Introduction

The political materiality of cities

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How can urban anthropology understand rule and belonging in the city? Where is urban politics located and how do we recognize it? In this special issue, we suggest that a focus on materiality might help us understand the relation between cities and political processes in new ways. Anthropologists have long understood cities as important political arenas and as key sites in the formation of political communities (e.g. Holston 1999). Such ethnographic work has shown how urban politics is located across diverse social spaces, from official government buildings to the space of the street, and in a range of everyday practices and more spectacular events. Urban anthropologists frequently study the role of elected officials and bureaucrats (e.g. Lazar 2007; Anjaria 2011), and increasingly also study the role of non-state actors—from social movements and corporations to churches and criminal organizations—in urban governance and negotiations of citizenship (e.g. Jaffe 2013; Lanz and Oosterbaan 2016).

In this special issue, we seek to extend such intersections between urban and political anthropology by exploring the role of *non-human* entities in urban politics. As Daniel Miller (2010: 51) notes, "objects are important…often precisely because we do not *see* them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations, by setting the scene and ensuring appropriate behavior, without being open to challenge." While urban anthropologists have generally been attentive to the spatial dimension of political life, attending to a broad range of urban "things" helps us see how political subject formation, and the imagination and legitimization of political order, are more-than-human, *material* processes.

How might we draw fruitfully on the "material turn" in anthropology and related disciplines (Ingold 2012; Bennett and Joyce 2013) to intervene in anthropological studies of urban politics? In this special issue, we propose an approach that understands urban politics as a socio-material coproduction. Debates over the design of mosques in Dutch cities, the repurposing of electricity bills within negotiations of citizenship in Rio de Janeiro, and the creative use of water meters to selectively incorporate citizens living in informal settlements in Mumbai are some of the contexts through which this special issue engages with the political materiality of cities. We explore the purchase of thinking materiality and politics together within urban anthropology, drawing on a comparative approach

and connecting to ongoing conversations in neighboring disciplines such as urban geography and material culture studies.

We are particularly interested in analyzing how citizenship and political legitimacy are assembled through relations between humans and various forms of urban technology, infrastructure, buildings, documents, and consumer products. We want to understand when, how, and why urban matter becomes political and urban politics become material. The seven articles in this special issue direct ethnographic attention to these socio-material processes and to the specific relations, practices, and norms that they entail. Such processes involve the simultaneous transformation of the urban built environment and city dwellers' everyday lives, for instance through the construction, demolition, and renovation of buildings, or the physical, institutional, and financial reworking of water, electricity, and transport infrastructures. These changes often entail the repurposing or reshaping of existing objects, but they may also involve the introduction of new material entities—from walls and minarets to water meters and utility bills—that in turn enable new forms of political imagination and action and generate or transform specific political relations.

The articles collected here demonstrate the value of bringing together research on specific categories of non-human entities—including literatures on urban infrastructure, architecture, and documents—in order to develop a more encompassing understanding of the role of materiality in urban politics. In the rest of this introduction, we discuss, first, our approach to *political materiality*, the concept we develop to understand the connection between urban politics and non-human matter. This approach also incorporates the concept of affordances, a term originating in environmental psychology but more recently developed within science and technology studies. In the next two sections, we outline how the articles within this special issue draw on this approach to contribute to debates on urban politics, focusing in particular on the two main themes of citizenship and political legitimacy. Where a number of contributors to this issue analyze the role of different types of urban matter in negotiations of citizenship, others discuss how the legitimization of urban political projects—and thus of normative visions of a city's future—is mediated through the material and symbolic properties of different things. We end with a discussion of what is gained by thinking materiality and politics together within urban anthropology, and what distinctive approaches the subdiscipline might develop in contrast to neighboring disciplines such as urban geography and material culture studies.

