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EDITORIAL

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Making worlds in urban cultural studies

ABSTRACT

In this editorial, we explore the relevance of the concepts of worlding and world-making within the context of urban cultural studies. We ask how cultural practices make worlds and how these practices are in turn worlded, with particular attention to the diverse forms that the urban (as a ‘global’ phenomenon) takes across the world and fact that academic research itself should be considered a form of worlding. In doing so, three focal points come to the fore. The first is the importance of so-called ‘elite dreams’ and their messy and contested relation with worlding practices from below. Second, we emphasize the need to examine the social, political and economic contexts in which cultural objects are created, distributed and received – which calls for an interdisciplinary approach. Third, we focus on historical differences and the need for longer-term perspectives within scholarly research, considering how particular cultural practices are preserved and remembered.

We [...] focus on the urban as a milieu that is in constant formation, one shaped by the multitudinous ongoing activities that by wedding dream and technique, form the art of being global. Inherently unstable, inevitably subject to intense contestation, and always incomplete, worlding is the art of being global.

(Roy and Ong 2011: xv)
If ‘the urban’ is taken to be a global phenomenon, then how can the multiple forms that cities take across the world, shaped by conditions of historical difference, be best considered? This question is central to recent debates in urban studies that have centred on the concept of worlding. In this special issue, we take this concept as a starting point to ask how it contributes insights to the project of urban cultural studies, precisely because ‘art and culture constitute no inconsequential area of human practice, but another potential staging area for far-reaching social change’ (Fraser 2014a: 12). It is telling that Roy and Ong (2011), in the above quote, refer to worlding as the art of being global, acknowledging that the meanings of worlding practices are – much like artistic practices – always ambiguous, fragmentary and contested. With this in mind, the contributions to the special issue consider how worlding occurs through cultural practices and how cultural practices are worlded, showing how these ongoing processes of negotiation, debate and contestation manifest in specific contexts and sites.

In this introduction, we aim to clarify how we define and use the concepts of worlding and world-making, which have been engaged in a broad range of scholarly work, and to outline their relevance to urban cultural studies. The apparent flexibility of the concepts contributes to their appeal. As Mieke Bal (2002: 25) has argued, ‘forms of travel render concepts flexible’, which is ‘an asset rather than a liability’, especially in interdisciplinary scholarship. Nevertheless, as several scholars note in reaction to Bal’s argument, when concepts travel there may be a risk of ‘oversimplification’ and ‘the loss of terminological precision’ (Neumann and Nünning 2012: 15; see also Hatavara et al. 2013: 5). Keeping such cautions in mind, the first section attempts to carefully frame how and why we think that the concepts of worlding and world-making can be useful in urban cultural studies by positioning them within two particular scholarly traditions. The three subsequent sections focus on specific aspects that are of crucial importance to our understanding of urban world-making and connect the different contributions to this issue: (1) the successes and failures of elite dreams, (2) (unequal) social relations and the practicalities of artistic/cultural production and consumption, and (3) worldings of the historical past and longer-term perspectives on processes of worlding/world-making.

**CONCEPTUALIZING WORLDING AND WORLD-MAKING**

While the concepts of worlding and world-making have enjoyed a broad application across the humanities and the social sciences, in this section we will position each concept within a specific scholarly tradition and field. Our usage of worlding draws primarily on recent debates within the field of urban studies and urban theory (e.g. Simone 2001; Roy and Ong 2011; Roy 2011b, 2011c; McCann et al. 2013; Binnie 2014; Ming Wai Jim 2014; Baker and Ruming 2015; Furlong and Kooy 2017). To briefly summarize, the concept of worlding has been employed as part of a broader postcolonial understanding of urban studies, in which the relation between cities across the world and academic knowledge production has been fundamentally questioned (e.g. Robinson 2006, 2011; Roy 2009; Edensor and Jayne 2012; Roy 2015). In this sense, the worlding concept is related to arguments made around the idea of planetary urbanism, aimed at ‘[deciphering] the variegated articulations among the disparate spatial, political-institutional and environmental elements of the emergent planetary urban configuration’ (Brenner et al. 2011: 237; see also Heise 2008; Brenner 2013; Scott and Storper 2015). At the same
time, we recognize that a risk of such ‘planetary’ approaches is precisely the reproduction of dominant geographies of knowledge production, in which peripheral sites are reduced to ‘empirical variation to existing urban theory’ (Roy 2015: 2).

