◆ Afterword

Walking in the Slum: Urban Cultural Production Today

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> Once men begin to feel cramped in their geographical, social and mental habitat, they are in danger of being tempted by the simple solution of denying one section of the species the right to be considered human.
> — Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

> Today's informal proletariat also wears radical chains, but it has been expelled from social production (at least in Marx's sense), and, in many cases, from the traditional culture and solidarity of the city. Living on the slum outskirts, cut off from formal employment, and exiled from traditional public space, it searches for sources of unity and social power.
> — Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*

> In the modern era, misery and exclusion are not only economic or social concepts but eminently political categories.
> — Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*

Michel de Certeau opens "Walking in the City" (1974)—his famous meditation on the relations between everyday practices and urban space—in Manhattan. He is gazing down from the 110th floor of the World Trade

Center, the "most monumental figure of Western urban development" (93). It is a comfortable vantage point. From it, he can imagine joining a long history of specialists of the "panorama-city," from "Medieval or Renaissance painters" to the "urbanist, city planner or cartographer" (92–3). But the view is ultimately *geographical*, an attempt to write the world by "transform[ing] action into legibility," converting the earth's most complexly idiosyncratic spaces of human interaction into bland script: "The voyeur-god created by this fiction . . . knows only cadavers" (93). Pretending to know the city in its totality, the urban geographer "must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them" (*ibid*.).

He refuses the lure. Instead, De Certeau invited us to study culture, meaning and social relations on the ground, to seek out the *arts du faire*, the "way[s] of making" (xv), through which individuals and multitudes appropriate, recombine, and subvert disciplinary power "without being outside the field in which it is exercised" (96). He reads his city horizontally (walking *in* the city), as opposed to vertically (gazing *from* the panopticon). De Certeau's city is a space where continuity and communion constantly intermingle with discontinuity and conflict. He splits the difference of Mike Featherstone's useful dichotomy of two urban ideals that dominate the Western imagination: the polis and Babylon.[1]

"Walking in the City," then, makes an eloquent case for urban space as a workshop out of which we might craft a "theory of everyday practices, of lived space, of the disquieting familiarity of the city" (*ibid*.). Walking is to the urban system what speech acts are to language (97): the wild, unpredictable, creative element within a theoretical framework. Writing in the wake of *Discipline and Punish* (1975), he does not reject but rather complicates Foucault: in a disciplinary society, how can we account for the tremendous "lack of discipline?" De Certeau's answer is an exuberant set of suggestions for finding the humanity of the city, for tracing the contours of an urban version of the tension that emerges when "state fixations" collide with "fugitive landscapes," to borrow Raymond Craib's evocative phrase. The city is humanity itself: creative, subversive, marvelous, constituted by "a multitude of quantified heroes."

De Certeau's essay calls out to be re-read today: for urban space, the city, is just about all that we have left. As Cristina Ferreira-Pinto Bailey points out in the first of the essays collected here, the *campo* has by now been thoroughly routed by the *cidade* in the urban-rural dichotomy that has traditionally governed Brazilian cultural production. And with an insight that can be readily backed up with population statistics and extended to all of Latin America, she notes that rural space has even lost its role as national "periphery": the more relevant tension in today's world system is between the massive, cosmopolitan centers of national economy, and the mid-sized cities, more and less successful at carving out a niche in the GDP. So it

makes sense to rethink De Certeau's city in today's context. And in doing this, no doubt, we are buoyed by the fact that human creativity and its *arts du faire* will only be exhausted with the apocalypse itself.

