city's small clothing manufacturing businesses. Born in Arequipa, Peru, he had joined his older sister in São Paulo who was married to a Peruvian managing a sewing unit in the neighborhood of Bom Retiro. His brother-in-law's business basically relied on sewing orders from external companies, but also designed and manufactured its own clothing pieces. Family members from his brother-in-law's side and his sister primarily worked in production, whereas Leo was responsible for retail sales at itinerant bazaars across Brazil. This role required him to frequently travel to smaller Brazilian cities and towns where residents lacked access to similar clothing items. When in São Paulo, Leo helped a cousin at the family's stall in a popular night street market in Brás, the *Feira da Madrugada*. Because arrangements at his brother-in-law's business greatly fluctuated, he had an unusual work schedule and often missed numerous Portuguese classes. As the next sections will show, Leo is not alone in his experiences across and beyond São Paulo. For instance, classmates who worked in the sector as sewists also skipped classes when orders peaked and would even work on Sundays to meet deadlines. This inconstancy in the experiences of those involved in the small scale businesses of the garment industries deeply resonates with the sense Leo articulated so sensitively: of never being able to fully grasp what São Paulo holds for them.

Accordingly, here I do not only see São Paulo through the experiences of my interlocutors but also take seriously their understanding of living in the city as an epistemic exercise. I embrace Leo's bewilderment about the impossibility of fully apprehending a city like São Paulo as an epistemic attitude, i.e. as a way to understand life in São Paulo and produce knowledge under this very condition of incomplete apprehension of the city's dynamics. Simone and Castán Broto identify this sort of epistemic disposition with the recognition of the 'radical unknowability of urban life' (2022, 788), which I correlate with what Leo wittily conveys with his uneasiness about not being able to fully know São Paulo. In doing so, I diffract my reflexivity as a researcher through the reflexivity of my interlocutors, exercising a mode of 'epistemic entanglement'—as my contribution to this Special Feature about 'the epistemic tangles of urban inhabitation'—in which I integrate their understanding of their own conditions into my analytical gaze, as a radical step in an 'epistemic choreography' (Perry 2022). However, because my interlocutors' reflexivity is often coupled with the pragmatics of their daily lives, this reflexivity is manifested through their experiences and life trajectories. Whether such reflexivity was expressed less frequently in explicit verbal form, this does not mean an absence of reflection, but rather points to how epistemic orientations toward the city's unknowability were embedded in practice, such as in the decisions people made, the relationships they activated, and the ways they navigated uncertainty. To assume that knowledge and reflexivity exist separately from and above practice would be to impose an epistemological framework misaligned with my interlocutors' own ways

of knowing and living in São Paulo. Thus, I consider Leo's enunciation in the Portuguese class assignment the expression of tacit understandings held by many involved in the small businesses of the garment industry in São Paulo. In this way, it is through my interlocutors' experiences within the clothing industries that I explore urban inhabitation in São Paulo.

This shift in focus, from the city as an entity to the city as an ongoing enactment, allows us to apprehend São Paulo not as a totality to be grasped but as a multiplicity of fragile and contingent processes that cannot be fully captured, yet remaining generative of modes of dwelling, knowing, and imagining the urban. As glimpsed in Leo's hassles in the dynamics of garment production in São Paulo, uncertainty is part of an experience in which not only the conditions to establish a routine are highly challenging, but the very conditions to know how life in the city will unfold are continually undermined. Uncertainty here is not an external or casual element that produces unknowability, uncertainty is constitutive of the ongoing becoming of urban life in São Paulo, where what is to be known is not pre-given and unknowing is part of the experience of leading a life in the city. For this reason, embracing my interlocutors' experience of unknowing as an analytical framework also entails to consider certain epistemic assumptions otherwise. Here, the aim is not to identify relations of causality that might explain urban outcomes through linear sequences of cause and effect, nor is it to search for patterns that promise to reveal a hidden coherence behind urban practices. Instead, as I have learned from my interlocutors, the task becomes attending to relations of aggregation, that is, attending to how heterogeneous elements resonate, align, or momentarily coalesce without ever forming a stable system. This approach treats urban life less as a structure to be decoded than as a constellation of relations, a configuration whose significance lies not in its capacity to be mapped as a pattern, but in the fleeting proximities, frictions, and correspondences that emerge among its components. Such aggregations do not explain the city, they illuminate how urban life is continually composed through encounters that are partial, provisional, and often opaque. In this, I follow Edouard Glissant's (1997) invitation to epistemologically consider relations not a principle of order but a instance of opacity, encounter, and becoming. Glissant invites us to move beyond the desire for transparency, the impulse to render the world fully legible, and instead to acknowledge the legitimacy of what escapes comprehension. His notion of relation unfolds through unpredictable linkages that exceed fixed identities and stable categories, echoing the urban entanglements I encountered in São Paulo. Rather than presupposing a coherent whole, Glissant's relational poetics insists that meaning arises in the partial connections that do not resolve into a unity. To take this seriously is to accept that the city's significance is not found in an underlying structure waiting to be revealed, but in the mutable, opaque, and affective ties that compose it. In this sense, Glissant not only provides a vocabulary for understanding the contingent constellations I describe, he also leverages an epistemology that values opacity as a mode of knowing, one that refuses to collapse the multiplicity of urban life into a graspable form.