With this in mind, our approach builds on two crucial points from existing literature around worlding in urban contexts. The first is the need to study conditions, assertions and theories of globalization beyond a limited number of cities considered to be ‘global’. This is not just about expanding the scope of analysis, but rather about questioning how we think (and where we locate) the general and the particular (Roy 2015). More specifically, the concept of worlding requires a rethinking of what has too often been approached as the general model (i.e. a limited number of western cities) and the empirical variations to that model (smaller and peripheral cities), instead revealing the ‘deep relationalities’ between different sites across the world (Roy 2009: 821, 2015). To do so, and this is the second point, requires a ‘focus on mid-range theorizing (Collier and Ong 2005) [which] dives below high abstraction to hover over actual human projects and goals unfolding in myriad circumstances of possibility and contingency’ (Ong 2011: 11–12). In addition, and in line with the approach of urban cultural studies, we argue that such a project calls for an interdisciplinary approach.

The second scholarly tradition on which this issue builds centres around the concept of world-making, which was originally formulated by Nelson Goodman (1978) and commented and expanded upon by a variety of scholars in the humanities (e.g. Mitchell 1991; Carter 2000; Bruner 1991; Donato-Rodrigues 2009; Herman 2009; Hollinshead et al. 2009; Nünning and Nünning 2010; Stone-Davis 2015; Costa Söderlund 2015; Breger 2017; Clark et al. 2017). Firmly rooted in constructivist approaches, this concept signifies ‘the movement […] from unique truth and a world of fixed and found to a diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making’ (Goodman 1978: x). While this broad argument can be applied to a range of situations, practices and fields, Goodman’s theory focused particularly on cultural and literary contexts, in which world-making becomes primarily ‘a form of communication’ (Clark et al. 2017: 3).

In contrast to the specific ways of world-making described by Goodman, however, the articles in this issue take inspiration from some of the broader implications of his theory for the field of (urban) cultural studies, as described by Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning (2010). First, as they suggest, ‘[i]nstead of pitting the arts, the humanities, and the sciences against each other, such an approach provides a useful framework for comparatively exploring similarities and differences with regard to their respective forms of worldmaking’ (Nünning and Nünning 2010: 19). Second, ‘it shifts attention from “culture” or “cultural objects”, assumed to exist, ready to be examined, to the level of the concepts that we deploy to construct the objects of inquiry in the first place’ (Nünning and Nünning 2010: 19). In response, our interest in this issue concerns the ways in which cultural objects and expressions co-constitute and communicate urban worlds, and how this relates to world-making efforts in other fields, precisely because ‘[w]orldmaking as we know it always starts from world already on hand; the making is a remaking’ (Goodman 1978: 6). In addition to these points by Nünning and Nünning, and building on inspiring recent scholarship in literary studies, here too we recognize an urgent need to look beyond an established canon of the urban contexts treated in academic research (e.g. Ameel et al. 2015; Finch et al. 2017).
A final point that Nünning and Nünning identify as useful in Goodman’s approach deserves extra attention here because it also represents a key issue within urban studies debates about worlding. As Nünning and Nünning write:

Since all cultural domains and kinds of culture are conditioned by knowledge and shaped by ways of worldmaking, the concepts we generate [as scholars] and the methods we develop to construct our cultures of knowledge and research can also be regarded as ways of worldmaking.

(2010: 19)

In Ananda Roy (2011a: 314) we find a similar reflection on academic knowledge production: she notes that ‘worlding as a practice of centering also involves the production of regimes of truth’ (see also Spivak 1985). Accordingly, worlding would ideally be ‘both an object of analysis and a method of critical deconstruction’, a ‘critical intervention in the truth-claims that are constructed and circulated’ in particular contexts and discourses (Roy 2011a: 314). With this in mind, the contributors to this special issue critically analyse practices of worlding and world-making in a range of urban sites while trying to remain aware of our own position as academics, asking critical questions, for example, on how we encounter the objects and sites that we study (Ferdinand; Swanton), how our own work might be complicit to the practices and dynamics that we study (Kalkman) and how we can be in ‘critical solidarity’ with specific practices of resistance (Gräbner). Indeed, world-making also represents a way of self-making and vice versa (Bruner 2001; Arif 2016).

With this theoretical background in mind, we argue that worlding and world-making are productive concepts in urban cultural studies for a number of reasons. First, they highlight the importance of smaller and/or peripheral cities for what authors such as Lefebvre (2003) have called ‘the urban phenomenon’. Following Roy and others, what is at stake here is not just an expansion of case studies, but rather the need to pose fundamental questions about the meaning and function of cultural imaginaries across conditions of historical difference. Second, keeping in mind the premise of this journal that the urban cannot be grasped by either the humanities or the social sciences alone, the broad applicability of worlding and world-making allows for examining differences, similarities and the mutual influence between cultural/artistic worlding practices and their political, economic and/or everyday counterparts. To make these rather broad claims more specific, the remainder of this editorial will focus on three particular points that we find crucial to carrying out such a project.