The global context, however, has changed. Writing in the mid-1970s, De Certeau is at the peak of developmentalism, the idea that good state planning can improve the daily life of the people. Within that world, underdevelopment could be looked at, as Francisco de Oliveira reminds us, with a certain optimism, as something to be overcome. To be sure, the point of De Certeau's city is to resist precisely developmentalist discourse, and to find the urban actors that "outlive" the urban "decay" (96) that represents the breakdown of technocracy and the subversion of its discipline. The developmentalist gaze could only see progress (plans carried out) or catastrophe (plans gone wrong), missing the fact that these small catastrophes were also the point where discipline met resistance, that is, creative alternatives, local originality. Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste's study of the rhetoric around public transportation in Colombia, from this volume, makes good critical use of the continued power of this perspective. He demonstrates how the desire to universally apply a certain urban model appears to base itself in a gesture of inclusion, but ends up excluding the peripheral cities that cannot live up to the transmillenial technocracy of Bogotá. Regional cities come to be defined by their incompleteness, just as the outdated inner-city neighborhoods of the national centers come to be understood as degenerate. Wishing for a happy architectural revival to rejuvenate these spaces, urban planners, technocrats and melancholy academics find themselves stalled before a city that is always already in ruins. Looking to the people that actually inhabit these failed spaces of urban development, that do not fit into plans but simply enact their reinvention, De Certeau finds resistance. Not negation but, as Foucault put it, resistance as "a creative process. To create and recreate, to transform the situation, to participate actively . . . that is to resist" (168).

Has De Certeau's resistant, ebullient, even emancipatory city run its course? Thirty years of a Washington Consensus global economy and its consolidation of capitalistic practices has led to the world's de-peasantization, with entire rural populations hurled into urban squalor.[2] This on-going history has shed new light on the interaction between disciplinary forces and the restlessness of their objects. For the first time in world history the majority of human beings dwell in cities. And with that epochal shift, the technocracy that pretends to guide these historical forces has moved from a logic of discipline to a logic of calculations. Indeed, precisely as De Certeau is revealing the faceless hero and his creative manipulation of disciplinary power, Foucault was already modifying his focus. In the introductory lecture to his momentous course of 1975–76, Foucault was suggesting that the disciplinary model was limited, and that the power of the modern state must

be contemplated in other terms. By 1976, discipline fades, and Foucault points us to the horizon of "biopolitics." Foucault's turn is crucial: the object of analysis would no longer be the normalization of the individual body through certain institutions but the regulation of populations by statisticians. This implies the re-evaluation of human life itself (the individual subject is now just one molecule of a larger biomass), qualifying its political existence or, in this case, defining its place in urban space. And within this framework of biopolitical power, technocracy exhibits the menacing new face of its sovereignty: the task of *letting die*.[3]

In her essay here, Juana Suárez considers how the victim of this biopolitical logic of calculations can be the urban landscape itself. In her study, this victim is the Centro of Bogotá, where urban forms of sociability are disappearing, historic buildings have been replaced, and the "murder of the city" is actually happening. Cinematographic representations—fictions—that deal with the Centro are what remain for us as the testament to an architectural and social space that is disintegrating into the fruits of neoliberal inequality, specifically in the form of high-end housing. But what about low-end housing? Increasingly, in cities around the world, this basic function of urban space is becoming, as the euphemism goes, "informalized." And while Suárez's critique of the destruction of the physical traces of historical memory is not to be diminished, it is not in the old historic centers, but in the newest, rapidly proliferating urban spaces that people most desperately bear the brunt of biopolitical power. In Bogotá, this space, the Centro's polar opposite, has a name: Ciudad Bolívar. And Ciudad Bolívar, in the current literature on urban life, has a new, generic classification: megaslum.[4] To be precise, it is the third largest megaslum in the world. This is a relatively new reality that the rapidly urbanizing world nevertheless already knows well. Today roughly one-third of the global urban population lives in slums (Davis 23). Death is constant. Housing, security, and health services are informal. Employment and sanitation facilities are scarce. Clean water is absent. Vermin are ubiquitous. The bubonic plague is back.