Following my interlocutors' epistemic cue, the article elaborates on the necessary methodological manoeuvres required in the epistemic entanglements with my interlocutors' reflexive concerns, given their inconstant routines in the small garment businesses in São Paulo. Thus in the next section, I draw on the

notion of ‘accompaniment’ (Simone 2022) as a methodological engagement with the everyday practices of urban subjects, from their well-defined, consolidated actions to their most fleeting and disparate expressions. Then, in the subsequent section, through the diverse enactments of my interlocutors’ daily experiences, I am able to characterize the dynamics of the clothing businesses in São Paulo as economies of uncertainty, in which my interlocutors manifest, for instance, their avoidance of long-term planning due to the unpredictable nature of the business landscape. From these dynamics, the article subsequently concludes by reflecting what kinds of urban inhabitation can be identified through the adoption of the epistemic standpoint of my interlocutors. This perspective points to a fragile state of being and becoming in São Paulo, suggesting the importance of considering the ephemerality of such urban processes.

Accompaniment

To assume the perspective of the actors of the small clothing businesses in São Paulo as an epistemic frame means acknowledging the condition of not knowing as a fundamental premise. This entails tuning the methodological approach to also be observant of those kind of experiences where ‘[t]here is always something not used or only partially used, something that remains just out of reach, something barely noticeable or deemed irrelevant’ (Simone 2022, 11). In the inconstancy lived by those involved in the small scale businesses of the garment industries, ‘accompaniment’ becomes a generous way of recognizing the limits of knowing by attending to experiences that are ‘within or beyond capture’ (Simone 2022). Simone does not explicitly define ‘accompaniment’ or what lies ‘beyond capture,’ leaving these notions deliberately open. My use of these terms, therefore, is developed in dialogue with Glissant’s reflections on relationality, as discussed above, and with Emmanuel Levinas’s (1969) insights into the ethics of knowing.

Following Glissant, if opacity and relation are not obstacles to overcome but conditions through which worlds are made, then my task as a researcher is not to dispel uncertainty but to remain attuned to the ways in which my interlocutors inhabit it. Their gestures, hesitations, and improvisations do not simply illustrate a theoretical point, they enact modes of knowing and becoming that escape closure. Accompaniment, in this line, is the methodological approach through which I am able to ethnographically acknowledge these moments when urban life shows itself as a relational field in which meanings and possibilities continually emerge and submerge. In this regard, Emmanuel Levinas’s (1969) critique of totalizing knowledge deepens the argument. For Levinas, any attempt to subsume ‘the other’ within a closed system of understanding is a violence in itself, because it transforms the other as an object of knowledge, since the other always exceeds any attempt of capture. In this way, Levinas formulates an ethical demand that resists the reduction of the other to comprehension, aligning profoundly with Glissant’s insistence on the right to opacity. Taken together, their work support a methodological approach that cautions against the epistemic violence of grasping, predicting, or stabilizing that which exceeds the frameworks we bring to it.

These theoretical references open the way toward a different epistemological and methodological disposition. Rather than approaching urban life as something to be captured, mapped, or exhausted by explanation, I am inspired by AbdouMalik Simone's (2022) notion of accompaniment, a practice of moving alongside others without presuming to be able to know everything about them. Accompaniment, as I understand it from Simone, is not a technique for deciphering urban life but a mode of staying with its excesses, its interruptions, and its unpredictable relational compositions. It likewise recognizes the researcher's limitations to project a synthesis or a holistic account onto the unfolding of meanings that are always more than what can be rendered intelligible. In this sense, accompaniment becomes an ethical and epistemological stance, a way of attending to what remains beyond capture, acknowledging that the city's liveliness lies not in what can be totalized, but in what continually escapes, exceeds, and transforms the conditions of living and knowing.

More tangibly, I use accompaniment as a methodological framework based on extensive fieldwork in São Paulo, which allowed me to follow a diverse range of situations and trajectories in the garment industries in São Paulo. As with Leo, during September 2013 to January 2015, November to December 2023, and August to September 2024, I had the opportunity to meet or interview business owners and workers of clothing and sewing units, various professionals such as stylists, pattern makers, print designers and sales representatives, as well as representatives of employer organizations linked to the production and trade of fabrics and clothing, and members of some non-governmental organizations.

Accompaniment also structures the organization of this article. Rather than using collected cases to illustrate a predetermined argument, the full line of reasoning emerges only at the conclusion of this piece. This is necessary because, in keeping with the epistemic practice proposed here, I refrain from imposing a theoretical frame onto my interlocutors' lives and instead acknowledge their own rationale of unknowing, that is, of not fully anticipating how their trajectories will unfold in the city. This may initially unsettle some readers, as the cases and stories presented might appear to 'miss the point' until the implications of accompanying these situations begin to take shape. Yet this arrangement is consistent with the epistemic discussion introduced earlier. A direct consequence of this position is that the article follows urban life embedded in São Paulo's small garment businesses as a constellation of diverse situations unfolding under conditions of uncertainty, aggregating seemingly disparate occurrences, including questions of time management, family relations, and forms of social detachment, which will be further elaborated in the following sections. To be able to attend to São Paulo's urban life as enacted by some actors in the small businesses of the garment industries, I now outline the context regarding the clothing industries in the city.

