Slums as Urban Constellations:
Tales from Toba Tek Nagar, Mumbai

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Geography and Planning Collaborative Program, Center for South Asian Studies
University of Toronto

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2016

Abstract

Three hegemonic phenomena dictate the fate of slums in contemporary Mumbai, India. First, the teleological statement: “Mumbai is to be Slum Free.” This ubiquitous proclamation denounces the possibility that the practices through which slum-residents build urban habitats can help rethink urban planning, and in doing so, relegates slums to the realm of “non-planning.” Second, the dominance of neoliberal slum policies, which reify localities built by residents over years into lands with a “developmental value” and alienate residents from their memories, desires, and the sociality embedded in the built environment. And third, the utilitarian impulse of urban development, which uses planning as instrumental means to achieve specific ends. This instrumentality can be traced back to colonialism, during which the ideologies of industrious reason and utilitarianism played a key role in the capitalist transformation of colonized lands. This relationship between means and ends, normalized today, legitimizes the will and the power to “improve” the world of “others” in the names of planning, development, and progress.

This dissertation is a response to these three hegemonic phenomena. It uses the concepts of mimesis, excess, and aesthetics to present ethnographic stories about four objects—idle time, films, toilets, and waste, located in the quasi-fictitious Muslim-dominated slum of Toba Tek
Nagar.¹ These stories explore four interrelated themes: Chapter One highlights how everyday storytelling, while idling in public spaces, is significant to confronting urban violence and slum planning; Chapter Two describes how rundown video-theaters and locally produced crime-shows become spatial and virtual mediums for residents to construct imaginary worlds in a melancholic context; Chapter Three explores the subject-positions and practices through which residents navigate the world of neoliberal developmental programs in order to build community toilets in their localities; and Chapter Four documents how the ongoing modernization of Mumbai’s waste-management system encloses and divides the common spaces of waste collection and recycling, and its varied impacts on waste pickers. Each story provides a thick description of the daily life and politics that constitute these objects, and contextualizes them within Mumbai’s history. The conclusion draws on the ethnographic insights to conceptualize planning as a form of “commoning.”

¹The name is drawn from Saadat Hasan Manto’s short story “Toba Tek Singh.”
Acknowledgments
Acknowledgments

This dissertation would have been impossible without the residents of Toba Tek Nagar and their research about the city. Their ideas, stories, and images provided the water, sunlight, and seeds to plant the thoughts developed in this dissertation. I thank them for sharing their thoughts and a copious amount of *chai*.

Friends, colleagues and teachers in Toronto provided a fertile ground for me and this dissertation to grow. In Kanishka Goonewardena and Katharine Rankin, my supervisors, I found immense support and encouragement throughout my time as a doctoral student. Both played different, but significant roles in different stages of my PhD life. Kanishka introduced me to the world of Marxism as a critical method of analysis grounded in political experience, and shared my obsessive fascination with Walter Benjamin. Katharine helped me think through the difficult connections between my thoughts and political praxis. Her relentless persuasions, disagreements, and commitment helped me see the impossible-possibilities in my own work. I learnt from them that planning could become a radical way of thinking and acting in this world. I thank them both for passing on their values to me and for their trust in me to put them to use, albeit in a “useless” and “risky” manner.

I found an excellent set of thinkers in my committee members: Robert Lewis, Kajri Jain and Francis Cody. They all read my work meticulously and pushed me to think in new ways. Frank introduced me to the world of anthropology and linguistic thought, and taught me to “read” the world—objects, texts, sounds, and technologies—as a trace. I thank him for his unspoken generosity, for understanding my vision, for mentoring and nurturing it, and reminding me about it at different points in time. I am indebted to Robert in ways that go beyond this
dissertation. With regards to the dissertation, his critiques and questions, and the subsequent arguments that would follow in his office helped me ground my work. Outside the dissertation, he played the role of that generous spirit who would help me get out of tight corners. I thank Kajri for teaching me to see “doubleness” in a non-romantic and critical way. She often saw significance in the smallest of details in my work, and helped me learn how to explore them in my own way. I also want to thank her for sharing my interests in aesthetics and Rancière, and helping me develop it in my own work. Outside my committee, I have learnt a great deal from an excellent set of teachers inside and outside the classroom—Andrea Muhlebach, Ritu Birla, Bhavani Raman, Sue Ruddick, Deborah Cowen, and Shubra Gururani. Also, a special thanks to Vinay Gidwani and Raj Reddy for reading my dissertation and commenting on it intently.

Over the course of the PhD, I have learnt from many of those who “sailed the same boat” as me. The reading group with colleagues at the Department of Geography and Planning—Martin Danyluk, Caitlin Henry, Katie Mazer, Patrick Vitale, Laura Pitkanen, Brett Story, Martine August, and Kanishka, which has lasted for seven years and taken on many names since the first time we met, provided an intellectual home. The residents of 297 Wright Avenue—Katie and Caitlin, provided us with unlimited food, desert and drinks, and a space for discussion. The reading group has influenced my thinking in profound ways.

Outside the department, Meghana Rao introduced me to a parallel world of critical thought grounded in questions of intimacy, body, law, and queer thought. In Jaby Matthew, I found the most ardent opposition from a different political point of view, an immense knowledge on South Asia, and a home whenever required. I am grateful to Katie for sharing thoughts, ideas, and writings during the fieldwork and writing, and being a friend at home away from home. Özlem Aslan shared my interest in rethinking student activism, and taught me what it means to
be an intellectual and an activist with a big-heart. Nishant Upadhyay taught me what it means to queer thought and self, and provided the tea-house in Toronto. Jacob Nerenberg shared my fascination for objects, technology and wandering, often late in the night on streets. I thank Preethy, Melanie, Tania and Ponni for their friendship, and for sharing moments of joy. Similarly, Akshaya, Sanchia, Ritika, Mey, Nick, Simon, Akshaya, Saafi, Vivian, Lia, Emily, Sabin, and Nebiyu for being a part of my adda in Toronto.

My interest in cities dates back to a time before the PhD, to my time in Mumbai. Prasad Shetty, Nilesh Rajadhyaksha, Yogita Lokhande, Rohit Mujumdar, Anand Ayare, Rupali Gupte, Prajna Rao, Aditya Potluri, Rohan Shivkumar, Solomon Benjamin, Ravi Sundaram, and Saurbh Vaidya, played a huge part in helping me develop my love for studying cities. During the PhD, Nilesh, Yogita, Satyajit, and their (grand) parents provided me a family and home in Delhi. Nilesh and Yogita made sure that it was intellectually stimulating. Prasad, Rupali and Anand played that role during my time in Mumbai. Rohit and Prajna read many drafts of my chapters and commented on it with great interest. Prajna edited many parts of the dissertation at different times. Tarangini Sriraman generously facilitated my stay in Delhi and helped develop a friendship that has lasted beyond that space.

Thanks to the staff at the University of Toronto for their behind the scene contributions during my time in Toronto—Marija Wright, Jenny Jung, Benjamin Potruff, Nina Duras, Yvonne Kenny, Mariange Beaudry, Mary-Marta Briones-Bird, and Andrew Malcolm at the Department of Geography and Planning, and Katherine Maclvor, Eileen Lam, and Rachel Ostep at the Center for South Asian Studies. A special thanks to Jessica Finlayson and Marika Maslej for their work, their patience, and for caring about students.
The Foundation for Urban and Regional Studies Studentship (2014) and the Writing-Up Grant (2015) provided me funds to conduct my fieldwork as well as write, and helped avoid spending another year gathering research funds through contract jobs. Also, “Global Suburbanisms: Governance, Land, and Infrastructure in the 21st Century,” funded by Social Science and Humanities Research Council, Canada, partially funded the fieldwork. The Center for Sciences and Humanities, New Delhi generously provided me with a space to write and make new friends. Thanks to Kathy White for editing my work at the last moment.

However, none of this would have been possible without my family, who has played the role that no one else can in my life. I thank Aai and Baba for gambling with everything they had (pension, house, salaries and trust) to help me pursue this road, and for assuring me that they would be there no matter what. Amit and Vanadana, who step in the hardest of times, I thank them for their generosity that has no bound. Yatin and Jo for sharing food, music, and film, and welcoming me into their family. Anna gave me the greatest gift—an indefinite subscription to books at my favorite bookshop in Bangalore, food, and an unconditional friendship. Kabir and Avni showed me what it really means to play with everything around.

Most of all, I thank Meghana for encouraging my indulgences, for tolerating my silences, for sharing undirected walks, and for her unconditional love and support, despite knowing my incapacity to return that gift—ever. This dissertation is a trace of the paths we have walked together since we met.
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*Note: All photographs and montages in this dissertation are by the author unless specified
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<td>GINGO</td>
<td>Giant Non-governmental Organizations</td>
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<td>GoM</td>
<td>Government of Maharashtra</td>
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<td>MCGM</td>
<td>Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai</td>
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<td>MSW</td>
<td>Municipal Solid Waste</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
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<td>PAP</td>
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Introduction

1. Story Cubes

To calm excited, anxious, and bored children, they removed a set of eight dice from the handbag and rolled them on the table. Each side of each dice had icons of different worldly elements—a spider, a door, a broom, a house, a bee, a lock, a face, and so on. The first child chose a spider and constructed a beginning of a story: “Once upon time . . . there was a spider called Kabir.” The second player, for their chance, chose home. They used the sentence of the earlier player(s) and followed it with their own, as if it was a part of the same story. “Once upon a time . . . there was a spider caller Kabir . . . it spun a beautiful house of web on a mango tree” The game went on to use most of the icons and construct a larger story. In this story, the disparate elements did not have any pre-given connections; rather, these connections were built through play. This dissertation is my attempt to join in on that game. My aim is to construct a similar narrative using images and stories provided to me by the residents of Toba Tek Nagar. The difference here is that the roll of dice and the involuntary chances have been replaced with voluntary practices. (Field Notes, December 3, 2012)

2. The Context

Post-independence, equitable distribution of housing was a major ideological force that characterised the planning agenda of the Indian state. The Government of Maharashtra (GoM) established planning regulations, such as the Urban Land Ceiling Act and Rent Control Act, and instituted planning agencies such as the Housing Authority and the Repair Board to deal with the burgeoning housing demands in Mumbai (then Bombay) equitably. Although private developers and landlords were active in Mumbai’s housing markets, housing delivery mechanisms were primarily managed by state agencies alongside Co-operative Housing Societies.² This trend in

housing delivery continued well into 1970s and 80s, while Mumbai continued to experience a growth in its slum settlements due to migration, urbanisation, and the growing backlog in housing provision. By the early 1990s, the Indian State had liberalised its national economic policies and altered its role from provider of public necessities to that of a market facilitator. With regards to Mumbai’s housing policies, this ideological shift resulted in the adoption of market-based housing provision systems. This change made private developers the most important agents of housing provision in Mumbai.

Today Mumbai is one of the most expensive cities in the world to own a house in, and only 40 percent of the city’s population can afford to access pucca three housing. This extreme unaffordability in housing prices is a result of an artificial price inflation produced by a small power lobby of developers and (national and international) investors, as well as a lack of public housing provision by the state. As a result private developers have continued to maintain their status quo as central agents of housing provision and rake colossal profits by commoditizing housing and mystifying housing development processes, while 60 percent of the city’s population resorts to slums as an avenue to live and work in Mumbai. Thus housing construction itself has not abated, neither have images of private luxury homes ceased to crowd the public realm in mass media, and yet, the commoditization and unaffordability has made housing an exclusive “dream”—a phantasy out of reach for a majority of the city’s population.

Mumbai’s slum policies paralleled the shifts in the public housing policies. Post-independence, slums were largely perceived as spaces of disease and crime to be remedied through demolition under the Slum Clearance Act of 1957. It was not until the 1970s that the

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3 Pucca housing (or pukka) refers to dwellings that are designed to be solid and permanent. The term is applied to housing in South Asia built of substantial material such as stone, brick, cement, concrete, or timber. It also refers to formal and legalized housing identified by the Indian Census as such.

GoM began to think of slums as possible solutions to avert the housing shortage in Mumbai. It launched two kinds of programs: first, various “self-help” and “self-build” housing programs to provide land plots with basic infrastructure to lower income groups (e.g., site and service schemes), and second, slum improvement programs to upgrade basic infrastructural facilities in slums. Both these projects drew their ideological and conceptual inspiration from the World Bank, which funded and shaped the implementation of these programs in Mumbai. However, these programs proved to be inefficient in averting the growth of slums and were subsequently phased out soon after. The failure of these schemes, as some scholars have argued, was a result of a conceptual problem in the scholarly work on two fronts: first, it signified the politics of building slums as an anarchic “self-build” activity, which later ethnographic research showed involves intense political negotiations between touts, small contractors, lower level municipal bureaucrats, and local politicians. And second, these scholars failed to understand the systems of property tenures, multiple tenancies, mixed land uses, and political networks that are central to the workings of slum settlements in most urban contexts.

With regards to low-income housing, the slum rehabilitation scheme administered by the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) is the only housing delivery mechanism that addresses the question of affordable housing in Mumbai today. The SRA scheme is a market-based approach formulated by the GoM under Shiv Sena in the mid-1990s. It adopted a market-based approach that incentivized the redevelopment and rehabilitation of slums for private developers. In contrast to the earlier incremental interventions, the SRA scheme allows for a complete redevelopment of notified slums established in Mumbai prior to 2000. This process involves

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demolishing existing slums and re-housing its pre-2000 residents free of cost in high-density apartment blocks of 225 square-foot units irrespective of household size, income, or occupation. In return, the developers are guaranteed free development rights (75 to 133 percent of the free housing), which can be used in situ, sold on the open market, or transferred to other areas with higher property values. Thus the property-values of slum-occupied lands are used to cross subsidize the cost of rehousing slums while allowing private developers to make high profits.

Furthermore, the scheme requires consent from at least 70 percent of the slum dwellers as well as the registration of the slum as a cooperative society under the Maharashtra Regional Town Planning Act (MRTP Act). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) advocating for the rights and livelihoods of slum dwellers have been at the forefront in facilitating legal procedures such as organizing slum communities, regularizing legal land titles, producing enumerations, and producing governmental information on existing slums. This active involvement of NGOs has fit well within the state rhetoric of “participatory governance,” making them the proxy “voices” of slum-dwellers in policy forums.

Slum redevelopment opportunities in Mumbai are highly sought after by developers as means to opening up urban land and building luxury housing. Often, developers use fraudulent means to relocate slum dwellers, thus violently disrupting the community structures, property tenures, and work-life patterns of slum dwellers. Besides, the housing provided for the slum dwellers...

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8 In the first formulation of the policy, the profits on a slum redevelopment project were capped by the government at 25 percent. The cap was eliminated in the second version since the policy failed to attract private developers due to a limit on the profits that could be made.