De Certeau could not have imagined that within a couple of decades his geographer's perch over New York City would be turned to dust. And while the spectacular violence that left a hole in Manhattan can be made to represent many things, it now appears that it may very well have helped to obscure the immediate links between the centers of capitalist accumulation and their ex-colonial peripheries. This, of course, is a paradox, the opposite of what should have happened. The violence in Manhattan opened our eyes to the blinding explosions of a so-called war on terror. It did not do the same for the quiet war on the urban poor.[5] Back-alley fire fights, hovering helicopter gunships, burning tires, a fist-waving cleric, make for a striking spectacle of bellicose violence through which the evening news has made Sadr City a household name. But we are ignorant of the real fight, the

violence of everyday life, of Sadr City's bombed out sewage systems, of the tap water in which visible filaments of human excrement hover, suspended in the 100-degree heat (see Davis, 144). This is the violence of urban life, a violence that is banished from our purview and that obviously extends well beyond the particularities of a city at war. The health and welfare catastrophe that is Sadr City is an ambient violence, one of context and environment. Sadr City is momentarily a war zone, but structurally it is also a generic representative of the worldwide *fact of urban existence* that most urgently confronts us today.

In what way can cultural production help us to think about the desperate reality of the urban world in which we live? Moreover, in what way can cultural production help us to think through the possibility of changing that world? These questions are particularly relevant for scholars that attempt to link their work to the potential for social action, especially and specifically in Latin America, home to the five largest megaslums in the world. In short: Is it still relevant to speak of the epiphanic moment of walking in the city, of resistance to discipline, when discipline has ceded to practices of letting die? As Mike Davis shows in his recent cascade of terrifying statistics and menacing anecdotes, *Planet of Slums* (2006), the practice of letting die is at the heart of the particularity of the modern slum. The modern slum is not the *failure* of discipline, the breakdown of the state's relations to urban space. It is the total absence of the state's disciplinary practices; it is abandonment as social policy. Slums are the rationality of urban space pushed to their hyper-active opposite, spaces of pure (black) markets, the detritus of a consumption-driven world gone haywire, privatization rendered privation. Spaces of exception where the citizen is exposed as bare life, left to die. If, as the essays collected here suggest, urban cultural production indicates the practice of representing the urban, then it would appear that we have not yet begun to penetrate the slum and initiate a high culture of protest—comparable to Sue, Dickens, and Zola from a previous era—against man's degradation of man in the urban scene. In the shift from the national narratives that dominated two centuries of our cultural production in Latin America, to the intimate spaces of urban violence, it has been difficult to transcend the narrow confines of the bourgeois concerns that tend to dominate the aesthetic tradition of the West.

The obsessive turn to the aesthetics of "violence" as Latin American cities become more precarious, or at least more gigantic, is symptomatic here. Two kinds of violence are at stake, each in dialectical tension with the other. There is the intimate violence that happens in the streets, usually between two people, often, but not always, from distinct social classes. This is the violence of physical danger and insecurity, the violence of homicide or its attempt. While easily degenerating into quasi-fascistic narratives of vigilantism, the representation of this violence can also be an effective tool

in the contemplation of social issues like inequality or hyper-consumption. But this is not the violence of the slum. To be sure, security, crime and the personal endangerment that they represent are a constant preoccupation in the slum. The nature of the violence, however, is different: it is ambient. Physical assault, then, is one specific form within an entire ambience of violence, and, indeed, cedes before other, more efficient, killers: poison, pestilence, traffic, fire, shit. These rarely make the literary scene today. Relegated to spaces of exception, this ambient violence constitutes the tedious crises of everyday life in Iztapalapa, Libertador, and Ciudad Bolívar. The affect associated with intimate violence is the aesthetic property of Polanco, Altamira, and Rosales.

