



McLean, H. (2017) In praise of chaotic research pathways: A feminist response to planetary urbanization. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, (doi:[10.1177/0263775817713751](https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775817713751))

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Deposited on: 22 January 2018

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In Praise of Chaotic Research Pathways: A Feminist Response to Planetary Urbanization

Abstract

This intervention draws from and contributes to feminist and queer responses to Brenner and Schmid's planetary urbanization thesis. I argue there is a lot to value in their call for alternative and politicized urban studies research pathways, especially their critique of urban age discourse, a body of work that defines cities as static sites of 'innovation', 'creativity' and 'sustainability'. However, I contend that Brenner and Schmid risk reproducing exclusionary analytical hierarchies by ignoring marginalized feminist and queer urban studies approaches that value situated and relational knowledges and lived experience. After reflecting on my engaged, arts-based research in Glasgow, I demonstrate how planetary urbanization furnishes a critical analysis of globalized geo-economic processes shaping the neoliberal 'creative city'. But this thesis is necessarily limited. Therefore, I also call for feminist and queer research strategies that embrace humility, dialogue, taking risks, and possibly failing in our efforts to interrogate urban processes and politics.

One blustery and dreary November night in 2015, I performed drag king urban think-tank expert and ‘tool for urban change’ Toby Sharp at the Fail Better cabaret in Glasgow. For the performance, I drew inspiration from my research: an intersectional feminist analysis of ‘creative city’ policies and the potential of radical arts practice for resisting them. Engaging in the feminist and queer practice of drag kinging is my way of disrupting the binaries that separate theory from practice (Halberstam, 2011). That night at Fail Better, I introduced the audience to an array of fictitious partnerships meant to ‘makeover’ Glasgow’s neighbourhoods for middle class professionals and to catalyze economic development. On the stage, I drew inspiration from an array of public-private partnerships already underway in the city: research partnerships that connect drone manufacturers on the River Clyde with universities; community policing strategies in Glasgow’s Govanhill neighbourhood that mobilize security technologies developed in Palestine; and Glasgow city council-funded partnerships that encourage arts organisations to prime vacant lots for real estate development.

As a feminist scholar committed to critiquing depoliticized ‘creativity’ discourse that has circulated in certain urban studies and policy networks over the past decade, I particularly appreciate Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid’s call for alternative and critical analytical approaches in recent debates surrounding planetary urbanization. In particular, I find their interrogation of ubiquitous ‘urban age’ research, a body of work that positions cities as sites of ‘innovation’, ‘creativity’ and ‘sustainability’, timely and generative. Here, they critique this area of research for “black-boxing” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015:155) the globally-reaching geographies and contradictory geo-economic forces that constitute cities and regions. They also point out how this lack of criticality and complexity obfuscates uneven urban development

resulting from several decades of neoliberal regulatory restructuring and ongoing geo-economic crisis (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 157).

Because I am inspired by geographers who examine the various ways the intimate, the everyday and the global intersect, I also see promise in planetary urbanization because it posits cities as enveloped in an “unevenly woven” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 170) and globally-extending fabric of forces. With this approach, researchers can move beyond static notions of place-bound cities and, instead, map the heterogenous processes that constitute neoliberal urbanization: from fracking in North Dakota, to bedbugs in London, to place-marketing strategies in Bangkok. Moreover, a planetary epistemology offers strategies to map and interrogate emergent conditions, processes and transformations associated with contradictory urbanisation processes. Some examples include the Occupy Wall Street movement and recent Indigenous-led anti-pipeline protests at Standing Rock.

However, I agree with recent feminist and queer critics of planetary urbanisation (Natalie Oswin, Anyana Roy, Kate Derickson, Linda Peake and others) who contend that Brenner and Schmid’s urban studies epistemology, like any conceptual or methodological apparatus, is partial, limited and limiting. In some ways, the approach reproduces hierarchies as it privileges a lineage of particular white, male and European Marxist and neo-Marxist political economists at the expense of feminist and queer contributions to this sub-field (Oswin, 2016). I and others also find Brenner and Schmid’s tendency to position researchers and research subjects as monadic and pre-constituted, not formed through struggle, dialogue and praxis, rather confining (Pratt and Rosner, 2012). Additionally, as critics argue, the approach tends to privilege a ‘god-trick-like’

telescopic view from nowhere, a standpoint that feminists have critiqued for decades (Derickson, 2014; Peake, 2015).