9 This shift towards market-based slum policies occurred concurrently with the rise in neoliberal rationalities in hegemonic international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, the decentralization and devolution of governance to local levels in India, and the increased participation of local and international NGOs in implementing developmental programs in postcolonial contexts. See: Nezar Alsayyad, “Urbanism as a “New” Way of Life,” in Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia, eds. Nezar Alsayyad and Ananya Roy (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 13.

10 In some cases, particularly resettlement and rehabilitation schemes (RnR), NGOs have even taken up slum redevelopment projects themselves by partnering with developers, private investors, banks, and international funding agencies.
dwellers has been utterly dismal and infrastructurally under-provided in most cases. Scholars working at the intersection of urban policies, informality, and slum settlements have argued that this shift to market-based slum policies, a trend occurring in most postcolonial cities, is an attempt to subsume informal capital occupied and generated by slums within the neoliberal regime of state and market, from which they were earlier insulated. In this process, the legalization of slums through the regularization of land titles, and the production of GIS maps and censuses, have provided a legal conduit for local politicians and land developers to enter slums and exploit them through rent-seeking and forceful evictions. Such violent modes of exploitation have raised serious questions about the accountability of NGOs, which appear to be conveying the state and market ideologies down to the grassroots in the name of “participation” and “inclusion,” while in fact usurping the voices of the poor.

In recent years, governmental bodies, NGOs, private developers, corporate groups, and civil society organisations have been mobilising “World Class City” visions to entice foreign capital. The vision was formulated under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) 2005, which was aimed at constructing massive infrastructural projects and building the governing capacities of governmental bodies in large and small Indian cities. Named by the Indian National Congress party after the first Prime Minister Nehru, the program has been considered by scholars as a neoliberal homage of the state to the collective socialist dream of Nehru in post-independence years. Most Indian cities have seen a proliferation of globalized infrastructure in the form of gated housing enclaves selling luxury life styles; office complexes and malls clad in glass, brushed steel, and granite; urban infrastructure mega-projects such as

expressways, metro rails, and international airports; and promenades, boulevards, and private parks, as part of this vision. The vision is animated not through disenchanted governmental tools such as cadastral maps or statistics, but through a distinct re-enchanted aesthetic of “World Class” or “beautiful city.” It institutes onto the city a new aesthetic economy of “value” and “order” along the lines of “World Class” ideologies through planning, law, and mass media. Another vital means by which such imaginations are mobilised is the construction of a common sensibility of “order” and “discipline” against the “chaos” of the city. Since the decentralisation and devolution of urban governance in the 1990s, Solomon Benjamin suggests, a dominant corporate-led civil society has been particularly vocal in visioning the city’s future along this path. Here, a select few areas are preserved through discourses of heritage and environmentalism, while the rest of the city, characterised through aesthetics of fear and estrangement, gets reduced to a non-planned slums. Within this aesthetic field, slums are perceived and represented as pathological spaces that lack qualities such as adequate hygiene, tenure, morality, and sanitation. And based on these criteria slums are disqualified as an unacceptable form of habitation and the clearest obstacle to a “World-Class City.”

This dissertation is a response to and an intervention in this context. To be specific, it responds to three phenomena stated below. I use them as springboards to identify a set of questions and draw out three lines of thought, which I then pursue in the dissertation chapters, albeit through a few detours.

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17 Ghertner, Rule by Aesthetics, 87.
3. Three Lines of Thought

The first phenomenon is the eternal return of the impossibility that slums can help rethink urban life, urban habitats, and urban politics.

In the absence of affordable housing, poorer migrants have continued to use slums as a common platform to settle and create their urban lives since Mumbai’s colonial expansion.\textsuperscript{18} Even today, 60 percent of Mumbai’s population, that is, fifteen million people, live in slums that cover a mere eight percent of city’s area. Despite their historical and social significance, state planning policies under colonial and postcolonial states have eradicated slums through permutations of violent demolitions, urban renewal schemes and, market-based redevelopment policies.\textsuperscript{19} Rather than thinking of slums as legitimate, incremental, and inclusive ways of planning urban environments, the state continues to invalidate them through discourses of filth, nuisance, backwardness, and illegal land occupation.\textsuperscript{20} This pronouncement of an end has returned today in the form of the state-government’s ubiquitous statement: “Mumbai is to be Slum Free.” The statement enunciates, on one hand, that as an urban form the slum has nothing to offer to urban planning and should be done away with, and, on the other hand, the urban poor as intellectuals or thinking subjects have nothing to offer in terms of political imaginaries but

\textsuperscript{20} Slums are often narrated as a modern dystopia. In its recent report on slum settlements, the UN Habitat defines slum as “an area that combines, to varying extents, the following characteristics: inadequate access to safe water, inadequate access to sanitation and other infrastructures; poor structural quality of housing, over-crowding and insecure residential status.” Similarly, the Draft National Slum Policy of India defines slum as “housing that is unfit for human habitation or detrimental to safety, health, and morals of the inhabitants.” These operational definitions of slums, now common-sensical among planners and policy experts, represent slums only through an absence of characteristics—safety, hygiene, morality—thus enunciating that the only qualification of a slum is its absence of qualification. This paradoxical definition of slums ties the slum dwellers’ right to qualify for housing to the disqualification of slum as a valid form of urban habitation. The refusal to grasp slums in and of themselves obscures the political practices through which slums dwellers use and inhabit the city. United Nations Human Settlements Programme, \textit{The challenge of slums: global report on human settlements} (London and Sterling, Virginia: Earthscan), 11; Jan Nijman, “A Study of Space in Mumbai’s Slums,” \textit{Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie} 101, no. 1 (2010), 10. For a detailed study of how such discourses get produced see: Ghertner, \textit{Rule by Aesthetics}.
simply resistances, misery, and/or survey data. By raising the term resistance I do not intend to disrespect or dismiss the work of housing-rights activists in Mumbai, nor do I intend to disregard the violence against which they organize. Contradistinctively, my argument is with binary formulations in scholarly work that stage slums and their residents as a negative—tragedies, sufferings, and resistances—only to assign them the role of laboring and struggling against the hegemony in the dialectics of urbanization. My aim in this dissertation is to move away from such binary formulations. Hence, I ask: How does one study and write about slums in order to undo the ends and closures imposed on them while eluding binary formulations? This is the first line of thought.

**The second phenomenon is the alienation of slums and their residents.**

During an interview, a housing-right activist cum slum resident who dreams of running a bakery someday drew out a short narrative of how slums are put together by people over years. Different migrants, he said, arrive in the city to fulfill needs as well as desires. After arriving, they acquire marsh by buying or occupying it, then convert the marsh into land by reclaiming it, assemble infrastructure (material and social) in myriad ways while simultaneously dealing with demolitions, and in doing so they build a habitat through years of life-work. But once assembled, the state steps in and abstracts the habitat into “land” for urbanization or redevelopment. This abstraction or reification of an urban habitat into property entails an alienation of the residents from their life-work. This alienation is violent; it acts on them as a discursive and material force, and they experience it repeatedly and in multiple sites. As a hegemonic practice of urbanization, this alienating violence has been a part of modern planning since colonial times, particularly in the form of land alienation policies. The work of urban historian Nikhil Rao shows how older
settlements were reified as “waste lands” by colonial planning in order to build a particular kind of city in colonial Mumbai.  

Under the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) scheme, this alienation of slum residents from their life-work results in the eradication of slums and the rehabilitation of their residents into “pigeonholed” high-rises. Here, as the slum dwellers often narrate in different public forums, they are alienated from experiencing air, rain, heat, light, pleasure, as well as socialities. The forums where they speak of the estrangement through personal stories alienate them based on the aesthetics of knowledge—what counts as knowledge for planning and what does not. I use the word alienation in this dissertation not to suggest a pre-existing non-alienated human nature. Instead, I use it to highlight a sensorial estrangement as well as a denial of slum residents’ capacity to see, hear, say, play, feel, and do. In short, to experience, to share and circulate these experiences, and to have them recognized as possible ways of affecting cities. Thus I ask: How do slum residents, despite recursive alienating violence, make sense of this world through experiences? How do they pass on these experiences to others? What sort of a commonsense and collectivities do they constellate in the process? This is the second line of thought.

The third phenomenon is the utilitarian and teleological impulse in planning.

In his chapter “Two Centuries of Planning Theory: An Overview,” John Friedmann begins the history of planning with two figures: James Stuart Mill and Saint-Simon, who were

21 Nikhil Rao, House, but no garden: apartment living in Bombay’s suburbs, 1898-1964. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 28. Such forms of alienation are not just historical or peculiar to urban contexts. They are prevalent in rural as well as tribal lands in India and have resulted in a number of political movements.

22 The word pigeonholed is borrowed from an interviewee, a slum resident, who was interviewed by the World Bank during its evaluation of RnR schemes built by the state government and funded by the World Bank. I also want to thank Liza Weinstein for pointing out that my framing slum rehabilitation and resettlement schemes as dystopic spaces tends to ignore the fact that even the RnR schemes do undergo the same processes of life-work as slums.

influenced by the utilitarianism and social reformist agendas of Jeremy Bentham. The role of modern planning for Saint-Simon, Friedmann tells us, was to use the knowledge of society’s “organic” laws to consciously set out its future course “according to a comprehensive plan.” In this conception, the role of social physicians such as scientists and engineers was to use their knowledge to predict future outcomes, and to steer humanity’s order towards a new industrial order. The fact that Saint-Simon’s theories were seized upon by a nascent bourgeoisie as an ideological weapon in their struggle for domination, and were disguised as scientific planning geared towards humanity’s liberation, was the utilitarian impulse and relationship set up in the theories themselves. Different scholars working on the history of postcolonial places have explored how James S. Mills and Saint-Simon’s ideas were instrumental to colonization.24 Tracing how these ideas have historically traveled into the present is a project for a different time, and maybe a different scholar. But we might be able to argue intuitively that these ideas of future-oriented progress through the use of industrious reason are very much with us in the planning discipline. As Friedmann himself suggests, what unifies and is common to planning as a practice-based discipline is its commitment to producing knowledge for action or practice. Too often, as Katharine Rankin suggests, this “orientation toward practice is confused with an orientation toward the future, with the history being reduced to a functionalist and politically decontextualized ‘lessons learned’ or ‘best practices’ (my emphasis).”25 Drawing on literature from planning theory, feminist theory, geography, and critical development studies, Rankin reconstructs a normative, critical, and reflexive planning praxis based on four aspects: a critical approach to postcolonial histories, an awareness of planners’ positionality within the historical

structures of imperialism, an attention to agency and resistance among the “others” of hegemonic structures, and lastly, the identification of conditions for collective action. This dissertation is aligned with Rankin’s call for developing a critical planning praxis in the times of imperialism, but at the same time departs from its call for planning theory to provide normative grounds for collective action. It does so, because it takes the “confusion” as a marker of what makes planning knowledge vulnerable and “useful” to colonial and postcolonial hegemonic practices. This confusion, I feel, has its source in the planners’ drive to produce knowledge for action, or thinking of means to ends (improvement of beneficiaries). This instrumentality or knowledge can be traced back to John Locke’s industrious reason as well as Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism, both of which played a huge part in the colonial project across different worlds. It is this relationship between means and ends that provides planners the will as well as the power to “improve” the world of “others.” This dissertation attempts to disturb this naturalized

26 The usurpation of scholarly work on slums by the World Bank is instructive in this regard. Critiques of low-income housing policies emerged from western scholars in the second half of the 1970s. Based on empirical work, these scholars prescribed that governments should invest in making slums a settlement, by allowing for mixed land-uses, investing in community services, and providing inexpensive land, infrastructural facilities, and most importantly “security of tenure” to avoid further displacement of slum dwellers. In the 1990s, neoliberal theorists reasoned for legalization of all forms of informal and illegal capital—land, labor, and money—just like Turner and Payne, and argued for structural reforms in the informal economy, although with the aim of harnessing its capacities while leaving out all the other suggestions. Hernan De Soto, one of its leading propagandist, contended that the majority of poor in the developing world, although “enterprising in spirit, do not have an easy access to the legal system and legal markets, which is the gateway to economic success.” Thus, legalization of informal and illegal capital would help the urban poor become a part of the mainstream legal economy and take advantage of it. Security of tenure, a solution to avoid demolitions and displacement, thus got appropriated through this rationale to bring slums within the legal frameworks of the state and open them up to mainstream land markets. This neoliberal and legalist approach of De Soto garnered great political support in much of the then “Third World” and resulted in the introduction of new developmental interventions through market mechanisms. Daniela Gandolfo in her work on formalization of informal markets in Lima, Peru, calls this the state mimesis, where the instruments of the informal economy get appropriated and then levied back onto the informal economy with the aim of homogenizing markets and allowing for the state and capitalist practices to function efficiently. Daniella Gandolfo, “FORMLESS: A Day at Lima’s Office of Formalization,” Cultural Anthropology 28, no. 2 (2013), 283.

27 Nicholas Blomley shows how the Lockean impulse of harnessing nature through the use of industrious reason played a significant role in settler colonialism in Western Canada. Similarly, Vinay Gidwani’s essay on British colonialism in India shows how the same logic was instrumental to identifying rural lands in colonial Bengal as “waste lands,” only to be reappraised as private property under the British colonizers. Nicholas K. Blomley, “Mud for the land,” Public Culture 14, no. 3 (2002): 560; and Vinay K. Gidwani, “‘Waste” and the Permanent Settlement in Bengal,” Economic and Political Weekly 27, no.4 (1992), 42–43.
instrumental relationship. In this regard, it aligns itself with Walter Benjamin’s call to drive out any trace of “development” from our understanding of history and to overcome the ideology of progress in all its aspects. It entails reconstructing the relationship between knowledge and politics as “pure means” or means without an end. But what does a non-instrumental planning project look like, and what kind of politics does it entail? This is my last line of thought.

4. The Three Lines of Thought and the Capitalist Regime of Value

In a broader sense, the three lines of thoughts outlined above—the relegation of slums to the realm of non-planning, the alienation of slum residents through reification of their land, and the utilitarian and teleological form of urban planning—have a close relationship to a modern capitalist value regime. In this regard, Karl Marx’s critical account of the capitalist theory of value is significant.