The clothing industries in São Paulo

Clothing production in São Paulo has been a component of the Brazilian industrial landscape since its early industrialization in the nineteenth century. Macroeconomic narratives highlight the histories of large-scale textile and

garment enterprises in relation to national industrialization policies and processes of economic liberalization. Until the 1960s, the sector remained a significant focus of industrial policy, though priority was placed on heavy industries such as mining, steel, and automobile production (Monteiro Filha and Correa 2002). In the 1990s, due to high external debt, runaway inflation, and persistent fiscal deficits, reforms oriented by the Washington Consensus gave way to governmental actions emphasizing fiscal discipline, trade liberalization, and privatization of public assets (Bielschowsky 2000). One of the most impactful measures was the reduction of import tariffs, which exposed Brazil's domestic industries to intense global competition. The textile and clothing industries, in particular, were severely affected by a surge in imports of synthetic fabrics and garments from Asia (Haguenauer et al. 2001). While sectors such as agribusiness and automotive manufacturing benefited from foreign investment and technological upgrades, others struggled to adapt to the new conditions, configuring an ongoing process of deindustrialization (Bonelli and Pessoa 2010; Morceiro 2019). In response to these challenges, the Brazilian apparel sector underwent significant restructuring, with outsourcing becoming a common practice as businesses adjusted to the new economic environment (Haguenauer et al. 2001).

In combination, studies laterally associate the trajectories of the small clothing manufacturing businesses in São Paulo with specific migrant groups and the development of working-class zones in inner São Paulo. Neighborhoods such as Bom Retiro and Brás exemplify former industrial areas that historically accommodated the laboring classes, fostering the emergence of diverse small businesses tied to international migration since the early twentieth century (Amadio 2004; Mangili 2011). European migrants of Jewish heritage are frequently credited with establishing the first small clothing enterprises, predominantly during the 1950s and 1960s (Klein 2012; Lesser 2023). In the 1970s and 1980, South Korean migrants entered the sector in significant numbers (Buechler 2004; Chi 2016), and since the 1990s, migrants from South American countries, particularly Bolivia and Paraguay, have been intensely participating in the industries (Buechler 2004; Silva 1997; Souchaud 2023). Although it is generally said that South Korean entrepreneurs replaced the Jewish ones and are now gradually being succeeded by Bolivians (Truzzi 2001), nowadays it is possible to find Brazilian traders of Jewish heritage in the textile businesses, while in other segments, South Korean, Bolivian business owners and their descendants were joined by other nationalities, such as Peruvians, Greeks, Lebanese, to mention a few. Consequently, the small garment businesses in São Paulo remain a highly culturally and ethnically diverse environment.

Recent studies have linked the tendency to subcontract and expand informal work with the systematic increase in undocumented migrants, particularly those from Bolivia (Freire da Silva 2007, 2011; Risek 2010). While meticulous research has characterized sewing production units managed by Brazilians, as well as Bolivian and Paraguayan migrants (Freire da Silva 2007; Souchaud 2023), small clothing manufacturing businesses, in their diversity and scope, are often mentioned only in passing in most analyses. As a result, there is little to no detailed information about these businesses as a whole. Due to their propensity for informal and precarious arrangements, they persistently remain off the radar.

While one initial aim of my research was to provide an extensive ethnographic description of these small-scale businesses, ‘filling a gap’ that justified my exploratory efforts, I have learned from numerous interlocutors that a comprehensive depiction of such businesses is difficult to achieve. A credit operator working closely with the sector conceives of it as an ‘ecosystem’ of multiple business forms. Navigating a multifaceted financial environment, this credit provider manoeuvres differing rhythms of money circulation among fabric suppliers, manufacturers, and retailers. By advancing or delaying payments within diverse financial circuits, his company assesses risk on a case-by-case basis due to the non-linear and dynamic nature of these transactions. This complexity leads this credit operator to view the textile and clothing industries as an open system where no single actor has preeminence over the others. Similarly, a women’s garment entrepreneur emphasized that the diversity of existing business models in the sector arises not only from the varied clothing segments—such as jeans, women’s wear, men’s wear, children’s wear, sportswear, fine wear, gala outfits, and more—but also from the specialized production stages on which different companies base themselves, whether in textile manufacturing, clothing design, assembly, finishing, or distribution. Tangibly configuring the structures of subcontracting services, as identified in the macroscopic analyses, the small businesses of garment manufacturing in São Paulo are multifarious. There is opportunity for all kinds of business initiatives depending on the clothing segment and what the new seasonal collection or clothing item requires. Different materials bring together different sets of businesses and professionals and this incessant production cycle continually arranges and rearranges production relations based on the specific pieces being manufactured at any given moment. However, competition thrives; new enterprises unrelentingly emerge, as well as unsuccessful ones close down.