However, is it possible to construct an alternative planetary approach that takes seriously feminist, queer, post-colonial and de-colonial analyses of the embodied and the everyday, as well as critical political economic research on structural forces? (Deutsche 1991; McDowell, 1992; Oswin, 2016). A more heterogenous approach could include Brenda Parker's "feminist partial political economy of place," FPPEP (Parker, 2016). This methodological tool kit combines both an overview of larger economic forces and, building on post-structural paradigms and the work of Black feminist thinkers, embodied and community-engaged analyses of lives lived from the ground up. With FPPEP, researchers can uncover the raced, classed, gendered and ableist discourses and practices that result in the vastly uneven production of space with a strategy that encourages humility, reflexivity and a feminist commitment to slow scholarship (Mountz et. al, 2015). An alternative analytical approach could also draw from rich feminist research that demonstrates the constitutive role of sexuality, ability, race and gender in uneven capitalist development (Cahill, 2007; Catungal and Leslie, 2009; Doan, 2011; Muller Myrdahl, 2013). As an example, through action-oriented research with a homeless women's organisation in a gentrifying Toronto neighbourhood, Kern maps the interconnections between small, cruddy everyday and embodied inconveniences of living in poverty with broad political economic processes (Kern, 2016).

In a similar vein, an alternative epistemology for urban research could learn from Richa Nagar's 'situated solidarities', a praxis-oriented research and pedagogical strategy that considers the heterogeneous webs of multi-scalar processes involved in the production of spaces and

subjectivities (Nagar, 2014; see also Peake, 2015). By encouraging collaboration with artists, activists, and scholars, a situated solidarity approach decentres theoretical and methodological frameworks that positions individuals and communities as objects of study. Furthermore, by recognising poetry, music, and theatre as valuable methods for negotiating everyday urban life and forging solidarities, Nagar de-centres what she refers to as “the class system of the intellect” (Nagar, 2014: 160) often reproduced by scholarly research.

From the standpoint of a researcher incorporating queer theory and arts-based approaches, I also question Brenner and Schmid’s claim that their new epistemology of the urban brings rigour and consistency to urban studies. According to them, their approach brings order to an increasingly “chaotic” (Brenner and Schmid, 2014: 743) field with a diminished “collective capacity to offering convincing, accessible alternatives to the dominant ideologies of our time” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 159).

But what counts as productive and rigorous research and who decides? Such claims to tame ‘chaotic’ analytical conceptual and methodological approaches have already been the subject of several cautionary critiques in other disciplines. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam, for example, has critiqued the hetero-normative imposition of intellectual rigour and disciplinary order in standard academic discourse by drawing on the likes of Paulo Freire, Fred Moten and Jacques Rancière (Halberstam, 2011). For Halberstam, establishing theoretical schemas and road-maps are particularly exclusionary, homogenising, masculinist and hetero-patriarchal acts because they create hierarchies that separate what counts and doesn’t count as valuable research. Instead, he contends that undisciplined research strategies outside predetermined frameworks and exploratory work that risk failing uncover subjugated knowledges and generate counter-

spaces where artists, activists and scholars can enact world-making practices. Furthermore, according to Halberstam, we need exploratory work that risks failing in order to produce politically and intellectually generative scholarship,

Queer theorists also claim that unusual research pathways can provide a way of escaping the current professionalization of knowledge production in the university sector (Halberstam, 2011; Schulman, 2011). As an example, in the UK context in which I am currently working, researchers and graduate students are pressurised to produce four-star articles to compete in the Research Excellence Framework. Within this regime, high-profile and well-resourced scholars define what counts as ‘rigorous theory’ constructing citational economies that reproduce their expertise and modes of thought. Planetary urbanization, in advocating a reproducible research model while excluding others, might unintentionally play into this era of academic capitalism.

Such an articulation of systematic academic financial gain is no minor matter. Not only are universities heavily implicated in neo-liberal employment and urban planning practises, university administrators increasingly favour globally-extending research schemes that mobilise multiple private sector, government, and third sector partners. Funding bodies therefore tend to devalue small-scale and politicised community-engaged approaches. Taken together, choosing to legitimate a universal schema or map has far-reaching consequences for already-marginalised methodological and theoretical approaches.

Nevertheless, it could be argued that all scholarship is subject to such power dynamics, and that we are all ensnared in reproducing these contradictions. As critical scholars committed to social and spatial justice, we continue to muddle through, combining the tools that make sense for our research journeys. Therefore, in my own post-doctoral research on neoliberal cultural