Political Materiality and Affordances

We use the term "political materiality" here to refer to the role of objects in mediating relations of power between humans. This definition works from a broad understanding

of "political" as referring to power struggles—to forms of contention and competition that include, but extend beyond, the formal domain of electoral democracy and the state. We use the term "materiality" to indicate a broad category of tangible, relatively durable non-human entities that possess specific physical qualities. As a shorthand, we frequently refer to these entities as "things." Our engagement with the concept of materiality draws on broader moves to develop more materialist modes of analysis, which consider matter and processes of materialization as central to constructions of "the social" (Latour 2005a; Miller 2005; Coole and Frost 2010).[1]

An emphasis on materiality does not mean ignoring the importance of either humans themselves, or discourse. Rather, taking inspiration from material-semiotic approaches (Law 2009), we recognize the importance of constructivism and discursive approaches, but extend such approaches to study how unequal power relations emerge through the connections and interactions between humans, discourse, *and* things. We see political materiality as the articulation between human and non-human entities that normalizes or challenges forms of rule and belonging. Referring to the concept of *res publica* common in political philosophy, Bruno Latour (2005b: 6, emphasis in original) notes,

> Procedures to authorize and legitimize are important, but it's only half of what is needed to assemble. The other half lies in the issues themselves, in the *matters* that matter, in the *res* that creates a *public* around it. They need to be represented, authorized, legitimated, and brought to bear inside the relevant assembly.

Our approach considers these more-than-human processes from two complementary angles. It involves, first, studying how apparently insignificant matter becomes politicized. How do things become what Latour (2005b) calls "objects of concern," provoking controversy or conflict? As ethnographers, taking a processual, historically-informed and practice-oriented approach to materiality allows us to follow things as they take on a connective role, assembling contentious publics around them. Second, political materiality involves the materialization of politics. Ethnographic analyses of object-oriented processes and socio-material practices can show how specific political discourses are materialized and how normative visions of social relations are intentionally made more fixed, for instance through the built environment or technological devices (e.g. Winner 1980; Kusno 2010; von Schnitzler 2016; Pilo' 2017; Müller 2019). Attending to material entities can help us understand how governance actors seek to legitimize a specific order and how people contest or conform to such orders.

Understanding the political work of things entails more than noting their presence or absence. In addition, it involves emphasizing their capacity to connect people and to affect the quality of such connections. These connective capacities are dynamic rather than static, and

relational rather than embedded in an autonomous thing. We find the concept of affordances useful in unpacking how different material entities impact urban politics. Affordances are those conditions, materials, or artifacts that, through their specific properties, enable or constrain— but do not determine—specific outcomes. Affordance theory seeks to recognize the social efficacy of artifacts, and by extension other materials and things, without assuming a deterministic perspective. Generally speaking, the concept refers to "the range of functions and constraints that an object provides for, and places upon, structurally situated subjects" (Davis and Chouinard 2016: 241; see also Hutchby 2001; Faraj and Azad 2012).

We find the concept of affordances useful in unpacking how different material entities impact urban politics

Affordance theory has tended to focus on both individual human behaviors and the social relations that different materials and artifacts afford. In this special issue, we are specifically interested in asking what types of *urban political relations* they afford. How do different things and their material properties mediate the legitimization and contestation of a given urban order? What repertoires of political action and thought do different urban things – from specific buildings, to guns, or utility meters—afford? Studying political materiality also entails thinking various urban things together and attending to the politics of *their* interrelations. This requires going beyond the properties and potential of a singular object or material. Rather, we must attend to *inter-materiality*, to the capacity, or conversely the inability, of urban things to connect to other forms of matter. As the articles in this special issue underline, studying socio-material processes involves paying attention to inter-material relations, for instance between building types, technological devices, documents, flows of water and sewage, and the physical shape of the urban landscape, including its gradients and soils. As different contributions emphasize, realizing a specific vision of the city or legitimizing a particular urban political project often requires different things to "work together." Urban authorities' failure to achieve their goals often stems from their neglect to take such interdependence into account.

In addition to being relational, affordances are also *dynamic*; the possibilities for political action and thought that different urban things afford change over time. Urban matter itself is not stable: buildings and technological devices fall into disrepair, infrastructure decays, archives containing official documents go digital or are consumed by mold, and new substances seep into flows of water or sewage. In addition, social change reshapes the possibilities afforded by any one thing. As Jonathan Rutherford (2014: 1452) notes, a focus on urban materiality involves concentrating "on the contested processes and practices of change, because the diverse ways in which people understand and engage with the shifting sites and arenas of negotiation constantly work and rework the material constructions and experiences of their living space."