The manifold ways in which the varied businesses actors can operate in the textile and clothing production sector in the city of São Paulo generate a certain sense that it is difficult to map such a multitude. As open configurations, these business arrangements resist being fully apprehended in their massiveness. There is thus this opacity in not being completely known in these dynamics in São Paulo, something that Leo, in a certain way, emotionally prefigured. Since the epistemic gesture here ‘accompanies’ my interlocutors’ considerations and sensibilities, I understand the small businesses of the garment industries in São Paulo through my interlocutors’ routines, accepting this condition, as my interlocutors experience it, of not completely knowing these industries.

São Paulo through the small businesses of the clothing industries

Economies of uncertainty

The highly fragmented landscape of the small garment businesses in São Paulo is an environment shaped by the rapid pace of fashion trends, shifting consumer preferences, and economic fluctuations. Uncertainty is woven into the fabric of daily work routines and the prevalence of overly dispersed outsourced services further amplifies this sense of volatility. As the mentioned credit operator also

remarks, the ‘ecosystems’ of garment production in São Paulo are ‘an organized mess’ where ‘nothing seems to work out, but it does’ (Toji 2025).

There is a shared belief that no one can ever fully prepare for what might happen next in the fiercely competitive space of the subcontracted configurations of the small clothing businesses. A common refrain among my interlocutors is that they avoid planning too far ahead because ‘you never know what will actually happen.’ What motivates the actors of these businesses may vary, but there exists an attitude of nothing being left but facing what is needed to be faced, even when nothing is sufficiently clear.

Take Juan’s situation, for instance. Originally from El Alto, Bolivia, he had been living in São Paulo for nearly seven years. Like Leo’s brother-in-law, he also owned a sewing business, located in the Pari neighborhood in the city’s north zone. Once, he was offered a job to sew three hundred linen trousers. He then calculated: his workshop consisted of himself, his wife, and his younger brother, and they had only 20 days to complete the order. The offer was a testament to his business’s growing reputation, having previously delivered a bulk order of *tricoline* dresses to the same client. Although unsure of how he would manage it, Juan seized the opportunity; he would find a way.

Hold the scene and let’s follow Calil in Brás, a central neighborhood in the city. Born in São Paulo to Lebanese parents, he was a jeans entrepreneur with a store on Oriente Street inherited from his father and uncle. In his case, we find him on his mobile phone speaking with his sewing service provider from the state of Minas Gerais. He was being informed that the vehicle transporting his jeans order had been stolen on the way to São Paulo. Calil lost his temper and yelled, ‘Damn it, man! I told you, you should have installed a monitoring device on it. The insurance won’t cover it. What am I supposed to do now?’

Again, pause for a moment and let’s move to Bom Retiro, another central district in São Paulo, where Lee and her assistants were inspecting packages of black trousers that had just arrived from the sewing provider. To their disbelief, not a single pair had the back pockets as designed. A young adult, Lee was born in South Korea and had recently married a Korean Brazilian whose family owned a women’s garment business. Lee’s mother-in-law had warned her not to proceed with that type of pocket: ‘It won’t work,’ she had foretold. But Lee, still learning the trade, insisted, and now her husband’s family store counter was piled high with stacks of black trousers that no one would buy.

By accompanying Juan, Calil, and Lee in their particular circumstances, it becomes possible to glimpse the kind of instability that shapes daily life in São Paulo’s small garment industries. In each case, an unforeseen problem arose to which my interlocutors, at the moment of its occurrence, did not know how to respond with certainty. These moments were not simply interruptions in an otherwise stable routine, they revealed how urban life unfolds through contingencies that exceed planning, prediction, or control. Rather than resolving these situations through established procedures, my interlocutors navigate them through improvised actions and hesitant decisions to shifting conditions. While unpredictability may continuously disarm these actors, it simultaneously drives them to persistently search for possibilities beyond their immediate circumstances. It compels them to navigate transient forms of connection, pushing for new relationships and solutions to create something beyond their

initial position, something new out of what has been given to them. For instance, family relations and different engagements with time can become resources in such dynamics, as it will be discussed in the following subsections.

Making business, making kin

As evidenced through Leo's circumstances, family bonds are often valued and utilized by the actors of the small clothing industries in São Paulo. The vast majority of initiatives consist of family-run businesses, with nuclear family members, relatives, and other distant kin occupying various roles. Concurring with scholarship on family business studies (Koellner 2022; Koning and Verver 2023), the involvement of family members in these industries can be fluid and open depending on the specific circumstances of each business, which characterize a notion of kinship as 'relatedness' (Carsten 2000). This means working with a sense of kinship as an evolving situation that may extrapolate the boundaries of nuclear family membership, characterizing these relational arrangements more precisely as 'kinship businesses' (Stewart 2003) or 'kinship enterprises' (Yanagisako 2019). If we go back to Juan's situation, we observe how kinship connections become a resourceful asset in the competitive dynamics of production activities.