To reiterate in brief, a commodity under capitalism (like any other mode of production) has two values—use and exchange. While the use-value of a commodity is based on distinct characteristics of the commodity and is subjective since it varies in terms of its users, the exchange-value is the objective aspect of the commodity that is based on a logic of equivalence (1 yard of linen = 20 potatoes). This exchange value or the logic of equivalency is based on

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28 In his essay “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin differentiates between two types of revolt, the law-defining and law-breaking revolt. Of the latter, he provides the case of general strike, which he argues is non-violent. As Andrew Robison explains succinctly: “Such a revolt does not aim for a particular end, and hence is not law-making. It is a ‘pure means,’ and hence, paradoxically non-violent. It is non-violent not in its ends or effects, but as a means. This paradoxical view of Benjamin’s is difficult to explain. If a revolt or strike for a specific end is violent, why is a revolt or strike to bring down the system non-violent? The answer, perhaps, is that the instrumental revolt or partial strike aims to impose a particular ordering of social relations, whereas the general strike or insurrection destroys the conditions for imposing any particular ordering. It doesn’t force others to live a particular way or submit to a particular will. Instead, it destroys the conditions for subordinating others. It is not a form of coercive sanction. It is ‘unalloyed violence.’” Andrew Robinson, “Walter Benjamin: Critique of the State,” Ceasefire, December 31, 2013, Accessed December 5, 2015. https://ceasefiredirectory.co.uk/walter-benjamin-critique-state/
nothing in common between the two commodities being exchanged but on what is common to all commodities, which Marx argued is the socially necessary labor-time embodied in them and expressed in terms of money—the universal equivalent. Thus, under the capitalist logic of equivalence, the labor expended in the production of a commodity gets objectified in the form of its exchange-value.

What emerges from this logic of value, as Marx points out, is alienation, and this alienation he suggests is four fold: First, alienation as a loss or separation of the product from its producer, where the product of labor-power, the object of the human activity, gets taken away as soon as it has taken shape, and gets abstracted into an exchange value. This alienation is a result of both the logic of equivalence as well as the normalization of private property. The second aspect of alienation is the alienation of the subject from its sovereign control over its activity. In selling labor-power for wages, the worker gives away or exchanges the sovereign rights over her/his/their time and activity in exchange for wages. This loss of control over activity, Peter Osborne suggests in his reading of Marx, is the most existentially immediate form of alienation—an unfreedom.29 The relationship between alienation and un/freedom is related to the third aspect of alienation—the alienation of workers from their “species-being.”30 This alienation under capitalism relates to the transformation of the relationship—correspondence between human and non-human elements—from intimate, quasi-metabolic, and transformative to an instrumental and dominating relationship guided by the logic of equivalence. This process of objectifying the other also entails a subjectification of the other (creating a specific kind of

29 Peter Osborne, How to read Marx, (London: Granta Books, 2005), 52
30 It should be noted that this species-being is often also understood as species-essence, which results in a reading of Marx’s elaboration of alienation as the worker’s alienation from its human essence. As post-structuralist and non-humanist scholarships have pointed out, such a reading of human nature is problematic. In this regard, the more recent reading of Marx’s species-being as an intimate, metabolic, and transformative—becoming relationship between different species is far more productive. However, it also often results in the abandonment of the concept of alienation itself.
subject) through different forms of power. The fourth form of alienation is the alienation of individuals from others as well as a collective form of life within a capitalist regime. The alienation of the product, life-activity, and species-being results in the privatization of the product in the form of private property and the production of a being as a private individual with individual rights alienated from any other form of collectivity. Thus private property is also experienced as a privatization of the individual from the collectivity.

One last aspect of this relationship between capitalist value theory and alienation that needs attention here is the creation of surplus under a capitalist system of production. Here, Marx, as well as his astute readers, helped identify the different forms through which surplus value gets produced: the exploitation of workers, that is, extracting more work within a specific labor-time or getting more labor-time for a specific wage; the introduction of new forms of machinery and technology so as to produce more products within a given time period; the exploitation of nature, both of the being as well as the environment; and lastly, as Rosa Luxemburg suggests, the colonization of non-capitalist realms and their subsequent commodification. Thus Marx’s equation—M-C-M’—represents the typical form of capitalist production, wherein the (M) money invested in commodity production results in a surplus (M’), a portion of which is then reinvested in reproducing the capitalist system of production, expended to produce other forms of capitals, circulated in the other forms of production, particularly space, in order to produce more surplus value.

This relationship between a capitalist value regime, its material processes, and the alienated subject, need not be understood as a deterministic relationship (economism), but (following Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault) as being overdetermined by different social
practices, discourses, and forms of knowledge.\textsuperscript{31} Vinay Gidwani’s brief biography of the capitalist transformation of agrarian lands on the Indian Subcontinent under colonial rule illuminates this overdetermination. Specifically, the chapter “Waste” in \textit{Capital Interrupted}\textsuperscript{32} shows how Bentham’s utilitarianism, Locke’s mediation on the moral virtues of private property and industrious labor under liberalism, Mill’s push for relentless production of empirical knowledge for governing, and French physiocrat Quesnay’s theory of surplus value on land (land rent) were all at play in the discursive and material rendering of peasant and communal lands as “waste” and the imposition of a new land regulation system that could generate more revenue, spur commerce and capitalist production, and produce surplus value through privatization of agrarian land tenures.

The colonial discourse of waste—grounded on a theory of private property, maximum utility of land and labor, and the will to surplus value—was opposed to the “lack of ability” or the “deficiency of reason” among the colonized (the waster) to clear a ground for a permanent colonial presence and development (a colonial form of progress). Once colonized, waste land—an unused surplus—could then yield another form of surplus. Gidwani’s account of accumulation by dispossession grounded on waste reformulates Marx’s equation to $W-(M-C-M')$, wherein $W$ refers to the land brought into the capitalist cycle as waste by alienating the land from its users as well as their value systems. Such accounts of colonization of non-capitalist forms of political economies were not peculiar to the agrarian context, but as suggested earlier, were at play in the making of colonial Bombay.

\textsuperscript{31} Amariglio Jack, and Antonio Callari, “Marxian value theory and the problem of the subject: The role of commodity fetishism,” \textit{Rethinking Marxism} 2, no. 3 (1989), 36.

\textsuperscript{32} Vinay K. Gidwani, \textit{Capital, interrupted: Agrarian development and the politics of work in India} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 40.
What is significant in Gidwani’s account in relation to this dissertation is Locke’s rendering of the commons as waste (subsistence peasant lands = waste) unless rendered useful (highest and best use) through private property and industrious labor, and the normalization of this discourse in development thereafter. The account shows the denigration of all non-capitalist forms of value as non-value—waste (empty of any meaning), and the subsequent binary framing of waste as anti-value. To my mind, this process of assigning to the commons the name waste involves three moves: first, the rendering invisible of common lands or the rendering of non-capitalist forms as empty signifiers; second, a reordering of the commons based on a capitalist regime of value (commons = waste, private property = value); and third, giving this reordering the name of moral progress or development. Thus waste is a cipher (Marx’s cipher of the fetish) for a dissensus between two senses of value assigned to the common (world)—a dissensus between two (con)figurations of commons—commons represented as waste and therefore anti-value, and commons understood as heteronomous regimes of value. The former configuration involves a representational logic of equivalence and hierarchy based on a singular-universal logic of value and utility, while the latter refers to coexistence of many universal singularities and follows a heteronomous sense of the commons.

Following this last line of argument, the three lines of thought identified earlier—relegation of slums to non-planning; alienation and reification; and utilitarianism and teleology have a close relationship to Marx’s critique of capitalist political economy (while negating his developmental impulse), as well as Gidwani’s account of colonialization of common lands and its continuation in the form of development today. Specifically, these lines of thoughts

33 See Blomley, “Mud for the Land” for a similar historical account of colonialism in Vancouver.
34 It is important to note that heteronomy refers to an external force acting on the self. I use the word not to convey a multiplicity or heterogeneity, but to emphasize on the presence of an alterity. In this latter sense, it has a close relationship to my use of the concept mimesis.
correspond to three aspects of the sovereign relationship between slums, state, and capitalism: first, it is through the representational identification of slums as non-planned that the state exerts its sovereign authority (often though demolitions) to plan the common city space.\footnote{Liza Weinstein, “Demolition and dispossession: toward an understanding of state violence in millennial Mumbai,” Studies in Comparative International Development 48, no. 3 (2013), 291.} Second, related to the first, the relegation of slums as non-planned produces a binary and opens up the possibility of subsuming the non-planned within a neoliberal form of urban development that is guided by the singular-universal capitalist logic of exchange value. The latter, as argued earlier, alienates slum residents from the habitat they have produced and erases the non-capitalist forms of value through which residents create and use slums. In this broader schema, the utilitarian and teleological forms of planning become the instrumental tools for establishing these sovereign relationships and developing a World Class City—a city free of contradictions.

In this dissertation, my broader interest is in exploring the practices that disrupt these three sovereign relationships and produce contradictions. To do this I operationalize three concepts drawn from three writers, which pertain to the three elements identified above: Walter Benjamin’s notion of mimesis as a non-alienating, non-dominating, and non-representational form of exchange; Georges Bataille’s non-reproductive theory of surplus; and Jacques Rancière’s articulation of aesthetics as the distribution of the common sense and aesthetic politics as a sensorial and dissensual form of politics that disturbs the given understanding of the commons. These three concepts have influenced this dissertation’s research methods, writing form, and choice of subjects/objects I write about, as well as my proposition for rethinking planning as commoning. Let me elaborate on the three concepts briefly.
5. Three Concepts

In the course of exploring the above questions, my thinking has been influenced primarily by three writers: Walter Benjamin, Georges Bataille, and Jacques Rancière. I draw and elaborate on many of their concepts and ideas in the following chapters. Here, I wish to put forth the concepts that frame this dissertation: Bataille’s concept of excess, Benjamin’s concept of mimesis, and Rancière’s articulation of aesthetics and politics. I use these conceptual lenses to study ordinary objects, spaces, figures, and practices in the slum locality of Toba Tek Nagar and to look for new political possibilities.

a. Excess and Planning at the End of History

In 1989, drawing on Alexendre Kojeve’s lectures on Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (1969), Francis Fukuyama announced that we are at the end of history. Marked by historical junctures such as the end of the cold war and the fall of fascism as well as communism, history, in his narrative, had reached its end in the form of western liberalism. At history’s end, questions of poverty, war, and problems of atomization in community were the only problems left, which, he argued, could be resolved within liberalism; there was no need for alternatives.

In his polemical critique and response to Fukuyama’s announcement, Kanishka Goonewardena asks, what happens to planning and reason at the end of history? Do they become redundant? Through a close reading of Fukuyama’s essay (as well as writings by its proponents and critics, including Hegel), Goonewardena makes four arguments: first, he suggests that Fukuyama’s proclamation reduces the meaning of freedom to mean freedom in the market or free trade and in doing so separates the economic realm from the political realm. Second, the

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contradictions identified by Fukuyama—polarization by poverty, war, and the atomization of community, he argues, are not mere contradictions but lie at the heart of liberalism and its failure as a form of democratic social order, which Hegel himself recognized. Third, Goonewardena argues that the Third Way (championed by Anthony Giddens, Tony Blair, and Bill Clinton) response to the neoliberalism of the far right has failed as an alternative political philosophy, since the Third Way has continued dismantling the welfare state and existing form of collectives, while strengthening institutional frameworks for a well-functioning market.38 And lastly, Goonewardena negates the common-sense assumption that there is no need for an alternative. Drawing on a range of thinkers, he suggests a few ways in which progressive planners can work towards the goal of achieving radical democracy. These include: exploring the socialist potential of a creatively extended public sphere that include all forms of collectives at a regional or even international scale, developing knowledge for social movements, developing newer languages and means of expressions, creating and enacting horizontal forms of organization and organizational networks, diminishing the autonomy between the economic and the political, and lastly, moving away from professional and social science oriented approaches in planning towards a more political approach to actualize a radical democracy. Planning and planners are thus provoked to perform the labor of the negative.

Another person who drew on Kojeve’s lectures was Georges Bataille. Like Fukuyama, but unlike Goonewardena, Bataille was neither interested in questioning the truth of Hegel’s account of history nor Kojeve’s announcement (through Hegel) that we are at the end of history (because he knows that one cannot refute Hegel by means of logic). However, unlike Fukuyama, who seems content, Bataille, like Goonewardena (and the children in my field note), is anxious,

restless, bored, and unhappy with such an (anticlimactic) end of history. Thus he asks, what happens to these excessive and now unemployable negativities at the end of history? While Goonewardena explores this question by negating Fukuyama’s claim, Bataille explores it through the notion of excess, and he does this in two ways: first, he interrogates Hegel’s thought in its totality to understand what is it that gets left out in Hegel’s movement of history and knowledge; and second, he highlights how excess can allow us to identify new political possibilities in the moment of impossibility, that is, at the end of history.

b. Hegel’s Thought System

Hegel’s schema of knowledge is based on the dialectical movement of aufhebung or sublation, wherein each determination is negated and conserved in another determination, which reveals the truth of the former. In this process of constituting meaning (or in this movement towards Absolute Knowledge), nothing is lost or wasted but is negated and preserved. Bataille calls this a process of reproductive consumption, which he argues is similar to the “world of work” and utility, where every experience is made to perform the work of producing a new determination without allowing it to exceed its closure or suspend the totality of the discourse or meaning. Only by setting up the movement of meaning in such a way, Jacques Derrida argues, could Hegel construct his philosophical system as a totality. In this total system, nothing is wasted, although something is sacrificed—meaning: the meaning of non-abstract negative experiences such as unhappiness, anxiety, restlessness, forgetfulness, laughter, sex, and death. Hegel’s philosophical system, Derrida suggests, neither ignores them, nor reduces them to a meaning, rather it entails a reduction of their meaning. It sacrifices a part of the meaning and relegates this

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sacrificed part to the world of non-meaning or non-knowledge. It is only in relationship to this non-world that meaning and knowledge is produced in this world.

c. Excess and Class Struggle

For Bataille, the sacrifice of these elements signifies the negation of negation, which renders them as inoperative or unemployed negativities. And he is interested in exploring the political possibilities of this sacrificed world, that is, elements that cannot be assimilated into the necessity of the system, and are hence lost or expended non-productively. In his essay “Notion of Expenditure,” Bataille joins this theory of expenditure to class struggle and the Marxist dialectic, specifically, the role of the non-abstract negativity in animating class struggle.