It is this intimate violence that we read about in books and see on the big screen: this is the violence of urban cultural production today. Some critically-acclaimed films that have helped set the tone for Latin American cinema at the dawn of the new century come to mind here. *Amores perros* (2000), Alejandro González Iñárritu's masterpiece on the intimate violence of contemporary Mexico City, bombards us with images of a society defined by illicit exchanges, in turn surrounded by terrifying accidents: assault, political assassination, domestic fights, fratricide, and, of course, the memorable car crash that ties it all together. The emphasis here is on a civilizational fabric thoroughly rent and the irruption of violence that can change an individual life. But the social circle is a tight one, and ultimately centers on, as Ignacio Sánchez-Prado puts it, a "catalogue of urban bourgeois fears" (43) in the face of a deteriorating security situation. Regarding *Amores perros*, he concludes: "the privileged position of the neoliberal middle class [is reaffirmed] as the centre of citizenship [with the] exclusion of marginal subjects from this realm" (51). Placing to one side the fact that marginal subjects are, by definition, excluded, the spirit of Sánchez-Prado's point merits attention: what cultural production allows us to see is the unwelcome interruption of "marginal subjects" (in *Amores perros*, petty criminals careening through a fancy commercial district; a lunatic shooting down a prominent businessman; etc.) within the space of the citizen. What we miss is the space of the other.

By locating most of the action *within* the slum, one of Brazil's famously colorful *favelas*, Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund's *Cidade de Deus* (2002) has more opportunities for critical contemplation of the ambient violence surrounding the urban poor. But the opportunity is missed and, while we are treated to images of children being asked to execute children, the *favela* here is ultimately a movie set, a backdrop for a run-of-the-mill (if aesthetically exciting) gangster film with the requisite nut cases, sociopaths, anti-heroes, and, of course, the one that finds salvation by getting a real job.[6] A step in a more provocative direction is to be found in hard-scrabble efforts such as Víctor Gaviria's *Rodrigo D: No futuro* (1990) and *La vendedora de rosas* (1998), or Scott Dalton and Margarita Martínez's feature-length

documentary, *La sierra* (2005), all from Colombia. These films are light years beyond many of their contemporaries in developing the psychology of the subject defined by urban poverty, and they effectively confront us with the ambient violence that inscribes their subjects's world. We would thus argue that Eduardo Caro Meléndez overstates his claim in his essay here, precisely in reference to the marginal subjects that appear in the two Gaviria films just mentioned: "there seems to be no room for them: [the postmodern city] is an urban space they cannot yet enter" (89). The "yet" hangs ambiguously. Will the marginalized, urban poor—the new barbarians— someday be invited to enter the polis, or even the new Wal-Mart, with the rest of the citizens? While there may not yet (or no longer?) be room for them in these privileged spaces of politics and consumption, an alternative space for them has been defined and assigned, and so far it seems to be a space that our cultural production rarely dares to enter: the urban slum.

If the ambient violence that assaults the urban poor eludes us, exposing the limits of our aesthetic vocabulary, what, then, of the intimate violence whose affective power dominates urban cultural production today? What are its critical possibilities? We found some tentative inspiration in an image from Marcelino Freire's collection of short stories, *Angu de Sangue*, powerfully recreated here by Leila Lehnen. Lehnen describes the scene of a hold-up: a "woman refuses to give a young boy any valuables [. . . and so] with the piece of a jagged bottle he cuts her neck" (39). The woman is flabby and visibly wealthy, and it is perhaps a bit too easy to note that her body, in contrast with the almost transparent body of the attacker, reflects a basic social inequality. So there is nothing yet surprising in the immediate interpretation, as Lehnen writes: "He severs into the superfluous flesh in order to extract from it vengeance for his own material lack" (39). But things get more interesting when, "echoing her social unconsciousness, the woman does not acknowledge the wound afflicting her" (39). If, as Lehnen argues, the woman's flesh is the point of material contact between these two worlds, then the wound itself is their point of articulation. But just as she refuses to know the ambient violence—the social wound—that besets the boy as representative of the urban poor, neither does she recognize her own wound. And then comes a dramatic turn, where the intimate violence of the assault—individual, episodic, dramatic, reducible to modes of consumption—quickly shifts to the ambient violence of calculations, the violence experienced by the slum. Gushing blood, the woman is surrounded by people who share the street with her. However, as Lehnen vividly describes, the crowd does nothing to help. Instead of attending to or even recognizing the injury, they begin to calculate, quietly estimating the time and the money that they are wasting while they wait for the whole mess to be cleaned up. As intimate and ambient violence become confused, suddenly the wealthy victim of a random crime comes to know, even as she fails to

recognize, the biopolitics of slum life. Abandoned even as she is surrounded, the woman is left to die.