In face of the pressing order that he had just accepted, Juan contacted a distant cousin living in the neighborhood of Guaianases, in São Paulo's east zone, who had recently started his own sewing business. Invited to share the linen trousers order, Juan's cousin felt somewhat insecure about accepting the invitation, as his sewing unit specialized in jerseys and sportswear. Juan, however, persuaded him, assuring that he could personally teach everyone in his cousin's business how to sew linen trousers. Moreover, Juan argued, this experience would enhance his cousin's workshop portfolio. After striking a deal with his cousin, Juan set out to rent an old straight-stitch sewing machine from a Brazilian seamstress. Although she wasn't interested in joining the effort, she agreed to lend him her machine. With it, Juan planned to teach his young niece, who already had experience in ironing cut parts of garment pieces to prepare them for the sewing stage. Confident in her ability to learn quickly, he believed she could soon help with the order. By relying on kinship ties in São Paulo, Juan temporarily assembled a network of relatives to get the job done. If he succeeded in maintaining the flow of orders, he could even consider expanding this network and dream of improving the structure of his own business. If he did not, these business arrangements with his cousin would naturally fade, though their family ties would remain a valuable resource, awaiting other opportunities.

Making time, keeping the business

Time is another crucial resource in the efforts to make the most of what is at hand within the dynamics of the small garment businesses in São Paulo. Whether compressed into the tight deadlines of orders, as in Juan's case, time is an element continuously being shaped. In the multiplicity of concurrent activities within these businesses, time can be experienced as a 'polyrhythm effect' with different activities 'occurring simultaneously but differently, creating cross-variation in rhythm' (Audretsch et al. 2021).

In Calil's perplexing situation, we see how time can be pragmatically manoeuvred within a sense of 'time pressure' (Lévesque and Stephan 2020), i.e. lack of time. Unable to sell the jean shorts from his summer collection after they were unexpectedly stolen, Calil purchased wholesale pieces from a fellow store in Brás. There simply was not enough time to source textiles, cut the fabric, and send the pieces for sewing again. To avoid disappointing his customers, he decided to sell clothing that his store had not produced. This stopgap measure allowed him to 'buy time' until his business could resume production for the next season. Although he wouldn't profit from this operation, since he couldn't charge much for the jeans he had to purchase from a neighboring store, he managed to avoid major losses. Also, his sewing service provider had agreed to repay him the value of the stolen materials in installments, ensuring that Calil could at least recover his costs over time.

Similarly, we return to Lee's circumstances to follow how time can be expanded in a warped version of 'time affluence' (Lévesque and Stephan 2020), i.e. time availability, by the need to think in terms of long-term survival. Lee had joined her in-laws' business and was learning the craft of designing and selling women's attire. In the embarrassing situation with the black trousers, she was devastated because a significant amount of capital, materials, and time had been wasted. However, her husband, responsible for the business' finance, consoled her, advising her to 'put things in perspective.' He reminded her that no one could guarantee the trousers would have sold anyway. Losses, he explained, are part of the business; while continuous losses can indeed lead to closure, a single setback can often be offset by a seasonal sell-out in the long run.

These continuous expedients in the small-scale clothing businesses in São Paulo that lead to fleeting alliances, improvised resolutions, and pragmatic recalculations are born out of the pressing need to subsist in the trade. In these, uncertainty becomes a generative force that entails the constant rearrangement of connections, relations and understandings beyond one's usual lot. These possibilities emerge from the understanding that knowledge is inherently limited and requires constant recalibration. One may not know immediately how to respond to unpredictable incidents, but this uncertainty does not prevent them from moving forward. Still, these manoeuvres that expand, contract or alter the social resources of these actors, also reverberate their own backlash effects. This is most sensitive, for instance, regarding family relations.

(Un)making business, unmaking kin

As discussed above, kinship connections frequently serve as the foundation for organizing small business units in São Paulo's garment industries. They also act as a reserve that individuals draw upon to navigate unexpected production or commercial challenges, offering a certain degree of flexibility. However, when pushed to unanticipated extremes, these family ties can become strained to the point of exhaustion, resulting in fractured families and permanently severed relationships.

Sung's family arrived in São Paulo from Seoul in the 1980s when she was a newborn. They moved to Brazil after her mother's uncle, who was prospering in São Paulo at the time, encouraged them to relocate. Initially, her uncle worked in importation and owned a button workshop, which specialized in attaching

buttons to garments as part of the broader garment production dynamics. Over time, her family established their own women's garment business in Bom Retiro, relying heavily on family networks for guidance in navigating the industry and learning how to manage clients, employees, and operations. Her mother, who had a stronger command of Portuguese, managed the administrative and design aspects of the business, while her father handled logistics, such as procuring materials and coordinating with service providers. However, Sung was unaware that her parents' relationship had been strained for years, eventually leading to her mother leaving the family without warning. This sudden departure left the family business in disarray. As a teenager, Sung, along with her father, was forced to take on the burden of closing the business. In the small-scale businesses of the garment industry, the absence of key family members can completely disrupt operations, often making it difficult to sustain the enterprise.