Approaching a broad range of urban things through the socio-material lens of affordances allows us to understand their political functions and meanings in ways that include but go beyond symbolism and

representation. People make and attribute meaning to things, but the power of these same things to transform individual lives and social relations also lies in their specific physical, material qualities. What type of urban politics any one object affords results from a dynamic combination of its material-technological properties and a city's socio-spatial, cultural, and economic features at a given historical moment. How do certain forms of urban matter physically connect or separate people? How does the presence, absence, or erosion of specific urban matter give rise to political protest, or stifle it? What embodied, affective responses does the material constitution of an urban landscape evoke? The contributions to this special issue explore when and how various urban things enable, limit, and otherwise mediate the formation of political community and political subjects; and how different forms of urban matter become central to the authorization and contestation of urban futures, by both state and non-state actors.

What embodied, affective responses does the material constitution of an urban landscape evoke?

Material Negotiations of Citizenship

A first emphasis within this special issue is on the role of urban materiality in negotiations of citizenship. Understanding citizenship in a broad sense, as membership in a political community, a focus on materiality shows how different urban things can interpellate political subjects. Things that are associated with specific political communities, such as documents or flags or religious building types, can "hail" subjects. This material interpellation is central to processes of political community formation, tying urban residents more tightly to specific polities while discouraging other types of political affiliation.

In addition to interpellation through material presences, the absence of urban amenities and infrastructure can also give rise to political community formation, as alliances form around practices of construction and connection. For those living in informal settlements, this involves what Veena Das (2011: 330) describes as "the labor in securing objects on whose agency [residents] can call on to establish incremental citizenship that creates new forms in which citizenship can be actualized." In other contexts, residents' capacity to auto-construct their homes (Holston 2008) or to *destroy* urban things, for instance by burning them (Chance 2015), can be effective ways of asserting citizenship claims or grievances. The construction of citizenship through self-building and self-provision in informal settlements has historically been documented in Latin American urban contexts (e.g. Roberts and Portes 2006) and is also evident in Gabriella Körling's analysis of urban Niger in this special issue (Körling 2020).

Gabriella Körling's paper on Niamey, Niger shows how different forms of urban matter—cement, documents, pipes, and utility poles—play a central role in gradually affording the recognition of residents of the city's peripheries as both "urban" and "citizens." She shows how the material

consolidation of these peripheral neighborhoods proceeds not only through self-built housing, but also through residents' object-focused negotiations with both state and non-state actors, as they claim their right to the city and insist on being recognized as "productive urban residents" (Körling 2020). Their construction of houses from cement, rather than from less durable materials, affords a form of permanence, while connections to urban infrastructure consolidate residents' belonging to Niamey proper. Individual and collective struggles for rights and recognition are mediated by material objects: from individual installations of solar panels and electricity generators, to collective lobbying of utility companies to officially extend pipes and grids to the peripheries. Körling highlights the complex socio-material negotiations that are central to the production of urban peripheries. Extending classic work on auto-construction as an important way of making political claims on the state, her research points to the important role of non-state governance actors—including chieftains, NGOs and private corporations—in these socio-material claims to citizenship.

In addition to encouraging inclusion or exclusion within political communities, things highlight the normative aspect of political subject formation. Non-human entities are mobilized within normative projects that seek to redefine the concept of "productive" or "respectable" citizen, or that delimit who is allowed to inhabit and act on the urban landscape. Things play a central role in the formulation, implementation, and contestation of "citizenship agendas," the normative framings that prescribe what norms, values, and behavior are appropriate for those claiming membership in a political community (de Koning et al. 2015). They provide the material support for such citizenship agendas, mediating social relations and framing everyday practices across domestic and public spaces.