Much of the Marxist literature had focused on the means of production, and Bataille was more interested in the world of consumption. Consumption, he suggested, could be divided into two parts: one part is reducible and is “represented by the use of the minimum necessary for the conservation of life and the continuation of an individual’s productive activity in a given society.” The other part is consumption as “unproductive expenditure,” which could be dispensed with, that is, sacrificed or expended for its own sake. Bataille was thus interested in writing about acts such as sex, death, and laughter, in which energy is lost without a return. This sacrifice, he suggested, is an essential part of human life, but got relegated to the world of taboo under capitalism as well as under religion (particularly Christianity). With regards to class struggle, he argued that it is this ability to expend that enables the rich, who can destroy more than anyone else, to establish themselves above the poor, who they have also destroyed in the

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process through capitalism. The bourgeois use destruction not to destroy completely (expend), but to reaffirm their position in the hierarchy. Thus, class struggle for Bataille was not the replacement of conspicuous consumption by total utility, but a liberation of the true nature of expenditure. The lower classes were to take control of the means of expenditure as well as the means of production through class struggle. Bataille’s account of sovereignty is built on this relationship between excess and class struggle.

d. **Excess in and as Slums**

My interest, following Bataille, is in exploring the politics of excess, and slums provide an apt site to do this. In the course of Mumbai’s urbanization history as well as its recent movement towards becoming a World Class city, the meaning of slums has either been reduced to the utilitarian world of housing units, property ownership, or land value, or has been relegated to the world of non-meaning through terms such as chaotic, messy, and filthy. It is in relation to this non-meaningful and negated world that the dream of the World Class City gets instituted as the only possible and meaningful world. Most scholarly work on slums has continued to focus on objects of needs—water, housing, poverty, food, and so on. There is no denying that such basic utilities are required to reproduce life. But to my mind, such a framing of slums reduces slum residents to subjects in need, and the meaning of their lives to mere acts of survival in the city. Thus, this dissertation makes a conscious decision to not speak of housing in slums in order to avoid reducing the meaning of slums to mere housing units, a strategy adopted very effectively by the government and NGOs to rehabilitate and resettle slum dwellers. Instead, I explore spaces and objects in slums where meaning and non-meaning, utility and excess, needs and desires, collide against each other and create new forms.
e. Benjamin’s Mimetic Constellations

While I draw from Bataille his elaboration on excess and its transgressive power to breach the limits of the given world, I draw the concept of mimesis from the writings of Walter Benjamin as well a range of other writers.\(^44\) I use the concept as an analytical tool to study everyday spaces and as an operational concept to present the slum locality as a montage or a mimetic constellation.

By mimesis Benjamin refers to a cognitive drive in humans to see and reproduce similarities between the self and the other.\(^45\) Its ontogenetic form is visible in the child’s imitation not just of a teacher or an engine driver but also of objects such as a windmill, a car, or a train. Its phylogenetic form is visible in dance and gestures, wherein humans reproduce similarities in nature sensuously through the medium of the body, as well as in language and writing, where words imitate or reproduce nature through a non-sensuous correspondence. Benjamin’s notion of mimesis, Miriam Hansen tells us, is not restricted to a category of representation, but is a relational practice—a mode of accessing the world through a non-coercive engagement with the other that resists dualistic conceptions of subject and object.\(^46\) In its darker vein, mimesis also signifies “a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become same and behave accordingly.”\(^47\) In this regard, Michael Taussig’s elaboration on the state as a

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\(^{46}\) Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 190–199.

\(^{47}\) For Adorno and Horkheimer this negative connotation of mimesis was at play in the “organized manipulation of mimesis” under fascism. The work of Taussig on the use of the mimetic faculty by the state under colonialism and neo-colonialism has been particularly revealing of this in his book *Mimesis and Alterity*. Mimesis, he argues, is that nature that culture uses to create second nature. Mimesis is the primary instrument of the state-machine’s power. It
mimetic-machine, which reproduces cultural and social forms to naturalize its rule over the society, is particularly illuminative.\textsuperscript{48} One can see it in the bureaucratic procedures of producing state objects through fingerprinting and photography in colonial and neocolonial forms in order to assert power over subjects. In her elaboration of this darker side, Susan Buck-Morss points towards the role of mimesis in self-alienation.\textsuperscript{49} Speaking of the industrial landscapes, she writes about how the body of workers deals with the shock and rhythms of modern capitalism, whereby the body mimetically reproduces and coordinates itself with the factory machines, like Charlie Chaplin, in order to shield itself from the violence of experience. But if mimesis has this darker side of naturalizing the given and alienating the subject from its capacity to experience, it also holds the potential to reveal the truth as well as transform the given world. Mimesis involves this dialectical play between similarity and difference—reproducing a transformed copy.

In this regard, Theodor Adorno, who drew on Benjamin’s work, is instructive. To mime the original in a new modality requires, he suggests, the organizing principle of “exact fantasy.”\textsuperscript{50} By “exact fantasy” Adorno meant a fantasy (not dream) that is guided by the material presented to experience in a scientific manner, as well as the drive to rearrange the elements of the phenomenon until they opened up a new cognitive understanding. Thus, rather than being merely duplicated in thought, elements were to be transformed through a mimetic rearrangement of the given phenomenon in words and images. This operative and analytical concept of mimesis provided Benjamin a model for translation, and for Adorno musical performance. It was a

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid: 61.
\textsuperscript{49} Buck-Morss, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, 86–90.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid: 90.
conceptual as well as a performative operation—a way of presenting given elements in a new configuration, so as to transform the element into a new modality in order to reveal the truth. I have used the concept here to not only understand how slum residents as well as the state interact with each other mimetically, but also to show residents draw on the performative and transformative aspects of mimetic technologies to transform the given world. Another way in which I use the concept is operational, that is, as an instrument of writing, which relies on providing thick descriptions of slums (explained in the next section).

This dissertation is oriented around these questions and concepts, and it explores them through an ethnographic study of common spaces in slums. These spaces include teashops, toilets, video theaters, streets, religious institutions, dumping grounds, community halls, cigarette shops, courtyards, NGO offices, Human Rights Offices—all places where people wait, gather, argue, fight, discuss, strike deals, vent, and make plans for themselves as well as others. While these spaces, I argue, perform the task they are assigned, they also hold within them an excess. These spaces perform beyond their mandate, and slum residents always make something more of these spaces than what they are assigned for. These are not ideal spaces, but contradictory ones, and yet, to my mind, they point towards a possible way of doing away with the ends and partitions imposed on slums. Thus I am interested in showing how residents share stories about planning while idling in teashops; how old and new migrants use rundown video parlors to inhabit real and imaginary worlds; how rag pickers collect useful as well as useless objects in landfills; and how residents strive to ascribe beauty and pleasure to such a basic infrastructural object as the toilet. By narrating ethnographic stories of these contradictory spaces, this dissertation hopes to perform four tasks: first, to describe these everyday common spaces that are otherwise unseen in academic literature on slums; second, to contextualize these spaces by
drawing out connections between them and stories about the city; third, to put forth new ideas in
the form of spaces, figures, practices and concepts; and fourth, to perform aesthetic work.

f. Aesthetics, Politics, and the Slum

For Rancière, politics is concerned with how a community gets instituted based on something in
common—common sense; and aesthetics refers to the partitioning of that common sense, which
determines specific forms of action, production, perception, and thought, as well as the
relationships among them. In other words, aesthetics pertains to the configuration of sense that
determines what is visible, sayable, doable, and thinkable; the mode of articulations between
forms of doing, making, seeing, and thinking; as well as the subjects suitable to these tasks. This
partition delimits whether a specific utterance counts as speech or silence, logos or pathos,
discourse or noise. In relation to geography and planning, it refers to the distribution and framing
of time and space—boundaries that delimit inclusion or exclusion, central or peripheral, visible
or invisible, and so on. The or of the partition is significant to politics, not just in relation to the
binary it sets up but also in terms of the erasure of a heteronomy—and—between two competing
ideas about the common. This erasure of the and, and its replacement with an or, marks the
erasure of the paradoxical tension between two understandings and replaces the and with
oppositions so that the tension between the two can be resolved synthetically. In contrast to such
consensual politics that pronounce the existence of one space (in which one is included),
Rancière puts forth dissensus (≠ or non-equivalence) as the essence of politics.51 Thus aesthetics
and politics in Rancière’s account are two sides of a question concerning what is common.

Politics and aesthetics, Rancière argues, are paradoxical concepts, and this paradox
emerges from a heteronomy (and which also refers to the other acting on the self) tied to an

aesthetic experience. In contrast to a linear movement from pathos to logos—unreason to reason—or logos to pathos—unconscious to conscious—aesthetics interrupts and neutralizes the dichotomous structure through a heteronomy, an equality between logos and pathos, speech and silence. An example of this heteronomy is a workers’ strike. During a strike the inactivity (passivity) of not working is turned by workers into an activity that demonstrates their right as well as what is a just way running a factory. A workers’ strike is an activity and a passivity, which within a capitalist distribution of common sense gets construed as irrational protest, not rational debate or discourse. Speaking in relationship to art, and specifically modern art’s push for autonomy of art (art for art sake), Rancière argues that within an aesthetic understanding of art, art is not autonomous (separate sphere) or heteronomous (embedded in everyday life), but autonomous and heteronomous. For example, the depiction of everyday familiar objects by Surrealism as estranged and the abstract paintings of vegetables in a museum, involve both an autonomy of art as well as a heteronomy. Here, art is a singular collection of elements drawn from experiences of everyday life and displayed in a museum. Thus art within an aesthetic regime, he argues, is both art and non-art, which disrupts the established genres and hierarchies of pure art and popular art and replaces them with art in the singular since it has no criteria for being classified or categorized.

An example of this in relationship to politics is the distribution of roles in a community that determines participation in a democracy—ruling and being ruled. Ruling and being ruled expresses a reciprocal and equal relationship between activity (ruling) and passivity (being ruled). A so-called ideal democracy is based on defining roles, tasks, and actions. It identifies and counts those who are eligible to act or partake—part-take/avoir-part—in ruling and those who are not. The eligibility or qualification of those who act or rule is defined based on specific criteria—property, capacity of speech or discourse, citizenship, and so on. What is common to
those unqualified to rule, and are hence passive, is that they have no qualification to rule; they are void—empty of any qualification, as well as supplementary—un(ac)counted, an addition to those counted. In this scenario, politics for Rancière entails a dissensus over the principle and qualifications of counting. This dissensus manifests itself in the creation of a space, an act, or an utterance by those who have no eligibility (no-part) to part-take in democracy based on that ineligibility.

The example of the workers strike mentioned illustrates this inversion. In a factory, the role assigned to workers is to work and not partake in decision making about how a factory is to be run. They have no expert qualifications to do so. During a strike, the passivity—the criteria of ineligibility to run a factory—gets appropriated by the workers as an activity to demonstrate their right to part-take in decision making over how a factory (the common) is to be run. Further, in reference to the relationship between aesthetics and politics, Rancière’s book *The Nights of Labor*\(^52\) shows how politics is an aesthetic affair. In the book, his archival travels into the writings of eighteenth-century French workers reveal the wild diaries, poetry, and prose of anonymous artisans, thinkers, worker poets, and worker philosophers, who devised emancipatory systems not just in their act of aesthetic work (writing), but also by appropriating the night (passive), which was to sleep, to actively create a new imagination for an emancipatory world in their writing. Here, emancipation, Kristin Ross suggests in her essay on Rancière, does not mean seizing control of the workplace, but rather claiming their right to dead time, the right to think, and the right to occupy a terrain the bourgeoisie had carefully preserved for itself: the terrain of aesthetic pleasure.\(^53\)


To reiterate, dissensus is the essence of aesthetic politics. This involves two acts
connected to each other: the creation of a specific space, forms of speaking, and subjectivities in
common, and a rupture in the logic of the distribution of the common. Thus dissensus means the
disruption of logic of the consensus that pronounces there is only one reality, one space, one
time, and one logic: the space-time of the capitalist market and its inegalitarian logic of
equivalence. Moreover, Rancière’s aesthetics of politics also needs to be differentiated from the
“politics of aesthetics,” as well from as ethical politics (or ethical aesthetics), both of which, he
argues, aim to produce a consensus within a community. Rancière identifies the former with a
representative regime of politics akin to liberal democracy, wherein a representative governs in
the name of the people, and the later with an ethical community, wherein politics entails
educating the citizenry in accordance with their assigned roles and tasks. He attributes these two
forms of politics to a police order, which determines the distribution of parts and roles in a
community as well as the fluid circulation of these parts. Thus aesthetic politics does not occur
outside the police order but in the space of the police. Aligned with this notion of aesthetic
politics, democracy for Rancière is neither a type of constitution nor a form of society,
particularly in the case of liberal democracy, but is predicated on dissensus, equality, and the
emergence of new political subjectivities.

In reference to the relationship between aesthetics and slums, Asher Ghertner’s
significant ethnographic work on Delhi shows how the making of a “world-class,” “slum-free”
city is not instantiated solely or primarily through an economic calculus or juridical redefinition
Rather, it is instantiated through the creation of aesthetic norms such as nuisance—smell, sight, and sound—which lay down boundaries between legal/illegal, beautiful/ugly, planned/unplanned, and identify what fits within the vision of a “world-class city.” A slum, even if its residents legally reside at their current location, is pronounced illegal because it “looks unplanned” and can be demolished, whereas an illegal private mall built on public land “looks planned” and hence is not to be demolished. Here, Ghertner mobilizes Rancière’s notion of the aesthetic to show how the creation of a world-class city extends Foucault’s notion of governmentality—the population’s conduct towards suitable ends—to create a specific “distribution of the sensible” in line with the world-class city vision. In this field of perception, slums are identified as one of the clearest obstacles in the path of progress. While Ghertner’s account shows how this distribution induces a form of self-government among those who identify with the desirability of world-class urban improvements, it also complicates the binary notion of consent/resistance by showing how slum dwellers appropriate the aesthetics of the world-class city (particularly the dream of private property) to locate themselves within this changing city and frame their own world-class aspirations. His ethnographic account points towards the contradictory ways in which slum dwellers, those with no part, appropriate the world-class aesthetic to partake in the making of the world-class city. While Ghertner’s account eludes the binary of consent/resistance, it also eludes, to my mind, what is at the heart of Rancière’s aesthetic politics: a rupture and eruption in common sense. This dissertation, in one sense, follows Ghertner’s account, but it also departs from it. While it is located in the field of perception set up by the “World Class” city aesthetics, it is interested in the aesthetic acts of slum

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54 Ghertner, Rule by Aesthetics, 7.
55 Nuisance was also the discourse mobilized in nineteenth century Victorian England to institute land-use planning, where the nuisance of butchers (smell, blood, vision) provided the impulse to separate them from living quarters. In that sense, Ghertner’s account does not mark the limits of governmental forms of knowledge and a recourse to aesthetics, but points towards how aesthetics and governmentality are tied together.
dwellers that escape the common sense configured by the world-class aesthetics, by creating within it new forms of planning, temporalities, subjectivities, and value regimes in relationship to what is in common—waste, planning, films, toilets.

g. Dialectics as a Paradox
One last idea that requires clarification before venturing into the ethnographic account is what I understand as dialectics. Here, I draw on the three writers identified above, to provide some clarification.

If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things that were not embraced by this dynamic. . . . It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. . . . Benjamin’s writings are an attempt in ever new ways to make philosophically fruitful what has not yet been foreclosed by great intentions. The task he bequeathed was not to abandon such an attempt to the estranging enigmas of thought alone, but to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically.