policies and arts activism in Glasgow, Schmid and Brenner's planetary approach furnishes me a convincing and critical political economic analysis of the globalised network of actors involved in the marketing of Glasgow as a competitive 'creative city.' With a lens informed by David Harvey, Henri Lefevbre, and Bob Jessop to name a few, I can examine how internationally-connected private, public and non-profit actors are complicit in the production of uneven urban space. This includes analyzing the implementation of globally-replicated, neoliberal culture-led urban regeneration initiatives meant to attract professionals and catalyze urban regeneration to a city struggling from the loss of manufacturing jobs, unionised employment, and an eroded industrial base since the 1970's (Gray, 2008). With Brenner and Schmid's approach, I can also map and interrogate how culture-led regeneration planners mobilizing urban age research make-over neighbourhoods into sites of market-friendly cultural consumption. From this perspective, I can interrogate how the success of Glasgow's art scene (branded as 'The Glasgow Miracle') and its internationally-connected artists are complicit in the gentrification of some of the UK's most disinvested neighbourhoods. For example, over the past two decades, city boosters, consultants and public funding organisations have worked in collaboration with the Glasgow School of Art, universities, IT companies and urban regeneration planners to re-brand disinvested neighbourhoods as 'creative hubs'. At the same time, access to community services and affordable housing has rapidly declined (Gray, 2008) and arts funders consistently sideline artists of colour prompting difficult conversations about racialized inequalities in Scotland (Mother Tongue, 2013).

Yet, in order to make sense of the ways artists and activists are contesting this voracious neoliberal creativity and how these regimes exacerbate pre-existing inequalities along the lines of

race, class, gender and ability, I combine planetary urbanization with feminist, queer and engaged arts-based approaches. For example, part of my research tool kit over the past few years has involved actively following a regular political cabaret called Fail Better. An homage to poet Samuel Beckett's call to 'fail again, fail better', Fail Better fearlessly creates a unique space for underrepresented working class, feminist, queer and non-binary artists, disabled artists, and artists of colour to perform, meet and interact. This mixed performance event takes place at McChuills, a small bar on the edge of the city's east end with a clientele who are known to support radical and anarchist causes such as a refugee football league and anti-racist organisations. Curated by politicized arts practitioners with strong connections to activist communities, the twice-a-month cabaret features an eclectic mix of comedy, hip-hop, poetry readings, independently-produced short films, and a range of unclassifiable performances (striptease, fire-walking, performance art). In direct opposition to the current neoliberal emphasis on 'award-winning' artists, Fail Better makes space for works-in-progress and amateur artists alongside their well-established and known counterparts.

It is important that I don't over-emphasize the radical potential of events like Fail Better, spaces that often attract a narrow and self-selecting group of artists and activists in a moment when even the most radical arts practice is consumed as spectacle. However, echoing what performance theorist and artist TL Cowan refers to as the "trans-local" arts practice of cabaret, the activities taking place in Fail Better spark friendships and activist networks that extend outwards to spark an unruly mix of politicized interventions and world-building activities (Cowan, 2012; see also Muñoz, 1994). Indeed, Fail Better evenings are lively convergence spaces where every night has an overtly politicized theme: Fuck the Patriarchy, Tent Town

Logic, and No Bregrets (a post-Brexit event) are some pertinent examples. In the space, artists and activists rally support, such as raising funds to cover legal costs of anti-drone factory protestors, Medical Aid to Palestine and a youth centre in the Aida Refugee Camp. Moreover, Fail Better artists are involved in activist interventions that address local and global concerns – and ask the audience for more than just donations. During an event focussed on a protest to shut down Dungavel (an asylum seeker detention centre situated a few hours south of the city) practical strategies for a more effective demonstration were shared, and the audience mobilised to get involved. There was also a fund-raiser for a female asylum seeker night shelter program based at a Glasgow social centre that exists because of a fierce resident-led occupation. On other occasions, the focus can be more global. For example, the launch of poetry collections co-edited with Palestinian novelists and poets (Lochhead et. al, 2014)

Fail Better may have provided a lively space to practice an action-based analysis of the class, race and gender politics of ‘creative city’ planning in Glasgow, but however significant I found these events, experiencing and observing these activities places me at one remove, following the path of the traditional urban researcher. Exploring further as a feminist practise-based researcher means taking to the stage in solidarity with the performers I’ve witnessed. I find myself uncomfortable with the objectifying distance of study and research. Becoming a performing research subject is not simply a knowledge-seeking endeavour; it is a dialogical intersubjective practise of equal exchange and risk. My drag-king character Toby Sharp may have been born from my frustration working as a community planner in Toronto before I embarked on my doctoral research (##### add after review) but his hyperbolic caricature of the gendered politics of arts-led regeneration planning was equally applicable to Glasgow.