**ELITE DREAMS**

Perhaps the most visible, often forceful, forms of urban world-making are elite conceptualizations or projections of a city’s global position and relevance. Across the world, cultural, political and economic elites have attempted to model the cities in which they reside according to ambitious dreams and desires. Often, these dreams are based on ‘vehicular’ (Peck 2012), travelling ideas about best practices and policies in city building – e.g. the modern city, the global city, the creative city and the smart city – which leads, as Ong (2011) notes, to diverse practices of modelling, inter-referencing and new solidarities. As is often addressed, the realization of elite dreams often brings with it different forms of destruction and therefore rarely goes uncontested.
Accordingly, as Giulia Carabelli writes in her contribution to this issue: ‘the very idea of “worlding from above”, as the prevalence of elite urban planning in many of the world’s major cities (cf. Baker and Ruming 2015), suggests the myriad possibilities and potentialities of “worlding from below”’ (see also Simone 2001).

In this special issue, we see a number of interesting examples of elite dreaming. Miloš Jovanović, for example, discusses how the Balkan bourgeoisie dreamed of modelling their cities according to Western European models and how one novel about Belgrade both mirrors and questions the failure of these dreams. Similarly, the contributions by Laura Wenz and Giulia Carabelli address the formulation, implementation and consequences of specific elite imaginings of a city’s position on the global stage. In addition to often-criticized imaginaries of world-class cities as formulated by economic and political elites, however, the contributions also cast light on other, rather different forms of elite dreaming. The article by Simone Kalkman, for example, addresses how aspirations of social relevance of curators, artists and architects – as cultural elites – are negotiated and framed in the specific art-world practice of exhibiting Brazilian favellas in Europe. In addition, several articles show how imaginaries of social relevance and/or cultural openness, formulated by cultural producers and/or everyday narratives, can serve to obscure underlying divisions and inequalities (e.g. Wenz; van Hout; Ferdinand).

In each of these examples, we thus see how the worlding of particular elite imaginaries is negotiated by those involved in their formulation and those affected by their real-world consequences. In addition, the short-form articles, which have been set up as theoretically oriented think pieces, raise a number of additional questions regarding elite dreams. Simon Ferdinand, for example, asks how ideas around cosmopolitanism and global connectedness become ingrained in commonplace, everyday knowledge, and what this means for the scholarly analysis of the ‘banal’ expressions of these ideas. In turn, Cornelia Gräbner notices how elites have appropriated defiant, working-class worldings, and critically reflects on how contemporary scholars might position themselves within this field. As a whole, we therefore feel that the issue emphasizes a number of pressing questions, highlighting what is at stake in different forms of elite dreaming. How do elite dreams connect to everyday realities (e.g. Wenz; van Hout)? How can they be defied, confronted and critically remembered (e.g. Gräbner; Carabelli)? When do we consider dreams failed and when do they become nightmares (e.g. Jovanović)?

SOCIO-POLITICAL RELATIONS AND THE PRACTICALITIES OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Another crucial point that the special issue addresses is the importance of seeing urban imaginaries and their cultural manifestations through the social relations that make them possible, acknowledging both the different but intersecting forms of inequality at play here and the messy, contradictory ways in which different (groups of) actors navigate and negotiate these fields. Accordingly, we should not only consider how specific cultural texts or objects are shaped by socio-political conditions, but also acknowledge the underlying categories, identities and structures that inform cultural production. As the Freee Art Collective emphasizes:
To speak of artists, authors, viewers, spectators and participants without referring to these material conditions of actantial relations is to cut oneself off from the grammar of art’s social relations. More importantly, if the preconditions of art’s actants are not addressed and transformed, then we are condemned to occupy the places that we inherit rather than to inaugurate new places to occupy.

(2014: 260, original emphasis)

In other words, if art and culture ‘serve to render visible alienation and contradiction, and just as important, to invite dialogue’, it is equally important to ask by whom and for whom these visualizations and discussions take place (Fraser 2014a: 13; see also Hesmondhalgh 2013).

Accordingly, Laura Wenz addresses in her contribution to the special issue how designers – as a professional group but also, crucially, individual political subjects – frame and define the relevance of their practices in relation to Cape Town’s title as World Design Capital 2014. Similarly, Giulia Carabelli notes how an artist collective in the city of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, strategically positioned themselves in relation to EU-formulated narratives around the city’s divisions and future to criticize these very institutions and discourses.

The other full-length articles also pay specific attention to how cultural products and depictions are created, discussed and worlded through the particularities of social, political and economic relations in specific contexts and sites (e.g. van Hout; Jovanović; Kalkman, Swanton). It is not only important to focus on how bottom-up actors have resisted top-down narratives, but to also consider how elite actors navigate contexts of inequality, for which ethnographic methods are deployed in a number of the articles (Wenz; Carabelli).