(T. Adorno (1974), Minima Moralia: 151–52, my emphasis)

In contrast to Hegel’s understanding of history as a progressive and reconciliatory dialectical process towards a higher truth, where the tensions between contradictions gradually resolve themselves to achieve a whole, Adorno grounded his notion of dialectics, rather, negative dialectics, based on non-identity as the history’s motor force. The concept of non-identity was also mobilized as an anti-thesis to the exchange-value logic of capitalist commodity form based on an identity between all commodities through the medium of money. Adorno’s negative

56 Buck-Morss, Origin of Negative Dialectics, 47. The certainty of a dialectical resolution is what allows Fukuyama to assert that the path of dialectics has progressed towards an “End of History,” which in turn implies an end of politics.
dialectics, grounded on a non-identity (between history as natural progress or reason and reality), was meant to show that dialectics is instead an open-ended process, whereby the non-identity between what is and what should be (a gap between reality and teleology) liberates us from the necessity of history and opens up a possible impossibility. Similarly, Benjamin’s notion of dialectical image as well as his understanding of an Idea as a constellation, as Adorno’s aphorism above suggests, was guided by a “nonsynthesis of oppositional concepts in another” concept. The dialectical image, a Marxist version of an allegory, was meant as a constellation wherein contradictory elements were brought within a common space, juxtaposed against each other, rubbed against each other, so that new concepts would emerge. Thus Benjamin used the concept ‘dialectics at a standstill’ to arrest the dialectical movement. In this arrested moment the paradoxical tension and play (rather than a synthesis) between contradictory elements (mimesis as similarity and difference) were to open up transformative possibilities rather than overcome the contradictions. This paradoxical tension is also evident in Bataille’s concepts such as formless forms, mastery of non-mastery, and so on. In regards to his theory of excess, Bataille’s unproductive and non-utilitarian approach to excess is based on his dialectical negation of Hegel’s negation of excess to the realm of non-meaning. For Bataille, it is not the translation of negative into a positive, nor the relegation of the negative to the nether world, but the dialectical tension between meaning and non-meaning that brings about a new true meaning. To draw out the connections between the paradoxical tension in dialectics and Rancière’s work, it is enough to reiterate his rejection of reconciliatory, consensual forms of democracy, and his theses of aesthetic politics as a paradoxical unity of opposites—activity and passivity, logos and pathos. The paradoxical tension and the nonsynthetic dialectical thinking of these writers have shaped

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57 A clear example of this tension is his articulation of surplus as an accursed share, which plays on the paradoxical meaning of the word accursed as both sacred and cursed.
my dialectical approach in this dissertation. Specifically, my aim is to constellate dialectical images and explore the productive aspect of the paradoxical tensions between the contradictory elements of four phenomena: storytelling, films, community toilets, and waste.

6. Toba Tek Nagar

This dissertation is located in, and is about, a fictitious slum neighborhood called Toba Tek Nagar. But to be clear, the dissertation is based on yearlong ethnographic fieldwork in multiple slum localities in Mumbai. The fictional slum locality presented here is a montage of those slums I studied. I have elaborated on why I chose to fictionalize the locality in the next chapter on methods. Here, I elaborate on the choice of naming the locality Toba Tek Nagar and provide a short historical context to the slum locality.

a. The Ur-Story

The name Toba Tek is borrowed from Sadat Hasan Manto’s short story “Toba Tek Singh” (1955). The story is set in the post-partition context of the Indian subcontinent. The inmates of a lunatic asylum are being sent to their so-called respective countries based on their religion; the Muslim inmates from Indian asylums, whose families had already moved, are being sent to Pakistan; and Hindu and Sikh inmates from Pakistan are being sent to India. The story’s main character is Bishen Singh, a Sikh inmate of a lunatic asylum in Pakistan, who is being sent to India. But he is disinterested (an important act) in being in India or Pakistan and wants to go back to his native village, Toba Tek Singh—a space, and a time, where partitions were nonexistent. Unable to locate his native village through the course of the story, the deranged Bishen

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58 See the section above for an elaboration of why I chose to fictionalize the slum.
Singh chooses to not decide and to die in the no man’s land in between the two countries; there he locates his village, Toba Tek Singh. The lunatic inmate, Aamir Mufti tells us,

is a figure for all those, like Manto himself, who are unable to make the decision required of them, and decided to die on that piece of earth that belongs to no nation-state . . . It (the story) is a masterful exercise in the use of irony and inversion, the story is an essentially humanist text, making visible the resources of affect and feeling that are required in order to imagine the human in fundamentally inhuman times. 60

To my mind, the story, like most of Manto’s stories, not only questions the existing categories (partitions) and totalities (nation-state) but also displaces them by foregrounding ambiguous and ordinary figures, spaces, and concepts, which point towards new possibilities and collaborations at the limits of the given world. They exist not outside the boundaries of the given world, but in between. I will return to this aspect of Manto’s work throughout the dissertation.

The second reason for naming the slum Toba Tek Nagar is the ur-story. Bishen Singh, in Manto’s story, is searching for his native village called Toba Tek Singh. The actual place is situated in Pakistan and is named after a Sikh saint, Tek Singh. The place, it is said, was a desert with a small pond (Toba in Punjabi) until Tek Singh chose to settle there. He spent his life providing water, food, and shelter to travelers passing through the village. Years later, the place was named Toba Tek Singh after this saint. The choice of naming the ur-place as well as the no-man’s land in Manto’s story after a saint who provided food, shelter, and water to travelers is significant for two reasons: first, it points towards an in-betweeness of a place—a place where travelers are passing through and on their way to elsewhere. And second, it points towards a dialectical movement of the people and the place. Both the place and the people are in-between and in movement, always going somewhere. Thus boundaries drawn to partition, categorize, and

construct totalities are always restrictive of such movements. Bishen Singh’s choice of dying in a no-man’s land, to my mind, speaks of a desire to be in that in-between place, where the possibility of movement exists. Thus most places are Toba Tek Singh, where people, ideas, and things are always on their way to somewhere else in time and space. The slums that I studied are no exception. They are a place for migrants that come to Mumbai to become someone else: actor, con man, politician, baker, ordinary person, or all of these.

Thus I have named the slum Toba Tek Nagar to suggest that slums are places in movement and are inhabited by people in movement; they are also places that, like the Saint in Manto’s story, provide shelter and resources for these people to fulfil their desire of becoming someone else or of going somewhere else.

b. Toba Tek Nagar the Montage
Toba Tek Nagar is located on the margins of Mumbai. It was set up in the 1970s by the City Municipality’s Slum Improvement Department, which was involved in solving the problems of slums in Greater Mumbai. Under the slum clearance scheme launched a few years prior, slum dwellers were shifted from central parts of the city to its outskirts, and rehabilitated on municipal lands. The locality, or the colony as it’s called in the municipal records, was set up as a site and service scheme.

The colony was divided into six smaller colonies. By 1975, five years after the program began, around nine thousand families were rehabilitated in the first stage. Of these, 40 percent were relocated from nearby areas and 60 percent from the central part of the city. The land was marshy and had been partially reclaimed, as the land continues to sink even today. The colony was surrounded by a landfill on one side, a primary arterial road on the other, and the rest of the land was empty. Each family relocated here was provided a plot of ten by fifteen feet, free of
charge. The construction of houses was their own responsibility. Each family was given an identity card that certified it as the official owner of the plot, and the ownership was non-transferrable. However, a number of families sold their plots or houses and moved out soon after. The secondary owners bought them at the risk of remaining informal.\textsuperscript{61} While 70 percent were evicted and relocated, about 20 percent relocated to buy a house from the previous owners. The other 10 percent anticipated evictions and moved.

Under the site and service scheme, the plots were provided some basic infrastructures. A few waterlines were set up. Water was provided for four hours every morning and two hours in the afternoon. A block of toilets was provided for a block of plots, which meant that fifteen families, or seventy-five people, had to share one toilet. The drainage system was open. Storm water drainage and garbage disposal were not provided, neither were postal services, recreational facilities, entertainment facilities, religious institutions, or parks. There were no common electricity services, except on the main roads. There was only one primary school, which was set up by a Muslim leader from outside the locality. A welfare center that provided employment training to women was set up by an NGO within a few years. While the municipality was setting up the colonies, residents who were not part of the rehabilitation scheme were also occupying the land around the colonies. A number of new and old migrants to Mumbai bought land from touts and politicians around the colonies. The politicians were interested in setting up their constituencies, the touts in selling land. Regardless of location, all the residents reclaimed land with bags of sand, debris, or garbage based on their affordability. The residents outside the municipal colony availed basic services such as water, toilets, and electricity through various

\textsuperscript{61} The average cost of each plot then was around INR. 1750 (USD 26), and the cost of construction was around INR. 3000 (USD 45). The cost of plots outside these notified slum colonies was much lower. Around 50 percent of the residents borrowed money from various sources such as family, friends, employers, moneylenders, and banks. While the other 50 percent could afford the costs, they still had to invest all of their savings back into housing.
means. This involved paying residents of the colonies who were provided some infrastructure, pressuring politicians and bureaucrats, traveling to other settlements every day, and/or extending connections from the existing resources. The slum, thus, was always a mix of different kinds of residents, infrastructures, land ownerships, and politics.

When the colony was set up, it housed a population of 74,000, or 15,000 households. Of these, 47 percent were from Maharashtra, 26 percent from Uttar Pradesh, and the rest from Rajasthan, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Gujarat, and Nepal. In terms of religion, 45 percent were Hindus, 39 percent Muslims, and 12 percent Buddhists. Nearly 80 percent of those relocated had been in Mumbai for more than ten years, 5 percent for less than five years, and only 1 percent were recent migrants. Today the slum houses 1,200,000 residents, 80 percent of which are Muslims (both Sunni and Shia) and the rest Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians. This change in the slum’s religious composition, and its transformation from a mixed neighborhood to a predominantly Muslim neighborhood, was a result of the 1992–93 communal riots that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid Mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, on December 6, 1992. The riots unfolded violently in a number of slum localities, including Toba Tek Nagar, and resulted in an out-migration of non-Muslims and an influx of Muslims from other neighborhoods. Some non-Muslim residents moved back to their villages, while others shifted to non-Muslim slums in different parts of Mumbai. Besides the movement of people, the riots also redrew new lines of fear and estrangement between different religious groups in slums like Toba Tek Nagar.

Recent writings on growing marginalization of Muslims in Indian cities have shown that urban Muslims are being increasingly ghettoized in slums and victimized through state-led
violence. This ghettoization involves denying Muslim slums physical infrastructures and exiling them from new urban as well as national imaginations. In the case of Mumbai, this form of exclusion is a result of the rise of Hindu regionalism in Mumbai under Shiv Sena and the pervasion of Islamophobia into everyday urban life and state policies since the mid-1960s. Following the 1992–93 riots, the official re-naming of the city and city spaces became a way for Shiv Sena to establish the city as a Hindu regionalist place. Thus Bombay was renamed Mumbai in 1995, along with the renaming of streets, parks, airport, railway stations, and so on. It is in response to this politics of naming and renaming that I chose to name the fictional slum Toba Tek Nagar. In doing this, I wanted to locate the slum within the multiple histories: the history of partition, the appropriation of this history within regional politics in Mumbai, and the impact of this regionalism in the form of alienation of poorer urban Muslims. The response is not direct, confrontational, or oppositional, but tangential. It is in this vein that I explore figures, spaces, and political forms, which are put into place particularly by Muslim slum residents to show how they respond to the context in critical ways despite their minoratization.

To return to Toba Tek Nagar, the slum locality has transformed a lot since it was set up, despite repetitive violence. There are new toilet blocks, electricity transformers, cable television

64 I use the word critical not in opposition to religion and secular, but as a critical reading of practices employed in domination through the classification and management of cultures, and of human collectivities, into mutually distinct and immutable entities, be they nations or civilizations or ethnicities. It implies that the energies of nationalism and regionalism are thoroughly religious in nature. On the other hand, by critical secularism Mufti calls for a constant unsettling and an ongoing and never-ending critique, rather than a simple overcoming of the religious, theological, or transcendental impulse. It implies a crossing of boundaries—of nation, tradition, religion, race, and language. It conceives of communities of interpretation as inhabiting not self-enclosed life-worlds but rather the world itself. Aamir Mufti, “Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times,” *Boundary 2* 31, no. 2 (2004): 1–9.
networks, markets, schools, spaces for religious worship, organizational forms, film theaters, pucca roads and houses, parks, and so on. During the field research, my aim was to understand the practices through which slums have transitioned over the years. In this regard, three questions guided my fieldwork: What are the everyday practices through which slum residents assemble common urban spaces and infrastructures in a slum locality? What do these practices tell us about the ways in which religious and class-based minorities (individuals and collectives) partake (part-take) in urban politics? And lastly, can these practices help us rethink cities and city planning differently than the present hegemonic discourses of urbanization? The dissertation aims to translate the stories and experiences that I collected through writing, highlight specific transformative ideas, and circulate them.

7. **Structure of the Dissertation**

The main body of the dissertation comprises four chapters. Each of these uses one object, practice, figure, or space as a gateway to explore the everyday life, histories, and politics in which they are embedded.

Chapter One, “Methods, Choices, and Descriptions” lays out the methodological choices that informed my field-research as well as writing process. Specifically, the chapter elaborates on the concept of *constellation*, a concept I borrow from Benjamin, and its significance to the dissertation’s theoretical and methodological orientation. The chapter also elaborates on the experiences of the fieldwork, how I collected the ethnographic elements, and why “thick descriptions” are central to the practice of writing and research.

Chapter Two, “*Yahaan Phaltu Bethana Mana Sakht Hai*” (‘Idling Here is Strictly Prohibited’) is set against the backdrop of three phenomena: the communicative turn in planning
theory and practice; the increased use of governmental forms of knowledge and objects of
governance; and the ongoing reification of Mumbai’s slums into land with developmental value
under the city’s neoliberal housing policies. The chapter draws on the work of Benjamin and
Manto to explore the relationship between planning and storytelling in Toba Tek Nagar. It uses
an ethnographic study of spaces—teashops, bureaucratic offices, the Human Rights Office, and
Mosques, among others—to show how slum residents use storytelling as an allegorical device
not just to reveal the arbitrariness of planning reason but also to share cunning tricks to outwit it.
In doing so, the chapter documents how storytelling publics in slum localities disrupt the
partition between the expertise of planning and the art of storytelling.