Such normative delineations of the terms of citizenship through material elements can be recognized in practices surrounding utility bills (Pilo' 2020) and (prepaid) utility meters (Anand 2020). These documents and devices can become vehicles for "reforming" rights and political recognition in informal urban areas. In her analysis of electricity bills in favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Francesca Pilo' shows how these documents became the material terrain on which both governance actors and residents negotiate citizenship meanings and practices (Pilo' 2020). Her analysis of the electricity bill's properties, and of the practices and discourses that surround it, reveal how this document both materializes norms of "good citizenship," and also affords the contestation of these norms (Pilo' 2020). Favela residents had long had access to electricity, if frequently through illegal connections. As the private utility company sought to "regularize" these connections, it introduced a new emphasis on bills. This can be understood as part of an attempt to legitimize the unpopular project of regularization: favela residents, whose residence is often formally unrecognized by the municipal government, can use their electricity bill as a proof of address. The company's strategy materializes a political discourse that connects urban recognition directly to the issuance and payment of bills, contrasting virtuous bill-paying citizens with

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those who steal electricity. While this might appear to be a citizenship agenda that primarily serves corporations, the bill also explicitly includes different taxes, supporting a discourse that equates "regularized customer" with "taxpayer citizen" (Pilo' 2020). The hybrid public-private character of this document affords different relations: even as the bill allows public authorities and the private utility company to associate "deserving citizens" with the responsible payment of bills, it also enables favela residents to make claims on both sets of actors, and to contest market-oriented electricity regularization. Emplacing the study of utility bills within an urban landscape marked by inequality and privatization, Pilo' provides an understanding of documents as political things that contain both state and corporate logics of governance, and that play an ambiguous political role in the socio-spatial differentiation of urban citizenship.

Nikhil Anand's article highlights a related strategy that sought to effect the absence of utility bills, and the capacity of these bills to afford citizenship claims (Anand 2020). Analyzing Mumbai's municipal plan to install prepaid water meters in informal settlements, Anand shows how these attempts were tied directly to the possibility of producing bill-free customers and thereby reframing the urban citizenship of these residents. The prepaid meter has become an internationally circulating technology that has been criticized by academics and activists alike for its role in inculcating a neoliberal, self-regulating form of citizenship (e.g. von Schnitzler 2016). Anand shows that this neoliberal technology did not represent a withdrawal of state services in informal areas, but rather an extension of the state, aimed at reforming residents' experiences and practices of liberal citizenship. Focusing on this one device, he shows the multiple understandings of citizenship that the prepaid meter afforded to different urban actors. For pragmatic officials, the device enabled an extension of the right to water connection in areas previously denied that right because of their informal tenure status. It afforded a partial recognition of the political belonging of these urban spaces and citizens, enabling their inclusion without the need to grant full legal rights. The prepaid meter's role in extending some additional rights while limiting others connects directly to its capacity to replace utility bills. In contexts where utility bills can confer tenure rights (as discussed by Pilo' in her article on Rio de Janeiro), the prepaid meter's "paperless" technology prevents residents from accessing documents that are key in negotiating their right to the city. In Mumbai, the prepaid meter did in fact afford the extension of government services into the homes of some residents, while simultaneously discouraging a political understanding of water as a right. Finally, for activists, the meter materialized the selective, incomplete recognition of the citizenship rights of the urban poor. These multiple affordances of this one technological device are linked directly to the city's specific, historically developed inter-material relations. As Anand demonstrates, the meter's political effects emerge from "the relations between the meter and the accreted materials, histories, and rationalities already embedded and at work in infrastructural systems."

These three papers by Körling, Pilo', and Anand highlight how governance actors—the municipality in Mumbai, the private electricity company in Rio de Janeiro, and a range of additional actors including traditional chiefs and NGOs in Niamey—use things to negotiate normative ideas of citizenship. But they also highlight how residents rely on these same things to take up, transform, and contest the various citizenship agendas that are proposed to, imposed on, or denied to them. This centrality of things in mediating urban citizenship helps explain why political materiality is also an important lens for analyzing institutional actors' attempts to legitimize their visions of the city's future, as we discuss in the next section.

Legitimizing Urban Political Projects

The second, related focus of this special issue is the role of materiality in the legitimization and delegitimization of urban political projects. In attempts to render their political vision of the city natural or inevitable, different state and non-state actors mobilize various urban things. As the final four papers in this issue demonstrate, governance actors draw on design elements, infrastructural improvements or the installation of specific technological devices to make these urban futures a reality.