Accordingly, the contributions also draw attention to a methodological argument, which neatly corresponds with the aims and scope of urban cultural studies (Fraser 2014a, 2014b). As Laura Wenz writes in her article:

From a methodological angle, this also means that in order to analytically capture the multiple facets and complex social, spatial and political experiences of design, a close reading of cultural objects needs to be juxtaposed with an equally close reading of socio-cultural context and processes.

With this in mind, several of the articles use research methods from both the humanities and the social sciences, combining close-reading and visual analysis with interviews with stakeholders from different backgrounds, participatory observation/encounters, collaborative research practices, soundwalks and performance art. Luce Beeckmans’ contribution, for example, emphasizes the importance of in-depth but multi-sited ethnographies to understand the ‘trans-urban’ formulation and circulation of urban worlding practices of African diasporas. Again, an important additional component to this methodological focus is a reflective stance towards our own position as scholars.

HISTORICAL WORLDINGS/LONGER-TERM PERSPECTIVES

A final thread that links the contributions is the emphasis on how urban imaginaries, and the ways in which they are worlded, develop over time. One important reason for this is, in Roy’s (2015: 8) words, that ‘historical difference [is] a fundamental and constitutive force in the making of global urbanization’,
despite being often read in a depoliticized manner, as ‘empirical variation’ (see also Chakrabarty 2000). This represents a significant underlying assumption to our conceptualization of worlding and worldmaking, as we see in a number of the contributions. In Milou van Hout’s article, for example, we not only learn how the literary scene of Trieste, Italy, historically produced imaginations of a cosmopolitanism and openness towards difference, but also how a recent documentary film critically engages with these imaginaries. Other articles ask how recent histories of violence and urban divisions impact contemporary practices of cultural production (e.g. Wenz; Carabelli), and how representational histories continue to influence the production and reception of current artistic depictions (Kalkman). Finally, a number of contributors ask how to approach historical, elite urban dreams after their ‘failure’ (Jovanović), and how traces, monuments or memories are incorporated into the very structures and discourses that they tried to defy (Gräbner).

Accordingly, and following Goodman’s focus on symbols and narratives in world-making practices, the issue highlights the importance of questioning how historical, urban worldings/world-makings are preserved and remembered in visual, textual, and sound-based objects. In other words, how are different forms of mediation employed to express and access historical realities, and how does this affect the relation between material objects and imaginaries, experiences and dreams? The contributions trace historical, urban imaginaries through a variety of cultural products – e.g. newspapers, statues, performance art and museum exhibits – detailing the particularities of their production and circulation within specific spatial and temporal context. In asking these questions, we build on a number of scholarly debates that have connected cultural objects and urban histories, most notably on cultural representations of the urban (e.g. Deutsche 1996; Miles 1997; Lindner 2009; Shiel and Fitzmaurice 2001; Rose 2016; Tambling 2017), the various source materials available for investigating urban history (e.g. Brennen and Hardt 1999) and the role of the senses in urban histories, imaginaries and representations (e.g. Cándida Smith 2002; Howes 2003; Cowan and Steward 2007; Birdsall 2012). Accordingly, the issue challenges the stark opposition between urban theories on the one hand and lived realities on the other, precisely because theories are actively and constantly mediated and negotiated through the material and vice versa.

We started this editorial by asking how cultural practices make worlds and how these practices are in turn worlded, and we hope to have shown that these questions are inseparably connected. Our primary aim with this special issue is to consider how multi-scalar conditions of difference manifest in cultural representations of the urban and cultural practices in cities. In doing so, we not only argue for a varied geographical scope, but also for the importance of studying the (recent) histories that have made up these unequal conditions, examining how and why certain places have come to be – and be understood – in specific ways. In addition, we emphasize the need to zoom in on both bottom-up and top-down worlding practices, and especially also on how the two become intertwined in messy and sometimes contradictory realities. Finally, recognizing that world-making is also a way of self-making, we highlight the importance of reflecting on the positionality of our own research practices. By emphasizing the limitations of totalities, Clark et al. (2017: 4) notes, the notions of worlding and world-making require us to remain ‘perpetually open to what lies outside the parameters of our particular worldviews’. In our view, the concepts of worlding and world-making help redefine the role and importance of small and peripheral cities in theorizations and philosophies of the urban, now seen as a global
phenomenon. Moreover, their broad application and ability to travel across different academic domains allows for and even requires interdisciplinary research. As such, the articles in this issue offer various ways to productively engage with worlding and world-making for the broader project of urban cultural studies.

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