However, the tight profit margins under which some businesses operate also tensions the advantages provided by kin relations, pushing these to their limits and, at times, leading to their sacrifice or loss, as in the case of Laura. Laura and her family were from La Paz and São Paulo became part of their lives when her son decided to work in his uncle's, her brother-in-law's, sewing business. Though initially hesitant to let her son leave, Laura eventually agreed. Five years later, she received a letter from her son, stating that he was being forced by his uncle to work long hours sewing garments under exploitative conditions with little food or rest. Outraged by this revelation, Laura confronted her husband, demanding they address the situation, but when they contacted the uncle, he claimed the boy had fled. Laura was left waiting for another letter, but it never came. She later heard through others that her son was living with a Brazilian woman and had a daughter, which left her feeling helpless and consumed by the desire to reunite with him. Determined to find her son, Laura and her husband sold everything they owned and migrated to São Paulo. Upon arrival, they began working for a Bolivian employer under harsh conditions, living in a house where they sewed pieces for minimal pay. Her husband became gravely ill, and while fellow workers pressured the employer to take him to the hospital, his condition worsened, leaving him unable to work. As a result, both Laura and her husband were dismissed. Desperate, she turned to a Bolivian-run radio station to leave a message for her son. Miraculously, he appeared the next day, bringing them to his home, where he also managed a sewing business and lived with his wife and daughter. Initially, Laura was overjoyed to reunite with her son and meet her granddaughter and daughter-in-law. However, tensions soon arose. Laura worked in her son's workshop but was not paid, and when she confronted him about it, he claimed he had no money. The situation escalated when her daughter-in-law accused Laura of being ungrateful, as she was provided with food and lodging. Hurt and disillusioned, Laura decided to leave her son's house. By then, her husband's condition had worsened, and he was admitted to a public hospital. Laura found shelter with a Brazilian family who, despite not knowing her, allowed her to rent a room on their property. She noted that her relationship with her son remained broken and that she had not visited him since.

While the underlying inequalities of the clothing manufacturing dynamics and its associated forms of exploitation manifest in heartbreaking ways in Laura's case, another strain on family relations within these industries emerges in the

form of domestic violence reported by migrant women from countries such as Bolivia and Peru. Their testimonies reveal the persistence of patriarchal legacies deeply embedded in the intimacy of their mobile families. Stories of physical violence perpetrated by husbands or male partners are common, as are accounts of financial abuse, where these women's hard-earned income from their work in the family business is treated as the property of their husbands or partners.

In disconcerting ways, the family relationalities that sustain the small clothing businesses in São Paulo can simultaneously generate their own processes of disaggregation, something Simone and Castán Broto (2022) identify as 'detachment'. Detachment in this dynamic is the point where the logics of all sorts of traditional arrangements, such as kinship-based economies, heteropatriarchal hierarchies, and nationalistic driven forms of belonging, for instance, meet the capitalist exigencies of individuation and scalability and give birth to a myriad of unintended enactments of outlier economic practices and urban life. Despite its harrowing effects on certain forms of relationality, detachment can also become a means of endurance, fostering the emergence of new forms of solidarity, as Simone and Castán Broto sustain and we will explore in the next subsection.

Making it work, making other lives and worlds possible

From the dark side of family relationalities in the jumbled brutality of the small garment businesses, other relationalities emerge. Beginning with the abused migrant women from countries of South America working in the small-scale garment businesses in São Paulo, these women formally associate to share their stories, to support one another, and create space and time to generate the prospect for another life. Here gender creates a generative form of detachment which emerges through an epistemics of not knowing exactly how life will unfold. Maria, who was divorced and managed a sewing business of her own, recounted how difficult her marriage had always been since the days in Bolivia. Migrating to São Paulo offered her the opportunity to detach herself from the permissive male dominance of Bolivian rural small towns. Although work in sewing businesses had never been easy, when she decided to get divorced from her husband, after enduring a severe beating, it was her work as seamstress that provided her with a minimal basis for personal independency. Participating in the migrant women's association opened other horizons for her. Not all women in the association get separated from husbands and partners, but the intimacy politics of each household is being collectively debated. As nationals from Bolivia, Peru, and even Brazil, these self-organized women are bending the reality of their own suffering and subalternity to explore alternatives that they still do not know exactly what they are, only knowing that they cannot remain where they are. Together, they not only provide shelter in their homes for battered women navigating the turbulence of legal separations from husbands and partners but also experiment with ways to resist the low payments offered per clothing piece by clients. They are upskilling themselves with dreams of entrepreneurship and learning new trades, such as hairdressing and baking, in the hope of building a future that has yet to fully take shape. As Maria's case shows, families can be broken because of domestic violence, but individuals rebuild their lives outside of family references.