An internationalized culture of fear tells us that the act of walking in the city today may at any moment confront us with the drama of intimate violence. But the ambient violence that one will encounter while walking in the slum represents, in our estimation, the much more serious social, economic and political emergency of our time. The slum exposes the limits of the democratic possibilities of the polis, but also throws into doubt the cosmopolitan promise of Babylon. Perhaps cultural producers can be a guide here, helping us to see, think about, and act upon the points of contact where intimate and ambient violence intersect. What are the critical possibilities of staging these intersections? How can we entangle ourselves in the murky intertwining daily behaviors of resistance to inequality and refuse to make ourselves alien to them? From the standpoint of cultural production, what does it mean to take a walk in the slum? And what could it represent? So far, this material referent of urban life seems to go beyond the vocabulary readily at our disposal. Gaviria's films and Davis's statistics trace the outlines of the global condition here. And Freire's scene from *Angu de Sangue* confronts us viscerally with all the power of a tale well told, articulating two worlds living in the same city without offering any easy solutions. Not insignificantly, the story is called "Dialogue."

Notes

1. Of these two images, Featherstone writes: "the first, found, for example, in the work of Hannah Arendt, is of the city as the *polis*, the self-governing political community whose citizens deliberate, debate, and resolve issues in the form of collective outcomes [. . .]. The second is the image of Bablyon, the world city – a settlement of enormous scope, which is the opposite of a community through its heterogeneity and lack of citizenry. The inhabitants do not share a common political tradition of democratic citizenship. Yet in contrast to the *polis*, this cosmopolis possesses a tolerance of diversity, the co-existence of various groups who mingle in the active street life" (912).
2. The "Washington Consensus" is John Williamson's controversial term for, as he puts it, "the lowest common denominator of policy advice being addressed by the Washington-based institutions to Latin American countries as of 1989" (2000). The term has traveled well beyond this context to describe the common ground of policy initiatives driven by neoliberal ideology and practices of capitalist accumulation that bound the alliance of the most powerful economic and political institutions of the 1990s. Before it had a nickname, this family of institutions and their policies existed in fact, and its genealogy runs through the overthrow of Allende, the so-called Chicago Boys, the dictatorships of the 1970s and `80s, and their often twisted relation with a Washington-guided commitment to market fundamentalism.
3. See Foucault (2003).

4. The megaslum is a concept mainly associated with the work of Mike Davis, and stands in relation to the more common "megacity," or cities with populations surpassing eight million inhabitants (currently there are close to thirty megacities in the developing world). More qualitative than the bluntly empirical megacity, megaslums, according to Davis, "arise when shantytowns and squatter communities merge in continuous belts of informal housing and poverty, usually on the urban periphery" (26). Extreme population density intersecting with intense poverty is the basic formula: "Modern mega-slums [*sic*] . . . have achieved densities comparable to cattle feedlots" (92). Davis records the southeast quadrant of Mexico City as the largest megaslum in the world, with a population estimated at around four million (28). Bogotá's Ciudad Bolívar has roughly two million inhabitants (*ibid.*).

5. In the ample literature that examined the relations between dominant powers and the ex-colonial world in the wake of September 11, 2001—from ethically-questionable theories of "blowback" to the idiotic "they hate our freedom"—it was probably Baudrillard who first correctly articulated those contexts at the outset of the new millennium. He called it "the violence of the global," by which he means that it is possible to establish a relation between, on the one hand, a kind of police-state globalization that is dedicated to the unquestioned reverence for market-based economy—the engine of a never-ending "war on terror"—and on the other hand, the accelerated impoverishment of the slums. In other words, the violence of local context is always also a global violence.

6. For a much more complex representation of *favela* life, see Paulo Lins's eponymous novel.

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