Chapter Three, “Double Dekho” (See Doubleness) focusses on life around films in Toba
Tek Nagar to highlight their transformative role in the everyday life of its residents. This
transformative potential finds its impulse from two interrelated aspects of films as a mimetic
technology—repetition and play. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part is an
ethnographic exploration of everyday life in and around video-theaters in Toba Tek Nagar. It
shows how video-theaters are homosocial spaces that are used by old and new male migrants in
multiple ways every day. One of the significant aspects of the video-theaters is that the male
residents watch specific films, scenes, songs, or dialogues, over and over again. I show how this
repetitive viewing practice allows certain slum residents to undo the urban alienation
therapeutically, and to transpose themselves into virtual spaces and times. Part two of the chapter
extends this theme on films as medial technologies between actuality and virtuality to study a
YouTube crime series produced by a local youth group in the slum locality. This part of the
chapter focusses on the aspect of “play” in filmmaking. I demonstrate how the youth group and
their crime series disturbs and reorders—that is, plays with—the hierarchies of bodies, spaces,
and things at the individual and the collective level.
Chapter Four, “Kaminey: A Tragic-Play,” is set against the backdrop of the Mumbai Municipal Corporation’s Slum Sanitation Program (SSP). Drawing on ethnographic stories of three toilet projects in Toba Tek Nagar, and allegorical figures from films, folk tales, and critical theory, this chapter explores the relationship between infrastructural objects (toilets), individuals (kaminey), and urban development. In doing so, it aims to foreground the form of politics that slum dwellers devise to assemble common infrastructure and create an individual as well as a collective life in slum localities. The kamina, I argue in this chapter, is a mimetic figure that refuses to be contained or contain others within modern categories of order and morality. Instead, it moves across identities and life-worlds in order to create a new space and subjectivity between established categories. This chapter aims to foreground the political possibilities that open up in the space between established boundaries.

Chapter Five, Cocktail Mix, extends the theme of betweeness from the previous chapter by spatializing it. Using the waste recycling category Cocktail Mix as a metaphor, this chapter explores the waste collection, disposal, and recycling assemblage in Mumbai as a heteronomous in-between space, where contradictory forms of value intersect and collide with each other. Since the subject and object of study is waste, this space is also the zone where life and death, absence and presence, value and non-value, coexist and play against each other. At an ethnographic level, the chapter captures the ongoing modernization of waste collection and disposal systems in Mumbai to show how modernization divides, encloses, and (sub)contracts this “in-between” space, and how it affects the everyday life of slum residents who work as waste pickers.

The concluding chapter draws on the insights from the ethnography to conceptualize a democratic form of planning praxis that departs from the existing planning paradigms such as communicative planning, community participation, and political society. I do this by proposing the idea of “planning as commoning”. The idea is based on three principles: a non-
representational mimetic mode of exchange; creation of in-between spaces, temporalities, and subjectivities; and lastly, producing collectivities based on non-identities. The conclusion to the dissertation elaborates on these three principles and situates them within ongoing debates.
Figure 1: Map of Toba Tek Nagar
Chapter 1
Methods, Choices, and Descriptions

What follows below is an elaboration on the methodology that guided my fieldwork, writing process, as well as the final form of the dissertation.

The first section is an email correspondence between a friend just starting her field research and myself, while I was in the last phase of my fieldwork. We both shared a series of questions and reflections on methods and politics of research, on what kind of knowledge needs to be produced, and on how one locates oneself within a whole while immersing oneself in particularities. Writing these emails provided me (and hopefully her) a channel for sharing ideas, thoughts, experiences, reflections, and anxieties. A number of these ideas appear in this dissertation explicitly, and others have made their way in implicitly. But before presenting the correspondence, I want to make two points regarding the choice of using correspondence as a way of writing about methods.

First, it should be pointed out that the correspondence is between people in two different contexts: one in the “Global South,” the other in the “Global North”; one working on slums in Mumbai, India, and the other working on histories of economic transformations and the production of seasonal labor in Prince Edwards Island, Canada. Despite the contextual differences, the correspondence allowed us to share experiences, similarities and differences, connections and disconnects, and to share how we were translating these into thinking about one’s own world and its particularities without replicating them.\(^65\) I have put our conversation in the section on methods to think through what such correspondences could allow for in terms of devising methods, questions, and ways of thinking across different contexts without aligning oneself with the hierarchical global cities paradigm or the over-arching planetary urbanization

\(^65\) I return to this aspect in Chapter Two.
theories. Instead, the following method of correspondence, I argue, allows us to see and read places as intersections or “cross-roads” in the movement of ideas, people, and things that are always going elsewhere.\textsuperscript{66} The emails reflect my movement in between these intersections and how they have shaped my thinking.

The second point is about using first-person email correspondence to speak about methods of research as against fictionalizing ethnographic accounts of slum residents and the field site. This choice was made in response to dilemmas around politics of knowledge production in the time of empire. The relationship between knowledge and colonialism, that is, its use in constructing the ‘Other’ of the West, and constructing hegemonic power structures under colonialism, is fairly well known to us.\textsuperscript{67} This relationship between hegemony and disciplinary knowledge has not disappeared today. In reference to this relationship between knowledge production and imperialism in neocolonial times, Edward Said argues that it is important to pay attention to four aspects of knowledge production: first, how scholarly or monographic disciplinary work gets exfoliated from the relatively private domain of the researcher and their guild circle into the domain of policy making and policy enactment (something I experienced firsthand as an urban policy researcher). Second, an awareness of how ethnography can shut out the points of view of those on the margins in favor of thick descriptions about the margins. Third, how ethnography acquires its power by reproducing the geography of a space through thick descriptions and in so doing produces means of control over that space. And last is how disciplinary knowledges often end up revealing secrets of resistances that are central

\textsuperscript{66} AbdouMaliq Simone, \textit{Jakarta: Drawing the City Near} (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1–22.

\textsuperscript{67} The recent work of Nicholas Dirks, among others, on the emergence of the “ethnographic state” post 1857 in India and the culmination of ethnographic knowledge in the form of colonial census on religion and caste drives this point home effectively. Equally revealing is Simon Marvin’s work, which traces the history of modern planning discipline back to French colonialism in Algeria, and Eyal Weizman’s work on occupied Palestine, which shows how the Israeli military uses critical theory to make urban landscapes transparent and strategize attacks.
to the operations of specific individuals and groups. As a response to Said’s critical provocations, this dissertation draws its inspiration from the literary work of Sadat Hasan Manto (his short stories) and adopts four strategies: first, it fictionalizes the field and presents the slum as a montage in order to dissolve the specificities of geographical location; second, it produces an inoperative account, wherein all possible values that might prove to be useful for planning policy, legal work, or normative planning models are driven out; third, it uses ethnographic stories to stage the slum locality as a set of allegorical figures and spaces; and lastly, it puts these figures, spaces, and the concepts they signify in conversation with scholars.  

1. Correspondence on Research

September 2013, Toronto, Canada

Hi Prasad,
It’s too bad you are so far away, because I feel like we are thinking through similar things. We both have been meditating on a similar question about the governance (not the right word) of the very logic of life and the moments of possibility that contest or fracture the (dominant) logic (for a second or forever, which we would normally characterize as resistance), and introduce the possibility of other logics of time/space/sociality/individuality. I always feel like you are articulating ideas that I am trying to articulate, often using different words and thinkers.

I have been thinking about time too. The places that I’m thinking about (in PEI) have really been commodified (through predictable rural tourism projects) as performances of the past. When I was 14 I had a job scooping ice cream. I had to wear a 19th century Acadian costume. It’s a funny image: a 14 year old Jew in 1997, charming the Ontario (British) tourists by presenting herself as a (English speaking) French settler whose people were deported by the British 250 years ago. There is tons of stuff going on in terms of how new times are being imposed through new work regimes of migration, and the question of time seems to be one of the biggest things that people are struggling against. When I talk to people in the east who are still in rural communities, still fishing, they talk a lot about time: their imagined time of the city. They feel like they can’t move because they don’t speak the language—the language of time. I’m trying to think how I can make my project really about understanding urbanization from the outside. Not through people who are moving there, but who have resisted for a long time (or tried at least),

68 It is in regard to this last point that I have staged a conversation between a philosopher and a cinephile, who is also a slum resident, in the Chapter on films.
connecting to transportation, commodity, and capital circuits that they feel would speed up time. Now, that ability to separate (times) is being challenged and more of them feel like they are being entered into that system (not by going to the city, but by going to mines and the oil patch), which to them is basically an urban space. People out there actually understand that the urban is a process and they, seemingly inevitably, are part of it. Even in their rural communities, they are dependent on people from Toronto to come look at their Acadian costumes—which was a struggle in the 1970s and people felt like they were losing control and autonomy. And when that state-imposed regime fails, people move that much deeper into the system through new lived experiences of time and space with the migration regime. Its phenomenological element seems to bother people, gets under their skin. It’s the product of state planning, the dismantlement of small-scale agriculture and fisheries, and driving people into (state-created) tourism industry.

There’s this one story that I love. I was flying back to Toronto from home once and I sat beside a guy who was clearly an oil worker on his way to Alberta (this happens all the time). We started talking and I asked him about his life. He works two weeks in Alberta for every week off in Nova Scotia. He hates the whole thing and makes more money than he knows what to do with, but feels like he has no other option. Then he told me this, and I said (to myself) “that’s what my dissertation is about!”: even though the time change between “home” and “work” is three hours, he never changes his watch when he gets out west. It helps him stay rooted in the east; a little part of the logic of his life is reserved, is under his control. One tiny part! One tiny little thing that probably has no material impact on his life, at least not in any way anyone could possible argue and sound sane, but I feel like it’s so significant. It was a moment of clarity for me—well, the sense of clarity. I can’t really explain what it means. That’s for the dissertation I guess.

Talk soon and thanks again for the thoughts and the ear.

k.

October, 2013
Mumbai, India

Hi Katie,

I have been thinking about postcolonial debates and its stress on cultural and contextual differences. But my recent ventures into the work of Japanese critic Kojin Karatani, Jacques Rancière, and the Frankfurt school have been pointing towards a different way of thinking—about singularity-universality rather than particularity-generality. The idea that a singular phenomenon or singular break in time make claims to universalit rather than the notion of a particular phenomenon speaking of general state of things. It opens up singular events and their ability to claim universal emancipation vis-à-vis particular claims that are appropriated into generality (or normativity).

On time, a line keeps running in my head. In an essay on writing and time Rancière speaks of a French worker who writes, “I no longer have faith in time because time is “too twisted” (here twisted means encircling). It cannot be attacked from front. One has to walk round it, to transform the space that it constructs, the gestures that it imposes. This transformation may involve a bodily disjuncture such as when in a workplace the worker’s gaze falls on the landscape and his thoughts wander into space to make his arm stop work and transform time. I am interested in these moments of interruptions,
disjuncture, bypassing time, short-circuiting time, and how those moments open up possibility without its eventuality. Isn’t *telos* or the end already the tool of capitalism (M-C-M’)? I feel your stories on time and dealing with time speak a lot about the displacing, confronting, interrupting time of capital and the state.

I think sending letters, writing emails and discussing is a great idea. All of us are doing such different works and reading different people, but there are still so many connections that can be built into each other’s work. It’s exciting to think through such connections.

pk

January, 2014
Toronto, Canada

Hi Prasad,
I would love to read your (field) update that you sent to KG. I’m so curious what you are making of all of this, and as I am getting stressed about going back east to start my “ethnographic” work. It would be good for me to read some about your experience, as your reflections tend to resonate a lot. Overall, how have you found it? Have you sorted through some of the “going home to do research” issue?

Send me an update when you have the chance!

k.

February, 2014
Toronto, Canada

Hi Prasad,
Thanks for these articles (on multi-sited ethnographies). I am realizing now I really know nothing about methods. Not so much the technicalities of it, but the politics of it all. I spent a lot of time this summer thinking about what it means to do research in a place that you know well, a place called “home”, which is what I am trying to do. And it’s so complicated and really brought to light the degree to which all of my assumptions about research are (it’s a reflection of the world . . .) rooted in ideas of apartness and outsider-ness. Objectivity even! And, obviously, in these places, there are layers of insider-ness and outsider-ness within them—geographic, classed, raced, and colonial . . . All of which make the questions much more complicated.

Every time I mention this to someone they say: There is soooo much written on that! But they never give me things to read. But, I was wondering if (a) this is something you are experiencing and struggling with in your own process and (b) if you are, if you have found useful things to read that have helped you think through it. And this is the sort of sensitive and personal (though deeply political) stuff that I feel like we otherwise shrug off. It’s hard to find patient enough spaces to talk about it all . . . but it’s really central to my research.

k.

March, 2014
New Delhi, India
Hi Katie,
What helped me (as I reflect on it now) was reading Benjamin on Proust. There is no pure objectivity in knowledge; it’s a dialectical relationship between living the thing and knowing the thing. You go back and forth, as you are suggesting a back forth between outsider-ness/insider-ness—a hybrid being of a stranger and a resident, always reflecting on what you knew or took for granted. But then a new experience or encounter transforms it.

In terms of reading: Benjamin’s Berlin Chronicle (attached below). Benjamin tries to recollect (or what he calls redeem: A Proustian redemption) memories of childhood to reflect on Berlin's fascist or capitalist becoming. His writings on encounters with telephone, his nanny, visits to places . . . are a conscious effort to write out what you know, and in writing them renew/re-know it in the present. Knowing, un-knowing and re-knowing—a process, which comes only from habit, which is what a home is (I think). Such writing also makes writing useless for its appropriation by the objective planners as well as for the capitalists.

It helped me with things that were habitually built into me. Like the matter-of-factness and being okay with walking through shit and dirt all the time. Now that I work on toilets, all those memories of watching children squat as I go to school, the smell, the visuals, the containers they use, men sitting in line at the railway tracks, or their disappearance during rains, provides new questions and makes me aware of what it means to be middle-class in the city. So I am trying to use those built memories to know more about what exists, what is taken for granted, but also unknow/reknow them through research and writing. A diary helps, when suddenly you see something and it flashes a memory—a déjà vu, and you write about it. A lot of these memories are of my parents or relatives talking about the smell of shit, disgust with slums, rain and muck, about hatred for Muslims, living next to a slum.

I realized (while doing field work) that, as academics, we are very quick, we want to decipher signs and events in a Marxist or Foucauldian or Deleuzean way; move into analysis mode quickly. But I decided (during fieldwork) to rather enjoy or lose myself and then rethink those events in writing. It means a lot of everyday encounters from past and present, which are lived and need to be redeemed (in writing). I am trying to use the same method in talking to people about their lives. I decided to not ask residents of slums about their problems, but about memories and experiences. Problems demand solutions, which is what provides objective material for planners to provide violent solutions. But writing about experiences and memories of spaces, infrastructures, or events that made them happy or sad, objects they found and kept, encounters with government officials. In a way writing about experience helps me know the life and work that goes into making slum a livable place, but also avoids from seeing the place through the lens of problem/solution . . .

pk.
June, 2014
Ottawa, Canada
Hi Prasad,
Good to hear from you. How was the fieldwork in the end?