In a somewhat different way, Bolivian folkloric groups, or *fraternidades*, also open occasions for Bolivians in São Paulo to detach themselves from their overloaded work routines and dwell in other regimes of reference. As visible expressions of Bolivian identity in the city, these folkloric groups bring together men, women, and young people who, despite long hours spent working at garment related businesses, dedicate their limited free time to rehearse rhythms and movements of ancestral significance. While scholars argue that many of these folkloric expressions from the Andes are ‘domesticated’ results of colonial and nationalist histories (Branco 2022), these workers, whether of migrant origin or heritage, create an alternative time-space within their demanding routines to participate in such cultural practices. Berta, who was in her sixties, owned a sewing production unit in partnership with her husband. She was one of the leading figures in several folkloric ensembles in São Paulo. While her work as a seamstress had been her lifelong source of livelihood and remained her primary means of sustenance, she had also been an active dancer in different *fraternidades* since arriving in the city in the 1990s. She admitted not knowing how she had managed to balance work, family, and cultural traditions for so long, but in her view, ‘each thing has its place.’ When she danced, she felt transported to ‘another world’ where she could reconnect with the rituals and cosmovisions she had experienced since childhood in Oruro. In this way, Berta constructed a transnational space bridging Bolivia and Brazil (Hinojosa 2019) by continually switching between sewing orders and ancestral rhythms.

By accompanying multiple actors of the small-scale garment businesses in São Paulo, we had a glimpse of these production arrangements as economies of uncertainty. In their inherent shifting configurations, these economies of fragmented production networks are deeply affected by instability. Entrepreneurs like Juan, Calil, and Lee navigate this instability through improvisation, leveraging fleeting alliances and pragmatic solutions to meet tight deadlines, recover losses, or learn from setbacks. As Anna Tsing observes, contemporary capitalism ‘needs to be understood in relation to contingency, experimentation, negotiation, and unstable commitments’ (2009, 150–151). For her, to uncover the contingent local practices that render capitalism possible, we need to pay attention to the ways in which capitalism engages difference because it does not operate as a single, coherent system, but thrives through the frictions, improvisations, and unexpected collaborations that arise from heterogeneous worlds (Tsing 2015). It is precisely in these unstable encounters, where aspirations, materials, values, and temporalities intersect without ever fully aligning, that capitalism is continuously enacted and sustained. In the case of the small businesses of the garment industries in São Paulo, ethnic, class and kinship ties have been instrumental as questions of migration, socioeconomic mobility and family commitment deeply configure the organization of these businesses.

In these economies of uncertainty, kinship networks are integral to these businesses, providing essential labor and support, as manifested in Leo’s and Juan’s cases. However, these relationships are strained by the pressures of production, occasionally leading to fractured families or exploitative dynamics, as seen in Sung’s and Laura’s situations. Despite these challenges, the garment manufacturing logics also foster endurance and solidarity. For instance, abused

migrant women form support networks to share resources, explore alternative livelihoods, and resist exploitative labor practices, as Maria's and her colleagues at the migrant women's association demonstrate. Whereas cultural practices, such as participation in Bolivian folkloric groups, offer another avenue for building space and time to renew ancestral traditions, as exemplified by Berta. These practices enable these migrant workers and entrepreneurs to create alternatives that transcend the exploitative structures of the industries, fostering possibilities for other ways of living and working.

Like the 'baroque economies' that Veronica Gago (2017) portrays in Argentina, the small businesses of the garment industries in São Paulo are spaces where overlapping, heterogeneous logics—formal and informal, visible and opaque, legal and extra-legal—interact dynamically, producing a layered and ever-shifting economic terrain. They thrive on flexibility and improvisation, relying on the continuous rearticulation of alliances, resources, and practices. As zones of ambiguous relationalities, they are also embedded in a 'vitalist pragmatic' (Gago 2017, 4) that shows their capacity to create, adapt, and sustain life within conditions of structural inequality, systemic instability, and marginalization, though in contradicting ways.

By following the routines of my interlocutors, the small businesses of the clothing industries in São Paulo can be seen through 'the diverse and wide-ranging practices of life and production that crosscut domains' (Bear et al. 2015, 4). From migratory journeys, expectations for a better life to family engagements, unusual business deals, and incidental forms of solidarity, life under the dynamics of the small businesses of the garment industries 'challenge the boundedness of the domain of "the economic"' (Bear et al. 2015, 1). Life in São Paulo, in this way, gains complexity.

In the panoply of accompanied situations, the clothing industries extended well beyond the central districts of Brás and Bom Retiro, forging connections with other neighborhoods in the eastern and northern zones, such as Pari and Guaianases, and even reaching into the state of Minas Gerais. These industries map out an ephemeral and dynamic geography, shaped by a distributed and ever-shifting production process. When considering the migratory journeys of some of the actors involved, the production dynamics transcend São Paulo, stretching to Arequipa in Peru, El Alto, La Paz, and Oruro in Bolivia, and even Seoul in South Korea. These connections shape a global network of lives that converge and intersect in the small businesses of the garment industries in São Paulo.