In the past, states have sought, for instance, to prefigure Corbusier's "city of the future" through modernist planning and architecture (Minuchin 2013). Technological devices also played a key role in these modernist projects. The late nineteenth-century introduction of public clocks and standardized time in US cities facilitated the production of orderly, efficient urban landscapes, instilling in city dwellers a sense of state authority. In addition, clock time was also key to a nationalist project: it connected local systems of authority, in which churches and commercial actors often played important roles, to the federal government. As Alexis McCrossen (2007: 222) shows, clocks "helped to give rise to a consciousness of government's constant presence as well as to forms of national experience based on shared moments of time."

Technological devices also played a key role in these modernist projects

Other political projects have similarly relied on the introduction of new materials and things, and the destruction of old ones. In the context of European imperial projects, colonial authorities sought to literally cement racial hierarchies into cities, while for many post-independence governments, building a postcolonial city involved destroying or repurposing these material legacies of oppression (Bissell 2011; Kusno 2010). In the Soviet Union, socialism was built into the landscape through collectivist heating infrastructure (Collier 2011), while in urban Vietnam, bricks played a central role in producing socialist affect (Schwenkel 2013). In post-socialist Hungary, the shift from apartment blocks to new suburban "family houses" played an important if contested role in the transition to market capitalism and the consolidation of a new middle

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class (Fehérváry 2011). As these historical examples show, legitimizing a current urban political project has often involved literally dismantling a previously hegemonic vision.

Contemporary national and city governments—often in complex arrangements with corporations—draw on comparable material strategies to legitimize visions of "the global city," "the sustainable city," "the multicultural city," or the "the tourist city." In turn, urban residents or more organized movements engage with these different things to acknowledge or contest the legitimacy of these projects. Focusing on the Iraqi-Kurdish city of Erbil, for instance, Umut Kuruuzum (2017) describes how high-rise buildings materialize the aspiration of becoming a "Western" city, a project intimately tied to Kurdish state formation. However, she shows how the politics of these high-rises are ambiguous: the buildings' rapid construction and the type of "modern" lifestyle the apartments afford also act as material evidence of corruption and moral decay on the part of Kurdish state actors.

Claudia Gastrow's (2020) article in this issue highlights a similar negotiation of the urban future through architectural shifts in the Angolan capital of Luanda, where an increase in high-rise buildings materialized visions of modernity, nationalism, and the "modern African urbanite." Inspired by Asian and Middle Eastern models rather than the "Western city," high-rises became a desirable form of urbanism, legitimizing state-corporate strategies to build "the future African city" (Gastrow 2020). Yet even as high-rise buildings provided material support for the political project of an African prosperous future, in practice, Luanda's verticality has proved a fragile, unstable achievement. Moving beyond understandings of verticality as enabling control and surveillance, Gastrow describes how this urban project seems to have disregarded the "possibilities and limitations of materiality." Focusing on the high-rises' performances of material verticality, she shows how the buildings' fragility shapes inhabitants' practices of urban belonging as well as state and corporate responsibilities. These buildings' need for constant structural maintenance, in comparison to low-rise housing, has produced a new distribution of responsibilities between residents, planners, and real-estate developers. In a post-socialist Angola, where residents, rather than the state, have become responsible for urban maintenance, the high-rise buildings' material decay has resulted in a "DIY verticality" (Gastrow 2020). Residents' new responsibility for their material surroundings has reshaped the everyday politics of their engagement with both the state and with the buildings, aggravating the city's existing inequalities. Gastrow underlines the material process that mediates responsibilization, noting that "privatized belonging is a product not only of state inaction, but of the crumbling and unpredictable materialities that make up the built environment of cities around the globe" (Gastrow 2020).

The politics of architectural forms can emerge directly from the construction materials used to realize urban projects. Characterized by different properties, such as durability, porosity, or thermal conductivity, the

performance of these materials can legitimize or delegitimize political projects. Concrete and cement have been especially important materials in this regard. In her work on roads in Peru, for instance, Penny Harvey (2010: 44) points to the role of concrete in making the state's enduring presence and transformative capacity manifest. Focusing on the production, circulation, and consumption of cement in West African cities, Armelle Choplin (2019) traces the Africanization of this substance as it was transformed from a colonial material, produced in white European-owned plants and constructing white European housing, into the basis of African private wealth, city-making, and nation-building. Such processes of material (de)legitimization often involve aesthetic politics: different materials and design styles can persuade city-dwellers in an embodied, affective fashion to embrace a specific urban vision (cf. Rancière 2006), or conversely, as Oskar Verkaaik's contribution to this special issue shows, elicit powerful negative responses.