Toby's satirical critique of the entrepreneurialization of urban planning involved scripting a Toby TED-style talk that critiqued recent arts-led regeneration efforts to make-over Glasgow's East End neighbourhoods for property development. For the act, Toby presented himself as a Canadian urban think tank expert that had parachuted into the city to conduct a Commonwealth Games 2014 evaluation. With the help of a young woman intern, we handed out questionnaires that asked the audience if they felt more "creative" since the Games invested millions of dollars in a few weeks of community-engaged arts programs that promoted social inclusion. Referring to activist research on funding cuts in the community and arts sectors alongside the increase in public-private 'creativity' partnerships in Scotland, we satirized the contradictory politics of Games efforts to 're-invent' neighbourhoods for middle class professionals with culture-led regeneration (Glasgow Games Monitor, 2014).

In staging the satire, I had to research marketing materials and critical conversations on the Commonwealth Games. While useful, this material research does not compare to trust I gained and the knowledge I exchanged with other performers and the activist audience who approached me afterwards. For me, this was not an instrumental networking exercise, these interactions sparked friendships. By engaging with Fail Better and getting to know the artists who have performed, I have developed a nuanced understanding of the diverse networks of activist-artists who are actively resisting austerity politics in Glasgow. This became an unruly, embodied and risky research journey that planetary urbanization would have struggled to either generate or identify.

One such collective I was introduced to was the They They They's, a queer and disabled music and spoken word group who discuss borders, migration, non-binary lives, and violent cuts

to community services in their lively British Sign Language translated performances (Alland, 2016). Collaborating with collectives like the They They They's has helped me develop a more nuanced understanding of disability politics and austerity urbanization in Glasgow. By working with the collective, I learned firsthand about the financial barriers under-resourced disability activists encounter when they require British Sign Language translators to work comfortably with queer and non-English signing communities. When it came to selecting the acts for the Antipode Foundation funded 'Arts and Precarity Forging New Solidarities' cabaret in January 2016 the accepted my invitation to perform. In turn, the They They They's enriched the cabaret and workshop by making connections between current anti-racist and migrant justice activism in Glasgow with rich histories of feminist organising for community space in the city. As an able-bodied, white, cis-gendered researcher working in the university sector, I acknowledge that my understanding of these struggles is limited and partial (see also de Leeuw, 2012). However, in feminist, queer and anti-racist acts of praxis and dialogue, the participants in the cabaret and workshop demonstrated how inequalities manifest in Glaswegian arts scenes and the ways artists collectively confront them.

As a feminist urban studies researcher and teacher, I appreciate that Brenner and Schmid's call for planetary urbanization has catalyzed challenging discussions about how we approach the urban in our analytical endeavours. I particularly value their critique of urban age discourse, a research strategy that posits cities as static and bounded and favours quick-fix consultancy prescriptions that entrench urban inequalities. However, planetary urbanization risks reinforcing historic and ongoing divisions that separate particular political economy approaches from those that take intersectionality and difference seriously. As a result, such a lens could

unintentionally marginalise research that engages communities in messy dialogue and exchange and seeks to forge situated solidarities. Furthermore, I am concerned that their call for researching cities from a planetary standpoint situates the kinds of activities taking shape in *Fail Better* as ineffective. Through a lens pre-occupied with mapping flows of capital and neoliberal policies, local sites of activism are set up as weak and useless in the face of steamroller-like neoliberal policies.

In a time of multiple inequalities including vicious austerity policies, racist policing of borders, post-Brexit xenophobia in the UK, and the white supremacist, settler colonial and misogynist logic of Trump's ascendance in the US, we require multiple research strategies that spark difficult conversations regarding intersectional difference, power, and collective learning that challenges hegemonic structures. Within this context, I find myself cautious of perspectives that further sideline already marginalized feminist, queer, post-colonial and anti-racist methodological and theoretical approaches. Calls for masculinist research that refuses to learn from queer and feminist critique and lived experience entrenches gendered and raced exclusion in a moment when we should reflect on how we can act as allies, resource activism and break down colonial hierarchies. I am also critical of calls for discipline and order that might reinforce divisions in the increasingly exclusionary university sector. While advocating what counts as rigorous urban research, Brenner and Schmid risk feeding into already well-cited networks of scholars that thrive in the neoliberal citational economy. And citation matters. As Kate Derickson notes "the act of theorizing the urban and, by association, theorizing political possibilities, is fundamentally shaped and limited by the intellectual and philosophical traditions

upon which they are based, and the empirical examples upon which they draw” (Derickson, 2014: 651).

To conclude, what we draw from determines where we go forward. It is crucial that urban studies’ calls for alternative and radical new research roadmaps committed to social justice embrace heterogenous, dialogic and praxis-oriented approaches. This means taking seriously humble, reflexive and embodied approaches that take risks and meandering turns to research what Peake refers to as the undecideability of the urban (Peake, 2015). Inevitably, we have to allow for the discomfoting uncertainties of the chaotic and to value the humility of all of our situated and grounded perspectives. This also means risking failing in our analytical endeavours so that we might fail better.

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