(My) field work is ok. It's going pretty slow and I’m feeling really lost about what I am actually trying to do with my project. Who should I actually be talking to? What am I looking for in the archives? Will anyone care? What are my questions? I’m sure it's normal (but) I feel like I created this sprawling and disjointed project. And then there is the whole reality, and I will never know a fraction of the knowledge people here have. And then the other question: what is it in it for them . . . I can't answer the question: why am I doing this? I’m not collecting the sort of data that community groups need, so when I go and want to talk to people, I don’t have anything to offer them.

My plan is to stay out on the east coast for a year so I probably won’t be in Toronto when you are there. Send me an update when you have the chance!

k.

July, 2014
Toronto, Canada

Hi Katie,
I am actually not writing. Going through the material I collected to put an outline together.

The fieldwork turned out to be different than what I had intended. The project expanded beyond what I had started off with—which is looking at toilet projects. I ended up spending a lot time in the (slum) locality seeing movies, talking to people, drinking tea, walking, eating, renting out rooms in different localities, and doing some interviews by following links from one space to the other. The whole rise in surveys being done by NGOs, academics and activists about problems, have turned interviews into a problem solving exercise. I want to move away from that since the interviews I was conducting always ended up with talking about problems. It gave a glimpse into the development world of problems and solutions, which I want to move away from. I want to think of it in a more philosophical or political lens.

The question of what is it that I have to offer to them came up at two levels: one is what are the everyday things that one can work towards, and the other is a larger discursive shift in the way we “see”—where seeing is more about the experience (like in your article I read) than about abstractions through numbers and surveys, or abstraction of land into value.

How do we “write” about a place in a way that dies its own death without offering anything to the State or Capitalism to appropriate and reproduce? Reproduction is the theology of capitalism. Gramsci, Benjamin, Kafka, I feel, were attempting to work towards reproducing reality which self-closes, so that it offers no door for capitalism to enter. That’s the struggle I am trying to explore in terms of writing. Somehow the idea of
a fairytale—Grimm brothers, as well as the form of a movie helps a lot, because it’s a tale and offers nothing in terms of a telos, and yet allows for tricks to be passed on.

Re: what is it one can offer to the locality? I think the fieldwork is that exercise, rather than the final writing. To offer what we know—sharing. To give whatever I collected in terms of policy documents, legal cases, distributing cards of NGOs and lawyers, archival material, passing information across divided groups, trying to apply for grants for their projects. I am planning to apply for a grant to do a film project with a local ad-hoc filmmaker youth group in the locality about “beauty.” And second, a small community based slum redevelopment project came up in the process of the interviews. It is not a part of the PhD project but it comes up once you enter that world without having pre-ideas about what to do and offer—I think it’s a process that gets defined during (fieldwork) interactions. Initially, I went with the eye of the researcher, trying to be critical, trying to figure out the discourse, the hidden system. But it is already known to them, the answer was not to be discovered.

So two tasks came up, one is how do we reproduce an idea, something capitalism does very well—reproduction, (but) how do we mimic it to reproduce its own death. And second, how do we move away from critical distance, again which capitalism does very well. It doesn't maintain a distance but enters into every part of our lives and hits you in an experiential way. How can our work do that? Hit you, put people on the edge . . . Enter into the fairy tale world.

In terms of fieldwork, I think one needs to enter and move around like a rat in a labyrinth. And then move out at times of writing to see what we have in terms of food. That way you get to know the scene very differently and may be in terms of a fragment. But the fragment can have a lot to say about universality rather than totality. And it’s good to leave totality as a set of fragments, where a door is left open for someone else to add other bits.

Sorry for rambling, just writing out thoughts.

pk

August 2014,
Prince Edward Island, Canada

Hi Prasad,

Sorry it’s taken me so long to write back to this.

I laughed when I read this: “But in terms of fieldwork, I think one needs to enter and move around like rat in a labyrinth. And then move out at times of writing to see what we have in terms of food.” Partly because you would write something like that and mean it, and have me take it seriously and get it. And partly because I feel like that rat, but I’m running back and forth along the same passage looking for some turns. I’ll find them eventually. I guess that is part of the labyrinthine experience.
There is a lot in your email. I really relate to a lot of this. I really hear you about the problem-solving thing. And it’s an interesting thing to connect it to the history of people being studied. People here are very invested in the idea that there is a solution (and, for that matter, a problem). I spent most of the summer reading about the history of this big comprehensive social, spatial (land, industry), and economic planning project that was designed for PEI in the 1960s. I was trying to look at all the surveying and research that was undertaken in advance of the design of the plan, by planners and other professionals about peoples’ poverty, (un)productivity, and conditions of living. You know, quantifying and mapping in a comprehensive way for the first time to show the fact that there was something wrong with the place and the people. And then the answer took the form of this neat and tidy (and fucked up) comprehensive development problem that promised to solve all of these new problems. They interviewed every land owner on the island with five acres or more—would have been a huge percentage of people at the time. I feel like this is what I hear today when I talk to people . . . People have a strange way of relating to governance bodies. They are deeply suspicious but at the same time electoral politics is the only way people know how to talk about politics . . . The idea that I might be studying something to better understand how it came to be and what it means about the world we live in is incomprehensible to a lot of people. To them, research is either about problems/solutions or it is about data, collecting numbers to prove something. So, how did you manage to run your interviews in a way that got away from problems/solutions?

I think that the obsession with problem solving is a problem in and of itself. I guess maybe this is one of the things I want to do with my work. Maybe this is part of what you are saying re: reproducing an idea? That there are layers of realities and logics and that when it comes to interacting with more molar structures like research, governance, imagining “improvement”, people stick really closely to a hegemonic logic of history or something. But this is not the logic that guides daily life in so many ways—this is maybe the fairy tale moment. Finding other modes that allow the representation of these logics.I feel like people are stuck with a conversation that isn’t theirs. Like they have been given a set of ideas that they are allowed to use in their own problem solving and are not to deviate beyond that. And I get the sense that people’s adherence to these “rules” is guided by real fear. I don’t know who they think is listening.

So, yes to work hitting people. This is why we need to learn to be good writers! We need to tell stories! We also, I am learning, need to be investigative, learn to navigate the law and the state—and this I find so hard. Research is funny because you never know where you are going. It's a different sense you have to follow—not a rational one, not one that thinks too much about the future. But yeah, I am trying to trace the everyday part and the state part and it’s hard. But I like the fairy tale thing (if I get it) because I am increasingly down on the idea that I’m ever going to convince anyone of anything using logic or rational argument. Everything evil is way too naturalized. We have to appeal to other sensibilities maybe.

But I would like to hear more about how you managed your interviews. Good luck with the sorting, thinking and writing. I’ll look forward to your next update!

k.

September, 2014,
New Delhi, India
Hi Katie,
The work you are doing sounds really exciting. Hope we get a chance to speak at some point in person. Feels like we are struggling with same questions.

About interviews: I don’t think I figured it out completely. I run from interviews because they are too formal for my liking. I conducted some interviews with two basic ideas: first, to ask them (residents) questions that I am asking myself. There is a nice essay called the “Eleventh Question” in a book called *The Hub*. The Eleventh Question, they say, is the question that comes after the first ten questions of survey, and it’s a philosophical question—be it politics, about beauty, about love, about films, about strangers. So I tried as much as I could engage with residents at that level. It didn’t turn out to be philosophical in some ontological way, but in a political sense: how they see things: fucked, melancholic . . . and how does one then navigate it? I stuck to their idea of the world, rather than saying there is something hidden, which they don’t see but I will show.

The second part of it was also to allow for characters to be mixed. I feel that urban poor is a completely stripped of person, like the proletariat who has nothing but labor to sell. Urban poor—who has nothing but poverty to show. I think that it hides the bastards of the world, those scoundrels who cheat and get cheated, who work and play. I felt everyone is like that, which meant they are not “only” ultimate surplus humanity of global imperialism. But people who participate in perpetuating it and fighting it too (at the same time)—people exist in doubles. We tend to strip them into pure forms. So most of the characters I focus on were these contradictory forms, somewhat anti-heroic tricksters who are active, not passive to be woken up out of ideological sleep. Will see how it goes and what it shows.
Sorry for rambling,
 pk.

2. Constellations

Constructing constellations is a methodology I borrow from Benjamin, Adorno, and Buck-Morss (the latter elaborates on the ideas of the earlier two), as well as from slum residents whose methodologies echo those of these theorists.

Benjamin locates the use of the term constellation not just in astrology but also in primitive magic, both of which were based on a mimetic reading of transitory constellations of stars. Here, reading suggests a correspondence between transitory figures in the sky and ideas on earth. In his own work, Benjamin uses constellation as a method to break out of the
transcendentalist truth in positivism as well as the absolute truth in metaphysics. In a constellation, empirical elements of a historically specific phenomenon are reconfigured to reveal the truth as well as construct an idea. This configuration is mediated by concepts and the conceptualizing subject. These concepts in Benjamin’s work are drawn from different worlds and writers, including Marxism, the Kabbalah (Judeo-Christianity), Proust, Baudelaire, Goethe, Kafka, and Surrealism, among others. Benjamin thus grounds the method of constellation of stars within historical and dialectical materialism. In reference to its relationship to mimesis, the method allowed Benjamin to construct constellations that juxtaposed elements of contradictory phenomena to show similarities between them and in other moments to construct constellations consisting of similar elements from different phenomena to point towards a break. His writing on fashion as the eternal return of the same as new exemplifies the former, while his genealogy of the relationship between artwork and technology exemplifies the latter.

My use of constellation as a method for constructing the chapters in this dissertation is also influenced by the constellating practices observed during fieldwork. A simple example of this is the process of building a mosque in Toba Tek Nagar: three bags of cement are donated by a local contractor; land is bought in sections by convincing different residents to move incrementally; job contractors provide workers for various shifts; construction companies lend drilling machines to lay the foundation, based on their availability; the architectural design of the mosque draws its language from the world-class city discourse; some bricks are donated while others are bought from *zaqat* (donations by users in the form of animal hide or money); and the time for doing all of this is donated by residents. The mosque, like the slum itself, is a constellation of different materials, people, discourses, stories, and infrastructures that do not necessarily go together but are brought together at different moments in time to construct an urban form. While the constellating of a mosque is mediated by different concepts borrowed
from religious ethics, philanthropy, political claims, gift-ethics, among others, my aim in the following chapters is to construct constellations using elements collected during fieldwork: secondary histories of Mumbai, policy documents, and films and short stories about Mumbai. Further, these constellations are mediated by the concepts identified above. In so doing the dissertation allows the object of study in each chapter, rather than any disciplinary boundaries, to lead the way. The choice of refusing disciplinary boundaries is also related to my interest in the singularity or particularity within a phenomenon rather than its generality.

The method of constellating moves away from deduction (theory of the general observation-confirmation) as well as induction (observations-pattern-general theory), and focuses on identifying singularities within the general. For me, constellations, following Benjamin and Adorno, bring together disparate concrete elements of an empirical phenomenon in order to give an “image of the world” as contained within the elements as well as highlight the singularities within the phenomenon. These singularities point towards “specific” excess, differences, non-identities, or dissensus within the image of the world. The image of the world is a historically specific image that is not absolute or eternal, but a sedimentation of histories within which the singularities point towards a transition. While traditional induction assumes a continuum between the particular and the general, preceded by classification and systematization, these singularities point towards the possibility of certain elements eluding categorization or classification—they are indistinct. For Adorno, the elusiveness of the details, despite their small size, points towards a departure from the general.69 This departure is a rupture in the teleology (destiny) as well as tautology (equivalence). These singular elements, rescued from the general, provide the material to construct an idea as well as the possibility of things to

69 Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 76.
be otherwise. Each chapter of the dissertation constructs its own self-contained constellation that is different from the next. Each aims to provide an image of the world within which particular objects are located, and at the same time to focus on the details of the objects in order to point towards specific singularities that elude generalization. These singularities are figures, practices, material details, experiences, and spaces that point towards the impossible possibility of politics.

3. How Did I Collect These Elements?

The elements presented in the following chapters were collected through different methods, and each of the chapters has a different entry point that opened up in the process of carrying out planned fieldwork as well as breaking away from planned field methods. Let me elaborate.

The dissertation began and grew out of my initial interest in understanding the politics that shape the Mumbai Municipality’s slum sanitation project. In that sense, Chapter 3 “Kaminey,” is the kernel of the dissertation. The aim was to study five slum sanitation projects located in different parts of the city. The toilet project in Toba Tek Nagar, which is the central element of the story in Chapter 3, was one of the first toilet projects to be implemented under the program, and was the starting point of my fieldwork. My plan was to interview various actors involved with the project—the CBO in charge of operating and maintaining the toilet, the NGO that mediated between the municipality and slum residents, the municipal officers who initiated the program as well as those who executed the project, and lastly, the slum residents (the users)—and to document the physical elements of the toilet project. The aim was to understand how the planning process itself is reflected in the final object—the toilet—as well as how the object transforms the relationships among subjects—the different actors. While some of these

70 Ibid: 94.
dynamics and details were gathered as planned, most elements were documented posteriori to unplanned encounters. These encounters were guided by bodily functions and eating habits. The “nature’s call” would lead to chance encounters with different toilets in different parts of Toba Tek Nagar. Some of these toilets were operational and hence used, while some were defunct. Their use drew my attention to how these toilets operate every day as well as minute details of their physical elements. I would then follow up these encounters with interviews or informal conversations with actors connected to these toilets. These actors, in turn, would tell stories and provide references to other toilet projects. In a broader sense, the chapters that follow present the ethnographic elements collected through planned and unplanned methods. This methodology is related to my broader idea of constructing constellations (or should we say, planning) as an ensemble that provides an image of the world within which objects are located along with the unique details of objects (singularities) that break out of the constructed whole. An important point to note here is that the absence of details from the women’s section of the toilets, in Chapter 3 (as well as in the dissertation as a whole), marks the limit of my research method and also points towards my privilege to access male dominated spaces.

The second significant aspect of my fieldwork was time. The planned engagements with different actors during the initial phase of my research consisted of many gaps, specifically, gaps of time. The project grew in the process of filling these gaps by waiting and idling in different spaces: tea shops, video theaters, bureaucratic offices, NGO offices, cigarette shops, as well as walking around the locality, waiting in streets for interviewees to show up, and so on. The first chapter presents elements collected while waiting and idling in different spaces and observing what others do while they wait and idle. Appropriating the time of waiting and idling plays a significant role in how slum residents research to build slums in cities. In many instances, the research would involve investigating my presence in that space. It was only during the writing
process that I came upon the centrality of waiting and idling within research and planning methodologies. This, too, is a paradoxical method—one does nothing, but also something. This nothingness is an experience of indifference, where all means and ends get suspended, and the experience of things (stories told) in the nothingness allows for a new idea to emerge. This is what aesthetics means—a moment of indifference to all a priori forms of knowledge wherein one comes upon something new through an encounter with an-other. Chapter 1 on waiting and idling draws on these elements to show how waiting and idling, which seem like a passive endeavor, provide moments of activity. Thus waiting and idling make up a central aspect of my methodological approach to fieldwork.