Verkaaik's (2020) article discusses how a political controversy surrounding the construction of a new mosque in the Dutch city of Almere was expressed through the aesthetics of this religious building. Analyzing the "anticipated form" of the mosque during its design process, he demonstrates the crucial importance of its materiality for understanding the politics of this urban project. On the one hand, its material aesthetics was supposed to legitimize a specific vision of Islam in Europe, of being Muslim in the Netherlands. The architects and religious constituents who clashed over the building's design sought to make material the imagination of a "European Islam"—either by connecting to Islamic architectural forms developed in other regions, such as the Middle East, or by developing new mosque styles that connected to European architectural traditions (Verkaaik 2020). On the other hand, politicians and residents who were opposed to the mosque's construction also focused their protests on its material form. In this conflict over material aesthetics, the various parties sought to assert conflicting political visions of the city that centered on whose urban presence the future mosque was seen as legitimizing, and how and where that presence would be legitimized. The municipal government supported the construction of the new mosque in order to reinforce its position in a local electoral struggle against the anti-Islam party; it sought to house the mosque in an area with different religious buildings as an urban symbol of Dutch religious tolerance and pluralism. Beyond ideological differences, however, the protests revealed the extent to which citizens' participation in urban planning and design heightened the stakes, as residents' antagonistic position was also shaped by the municipality's failure to engage them in the design process (Verkaaik 2020). In fact, residents' lack of involvement in the design process contributed to the circulation of rumors, and specifically of images of the "anticipated mosque," that emerged from the top-down form that the urban planning process took. Where scholarship studying disputes around mosque construction—all too common in the context of increasing Islamophobia in contemporary European cities—has tended

to frame these primarily as urban *spatial* conflicts, Verkaaik's focus on the architecture itself pushes us to to include the politics of design and the material affect of buildings in our analyses.

In addition to buildings, technical devices are another important category of political materiality, affording legitimacy to specific visions of urban development, as Dorien Zandbergen and Laura Kemmer demonstrate in their contributions to this issue. In her research on Amsterdam, Zandbergen (2020) shows how corporate and municipal government actors hoped that specific "smart city objects" would allow their interests to appear aligned with those of civil society actors, smoothing over the contentious politics of the urban landscape in which these objects were to be embedded. Based on the case of the "Smart Light" project developed by the Amsterdam Smart City network, Zandbergen's article explores how sensor technologies—enlisted in the public-private production of a "responsive city"—afforded multiple visions of urban politics. Tracing "Smart Light" as it became increasingly controversial, Zandbergen shows how the different actors involved sought to realize divergent urban political projects through smart lampposts equipped with real-time sensors.

For the lampposts' public-private proponents, the technology legitimized their vision of Amsterdam's future as a city located at the forefront of global economic competitiveness, combining inclusive innovation and public participation within a progressive policy of local regeneration. The imagined affordances of these "smart" objects, built on their alleged "adaptivity," included not only their lamppost functions, but also the promotion of "minute-to-minute democracy" (Zandbergen 2020). The lampposts' materiality initially afforded the alignment of two distinct and potentially conflicting urban political projects: a more local one linked to the socio-economic revitalization of a deprivileged Amsterdam neighborhood, and a more global aspiration to "an urban future in which constant learning, feedback, and civic negotiation are central to urban decision-making" (Zandbergen 2020). In the end, however, the project was cancelled, following conflicts tied directly to the material design of the sensing technology. The project's abandonment was hastened by the progressive disinterest of several central project stakeholders. As experiments have become an important way of governing cities more broadly, Zandbergen shows that what is at stake in such "smart" urban projects may not be success or failure per se. While the smart lampposts never materialized in anything like the form that was initially promised, the actors involved still shared a consensus that the project has produced multiple, positive types of learning. Ultimately, Smart Light's development legitimized an anti-political type of urban vision, in which the tensions between different urban futures were rendered invisible (Zandbergen 2020).