The fragility of the urban

In adopting my interlocutors' considerations about the impossibility of fully knowing life in the small-scale garment businesses in São Paulo as an epistemic framework, I explored how the actors of these industries bring together materials, time, space, and affects in contingent and unpredictable ways. I do this by bringing together diverse situations that were rendered as a constellation of experiences that may not convey any form of synthesis but are expressive of what entails an epistemic approach that acknowledges the 'radical

unknowability of urban life' (Simone and Castán Broto 2022), as expressed by my interlocutors. We began our journey with Leo and his colleagues from the Portuguese class, and from there followed Juan, Calil, Lee, Sung, Laura, Maria and the migrant women's association, and Berta and her involvement with Bolivian folkloric groups in the city. Through accompanying my interlocutors in certain circumstances of their routines, we could witness momentary and unanticipated enactments of life in São Paulo. Attention to these enactments emphasized the fragility and ephemerality of urban processes that resist stabilization or categorization. As forms of inhabitation, these enactments are at the margins of socially sanctioned ways of living (Lancione and Simone 2021; Simone 2016a). Thus, in recognizing their flimsy nature, the urban here ceases to be merely a category of analysis and, muddling itself in the fluidity of practices 'can precipitate its own emergence' (Jazeel 2021, 661). Rather than being a circumscribed entity, the urban becomes something in the making.

This questions the impulse to 'know' the urban through mastery, transparency, and totality, and the epistemics of unknowing the urban invites us to know in opacity. Like Levinas (1998) cautions against reducing the other to an object of knowledge, urban studies should resist the urge to encapsulate the urban and its inhabitants within prefigured frameworks or universalizing logics (Robinson 2006; Roy 2011). Cities are not mere aggregations of social, economic, and spatial dynamics; they are also living, emergent 'mysteries' (Levinas 1987) that exceed our capacity to fully know or define them. In this line, for Édouard Glissant, opacity opposes the colonial impulse to fully know and dominate. For Glissant, opacity is a right, a resistance to the 'science of conquest' that seeks to encompass everything within its hegemonic gaze (Glissant 1997, 138). Cities, like the world in Glissant's relational poetics, are spaces of infinite entanglements, where multiplicity thrives beyond the reach of totalizing logics. Glissant argues for a 'science of inquiry' that values the fluid, the uncertain, and the ungraspable (Glissant 1997, 192). In urban studies, this entails approaching cities with modesty and openness, respecting the irreducibility of urban actors and phenomena while embracing their capacity to transform our ways of knowing. In both Levinas's and Glissant's work, the encounter with the urban, whether in the form of diverse communities, contested spaces, or ephemeral practices, requires an ethical orientation that privileges listening, openness, and respect for the unknown. Thus, another consequence of adopting this epistemic disposition, of approaching urban life as my interlocutors themselves conceive it, is that some readers will consider this epistemic modesty as a weakness of the researcher's voice. Yet the epistemic exercise proposed here calls for a different understanding of research originality. In this view, the researcher is not a singular genius whose exceptional intellectual capacities yield an original interpretation of the world. Rather, the researcher becomes a voice that joins the voices of her interlocutors to amplify their reflexive insights as a legitimate theoretical vision of the world, much like in a chorus of dispersed authorship.

Likewise, this chorus of multiple voices also resonates, in new ways, with other authorial voices. For instance, Amin and Thrift understand cities in the Global North through 'provisional diagrams' that underline 'transitivity, porosity, rhythm and footprint' (2002, 5). Latour and Hermant make an exhaustive photographic expedition to show how Paris 'cannot be captured

within a glance' (1998, v). Whereas Simone considers cities in Africa and Asia as 'surrounds', 'not clearly discernible or translatable territories of operation' (2022, 4). The case of São Paulo, particularly through its small clothing businesses and uncertain economies, can contribute to this discussion by highlighting how radical unknowability becomes this acknowledgment of unknowing to be the very condition that shapes urban life in the city. This reflexive and epistemic work involved in the daily experiences of my interlocutors demonstrates how inhabitants actively and consciously navigate the city's complexities.

In this article, radical unknowability opens new directions in understanding and characterizing urban life. 'Accompaniment' (Simone 2022) comes to be the epistemic procedure that opens the possibility to follow the ephemeral enactments of some actors involved with the small-scale garment businesses in São Paulo. In approaching São Paulo in this way, we embrace its complexity and uncertainty, remaining open to the unexpected and the emergent. Leaving a space of not capturing within urban inquiry allows us to engage with the vitality (Gago 2017) and potentiality (Simone 2016b) that define urban life. From the particular urban experience of the actors in the clothing businesses in São Paulo, an epistemology of unknowing emerges. By resisting the impulse to fully categorize, stabilize or project a pre-determined idea of the world, we expose ourselves to the dynamic processes that continuously shape the city, recognizing its fragility and ephemerality. These qualities are, in fact, essential to the urban's generative capacity. They remind us that cities are not static entities but ever-evolving assemblages of relationships, practices, and affects (Blok and Farias 2016; McFarlane 2011). In this way, we preserve the potentiality of the urban to surprise, transform, and arouse, keeping alive its capacity to incite imaginations and enact futures—not necessarily bright—yet to be realized.

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- 1 All names are pseudonyms.

ORCID

Simone Toji  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1466-2115>

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