What is at stake in such "smart" urban project may not be success or failure per se

Laura Kemmer (2020) focuses on a somewhat less high-tech device in the context of Rio de Janeiro. Her article analyzes the material politics of urban transport through a close reading of a piece of transport technology associated with the *bonde*, the city's historical tramway. Focusing on

the transformation of the tram's footboard, she demonstrates how these alterations materialized a vision of urban transportation that was central to the promotion of a "tourist city." She contrasts the spectacular public protests against bus fare hikes that took place in major Brazilian cities in 2013 with the more everyday practices that Rio residents use to contest the market logic governing public transport. Specifically, she traces residents' relations over time to the *bonde*'s footboard, a small piece of the tram that gained political power as a literal "free-riding" device as it allowed people to travel on public transport without paying a fare (Kemmer 2020). This politics of free transport is enacted through the specific, learned movement of *balançar* (swinging), the embodied skill of jumping onto the footboard. Kemmer argues that the footboard itself—a material connection between the tram and the public space of the street—combined with the movement of *balançar* produces an affective sense of neighborhood-level community that is aligned against urban outsiders. As such, the object and its use afford both the creation and the separation of urban political collectivities. However, a municipal project seeking to transform the tramway into a safer, tourist-friendly form of transportation made material-technical changes to the tram—introducing a retractable footboard—that also modified these micropolitics of affect. Following this transport reform project over time, Kemmer shows how urban publics transformed in tandem with the materiality of the *bonde*. Like other contributions to this special issue, her analysis of the footboard demonstrates that urban things tend to enable multiple political subjectivities and projects simultaneously, rather than strictly delineating political affinity and action.

Conclusion

The aim of this special issue on the political materiality of cities is to center an often-overlooked dimension of urban life. Where anthropological analyses of urban politics have engaged extensively with spatial narratives, symbols, and imaginaries, we have sought to also attend more directly to the politics of urban things. Thinking materiality and politics together allows us to connect discussions within urban anthropology more directly to a more-than-human turn within the broader social sciences and humanities, while ensuring that this turn remains sensitive to the work that things do in maintaining or disrupting urban hierarchies. In making such connections between cities, politics, and things, we draw on insights from other disciplines. Material culture studies, for instance, has long encouraged us to take *things* seriously, and to study their symbolic and physical qualities together (Appadurai 1986; Miller 2005, 2010). Work in geography has directed our attention toward urban assemblages and toward the question of how sociospatial formations emerge from human/non-human relations (Farías and Bender 2010; Anderson and McFarlane 2011).

While drawing on these adjacent fields, urban anthropology has its own specific contributions to make to existing debates on the political life of things. Material culture studies have often focused either on consumer objects and their role in shaping domestic space, or on museological artifacts and other types of heritage objects. Urban anthropology's longer history of reflecting on spatiality encourages us to emplace material objects in urban landscapes of contested meaning, and to consider how the complex, uneven, and constantly changing nature of the urban environment impacts on the physical and symbolic properties of different things. In so doing—and as the articles collected here also establish—urban anthropologists can also develop a more encompassing understanding of the political role of materiality by considering different types of things together within a city's wider landscape. They demonstrate the value of connecting recent anthropological debates that have tended to be segregated in terms of the *type* of urban matter being studied, from infrastructure and architecture (e.g. Larkin 2013; Buchli 2013) to technological devices and documents (e.g. von Schnitzler 2016; Anjaria 2011; Hull 2012; Koster 2014).

While urban geography is more inclined to take such a spatial approach to objects, it is sometimes less attuned to the everyday processes of meaning-making that make objects politically significant. Urban anthropology's distinctive strengths lie in its engagement with everyday urban life's less obvious aspects of life; in its focus on more intimate, informal, and illegal routines and practices; and on more tacit, embodied forms of knowledge (Jaffe and de Koning 2016: 5). The ethnographic work of urban anthropologists allows us to comprehend the political life of urban things in non-linear ways. As we hope the ethnographies featured in this special issue evidence, anthropological stories highlight the complexities, tensions, and contradictions that are at the heart of urban politics, urging us to recognize the multiple and dynamic affordances of distinct urban things.

Notes

[1]We recognize that these materialist approaches encompass multiple philosophical traditions that frequently coincide but also clash; here we seek to sketch an approach that can be applied in the context of urban ethnographic research.

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