One of the places I frequented during these gaps or intervals between planned research-engagements was the video theaters. My first visit was on a hot, sunny day, which described most days, except when it rained. The dark video theater provided a cool, dry space to spend time. The choice of a video theater over any other space was also guided by my love for watching films. The initial impulse while watching films in the video theater was to analyze: what films are they watching? Why? What are the connections between the elements of the film and the slum residents watching it? Is it that residents live the subaltern victory through the heroes onscreen? Do films provide an illusion and hide reality? Chapter 2: “Double Dekho” starts with these “analytical” questions, which I pose through Sudhir Mishra’s film Dharavi. It was only after a few shows that the fatigue of analyzing everything around me, as well as fatigue from fieldwork, led to several new reasons to watch these films: to escape this mental and physical fatigue and to partake of films I would otherwise not encounter in my milieu. I would watch one film a week, sometimes more. On days when I had no luck with interviews I would watch two films back to back. I watched around sixty films during the entire span of my fieldwork, most of them at the same theater (with a few exceptions), and watching the same films
more than once. These included new and old Hindi films, Hindi-dubbed English films, Bhojpuri films, and on rare occasions Hindi-dubbed Tamil films. The process of watching films had a somewhat random pattern: I would begin watching the films, then come out for a smoke during the songs; sometimes I would walk out half-way through a film to write notes about something I remembered, or to chat with the video-theater manager, or get a tea and then return; and on rare occasion, I would conduct interviews with residents whom I had met at the theater more than twice or had been introduced to by the theater manager. The elements that constitute Chapter 2, “Double Dekho,” were collected in this manner. The planned part of the research, which I developed a bit later on in the fieldwork, involved watching at least one film in video-theaters located in different parts of the locality and conducting shorter interviews with their managers. Chapter 2 presents these different elements.

Chapter 3 on waste is a result of my attempts to break away from planned interviews and to engage with residents about objects in their homes that weren’t a part of my fieldwork. I had begun my fieldwork on the toilet project by conducting broad demographic surveys of residents, problems of infrastructures, how residents avail themselves of different infrastructures, how toilets fit within a network of infrastructures, and how the new toilet project changed the political dynamics in the locality. My aim was to contextualize toilets within a broader context. These surveys were being facilitated by a cable TV operator, who I was introduced to by Abdulbhai (see Chapter 1). I had met the latter in a Human Rights Commission Office located next to the toilet project I was documenting. Often residents refused to participate in the survey, claiming that they had filled out a survey just last week (“Kal hi to survey kiya tha.” “We participated in a survey just yesterday.”). Their other frequent response to surveys was listing out problems they wanted the government to deal with. Neither of these responses provided me with insights into the everyday thoughts and actions that count towards infrastructure-building. After trying out
various permutations of interviews, I decided to break the pattern by initiating conversations 
about objects in residents’ homes that bore no relationship to my work or the questionnaire, and 
that were unrelated to issues of necessities. These objects included things such as lit fish tanks, 
flower vases, well-arranged ceramic cups and saucers, miniatures of villas, ceramic dolls, 
enlarged spoons and forks that hung on walls, Plaster of Paris motifs fixed above entrances, 
decorative curtains, doors and windows, and more. I wasn’t sure where these conversations 
would lead, but the process helped me to stop framing residents as “people concerned with 
necessity” rather than beauty, which was evident in these objects. Another reason I changed my 
method early on in my fieldwork, was my encounter with the writings of Cybermohalla 
Ensemble—an artist group in Delhi. Their three books: Cybermohalla: The Hub, No Apologies 
for the Interruption, and Trickster City,\(^{71}\) highlight the omnipresence of the “survey” as a tool of 
the state in the lives of slum residents; and in response, their writings employ a fluid and open 
approach to developing relationships between the self and the other. My exchanges with 
residents about beautiful objects led to conversations about how many of them came upon these 
objects while waste picking\(^{72}\) or bought them from the local waste recyclers. I followed up these 
exchanges with interviews with waste pickers in Toba Tek Nagar about their daily lives, the 
ongoing changes in waste management systems in the city, the closure of the nearby dumping 
ground, which would leave them unemployed, and their efforts to reclaim it. These dialogues 
were facilitated by a local NGO in Toba Tek Nagar, which had helped waste pickers in the 
locality organize themselves into a waste pickers’ organization (WPO). I followed up these 
interviews by attending meetings of the WPO; interviewing its members; making a day-long visit

\(^{71}\) Cybermohalla Ensemble, No Apologies for the Interruption (Delhi: CSDA and Impress, 2011); Trickster 
City: Writings from the Belly of the Metropolis, trans. Shveta Sarda (Delhi: Penguin India, 2010); and Cybermohalla 

\(^{72}\) The locality consists of a huge number of residents that rely on waste picking as a main occupation.
to the dumping ground (which took me four months of back and forth between different municipal offices); visiting the NGO-run waste recycling centers and interviewing its members; interviewing municipal workers and contract workers during an early morning shift on a garbage collection truck; conducting non-participant observations from a tea shop outside the dumping-ground entrance; interviewing a few municipal officers, who, incidentally, had earlier been in charge of the slum sanitation program; and lastly, by revisiting my masters’ dissertation. Chapter 4, “Cocktail Mix,” presents elements collected using these various methods.

Lastly, a number of empirical elements were collected through interviewing slum-based housing-rights activists; attending protests concerning the rights of slum residents; attending meetings regarding Mumbai’s new development plan; interviewing architects involved in slum rehabilitation schemes; interviewing secretaries of different mosques in the locality; attending community meetings and festivals; renting out units for different periods in different parts of the slum locality; walking and motor-biking around the locality; making an effort to spend as much time as possible in the locality; and paying attention to everything around without expecting a concrete result from what was being observed.

4. **A Note on Thick Description**

Most of the discussions and elaborations on the use and significance of thick description are found in debates on ethnographic writing in anthropology. While I was introduced to this research and writing form through readings in anthropology, the use of thick description in this dissertation has been influenced to a greater extent by Benjamin’s writings on his childhood, objects of mass culture, and cities, as well as a number of his other writings. As prose, they are excessive and indulgent, and they provide accounts of mundane details of the objects and
settings as well as Benjamin’s own experiences. In his book *Prisms*, Adorno described this method as an “extrapolation of the minutiae (…) in which thoughts press so close to its object, seek to touch it, smell it, taste it and thereby transform itself.”

Through this sensuousness, thoughts penetrate into depths of the object where all existing categories and classifications of the object dissolve along with the intentions of the researcher. Instead of the subject’s intentionality, the details of the object provide the lead. Objects are thus over-exposed, but only to highlight those hidden contours that reveal the difference between possibilities and impossibilities.

In her introduction to the book *Towards Cinema and Its Double*, Laleen Jayamanne provides a succinct explanation on writing descriptions as a method, and its significance to the develop of a critical praxis (film criticism in her case). To maintain the simplicity and clarity of her argument, I quote her:

> Description is critical, in the sense that it is through that move a film is apprehended or not. If the description does not move, then criticism is no more than dull copy or repetition of the object. The kind of descriptive act required cannot be determined before the encounters with a particular object, but certain guidelines seem to emerge through writing. One is to ride an impulsive move toward whatever draws one to something in the object—a color, a gesture, an edit point, a glance, a rhythm, a whatever. Enter the film through this and describe exactly what is heard and seen, and then begin to describe the film in any order whatever rather than in the order in which it unravels itself. Soon one’s own description begins not only to mimic the object, as preliminary move, but to redraw the object. This is not a betrayal of the object through an enthroning of the primacy of the subject’s narcissistic projection but rather the activation of an encounter, a means of entering the object, though not necessarily through the door marked “Enter.” An eccentric, impulsive, descriptive drive will cut the film up and link the fragments differently from the way the film is organized. It is through this montage of description that a reading might emerge.

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Following Jayammanne, this dissertation uses thick description as a way of entering the ethnographic encounter and redrawing it in order to develop a critical praxis through writing. This method, as she writes in the later part of the introduction, uses descriptions in a mimetic sense, that is, not just to redraw the object in order to enter it, but also to transform one’s thoughts as well as the object one is writing about. Following Benjamin and Jayamanne, the chapters in this dissertation provide thick descriptions of different spaces, events, and figures in the slum locality to reveal their transformative aspects as well as to highlight new political possibilities.

5. Why Tell Stories?

A final aspect of the dissertation that requires elaboration is the employment of ethnographic stories as a form of writing. Rather than elaborate, I would like to show it. The next chapter uses ethnographic elements to answer the question: Why tell Stories?
Chapter 2

Yahaan Phaltu Bethna Sakht Mana Hai\textsuperscript{75}:
Idleness, Stories, and Planning

1. The Participatory Platform

On an evening not so long ago, different apostles had assembled for a consultation workshop in a municipal office in Mumbai, India. Platonist apostles, Habermasian apostles, Saint Simonian apostles, Marxist apostles, all arrived early and occupied seats around an oval-shaped table. The municipality was preparing a development plan for Mumbai. The city survey had been completed, and the process of assigning a sociology of virtues to different pieces of land—the land-use plan—was on its way. The workshop was organized to discuss the future of slums in that imagined city.

The Habermasian apostles, the preachers of participatory planning and members of an NGO, sat at the head of the table. Next to them sat the Platonist priest. An ex-planner from the regional planning authority, the priest was a private consultant to both the municipality and the private consultants preparing the plan for the municipality. A Platonist par excellence, his aim was to establish an ideal city—a city of virtues, where justice was tied to the health of the city, and the health of the city to the right order of things. This order of things, like Plato’s Republic, was to be established on a founding story—a “noble lie.”\textsuperscript{76} The sociological survey of land, the demographic census, the policy book, and the logic of the market were the basis and the tools of his story. The noble lie was that every piece of land is to have one use only, nothing more; one form of ownership only; no mixing; and no multiplicities. For this city to function efficiently,

\textsuperscript{75} Translation: Idling here is strictly prohibited.

\textsuperscript{76} Jacques Rancière, “The Order of the City,” in \textit{The Philosopher and his Poor} (Durham: Duke University, 2004), 267-291. Jacques Rancière argues that the ideal order of the city and the order of the discourse are based on nothing more than a noble lie put forth by the king-philosopher.
people, for their part, were to simply accept the noble lie and abide by it as the rule of law. It need not be justified, only told; it need not be believed, only accepted.

The meeting commenced . . .

The Saint-Simonian apostles were the first to speak. They projected onto the screen information, cartographic maps, census data and based on these projections evoked a dreamworld of affordable housing. In this enchanted world, they said, houses could fall from heaven onto the earth, but only if the policy was right. And for the policy to be right, they needed more demographic numbers, more geographical maps, and above all a firm belief in progress and development. The Platonist priest intervened instantaneously and translated this image of heaven into a policy for earth through the cunning use of reason.

The next to speak were the Marxist apostles. They spoke of the squalor in slums and evoked the figure of the “urban poor”—that “surplus human of global capitalism dumped into the slums of the Third World.” Things could change, they said, but only if the poor revolt. The problem of the policy, the revolt, and the noble lie, however, was the only; the only, which rendered the city life put together by slum residents as an illegible “mess” or “chaos” and stripped them of all their capacities to leave them standing as “bare lives” with poverty as their only property.77

A few minutes later, the scene got a bit chaotic. The latecomers had arrived, the slum residents. The apostles had to move themselves around to make space and accommodate the latecomers to the scene of participation. As a result, the meeting was disturbed momentarily, but resumed shortly thereafter.

The different apostles finished their presentations, and the dialogue was opened up for others to speak. The meeting invariably turned into a platform for slum residents to narrate personal stories, just like in an organized housing rights protest. Stories about displacement, demolitions, bribes, all of which are intrinsic to planning process, were narrated as experienced. Some residents cried, clapped, laughed, and hooted. Others debated with apostles about legalities and calculations pertaining to their localities. The Habermasian apostles intervened, “don’t get personal or specific. We have heard that story. Does anyone have any new points on slums?” The rational discourse was getting too personal and repetitive. The Habermasians demanded that comments be restricted to generalities so that they are useful to that third person, towards which every consultative dialogue is directed—the state, the judge, and the planner. Despite the warnings, the residents continued to narrate stories.

The Platonist priest sat silently during this whole time. He was unable to respond to these stories the same way that he could to the other apostles. The constraint seemed to be the impossibility of translating these stories into a reasonable policy: the impossibility built into the aesthetics of knowledge to partition rational speech from the cacophony of tales, knowledge from experience, and the science of planning from the art of storytelling; the impossibility to separate what counts as knowledge, who possess it, and hence who can partake in democracy, from those unqualified to do so. In such a context, why tell stories?

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78 At a protest organized by the Ghar Bachao Banao Andolan (Save Houses, Build Houses) against slum demolitions the scene was similar to the meeting. The protest began with a march to the municipal ward office. After reaching it, the protesters, primarily slum residents, seated themselves on the road and blocked off the entrance of the ward office. After a short speech by prominent activists, different slum residents came up to the front and began narrating stories through a handheld speaker. These stories were about demolitions, corruption, bribery, and they pointed particularly towards the arbitrariness of state planning. The stories I heard there were similar to the ones narrated at the consultation workshop.

2. Three Locations

This chapter explores the relationship between urban politics and storytelling through an ethnography of common spaces in Toba Tek Nagar. Specifically, it shows how slum residents engage in storytelling while idling in common spaces, the form of storytelling publics that get constellated in the process, and the significance of these spaces and practices to planning individual and collective lives in cities. In showing this, my broader aim is to highlight the limits of present planning theories and to identify the political possibilities and impossibilities that are at play in the spaces and practices described here. However, I neither propose detaching these possibilities from these spaces and replicating them nor do I imply that storytelling is oppositional to planning. Doing so would be problematic on two accounts. First, as I demonstrate in this chapter, storytelling practices are embedded in an excess of time and space, and second, stories entail a mimetic correspondence between acquaintances and strangers, storytelling and planning, spaces and practices, events and the everyday, excess and utility. Thus, translating stories into normative forms or formalizing storytelling into functionalist practices would dilute the dialectical power. To demonstrate this paradox, let me begin by contextualizing storytelling in three locations: planning, politics and publics, and urban alienation.

3. Location 1: Planning as Consensus

Over the last few decades, communicative planning theory, which emerged in the United States and northwest Europe in late 1980s, has gained much traction in planning pedagogy and practice across the globe.\(^{80}\) Disillusioned with modernist thinking and technocratic planning,
communicative planning theory broke away from the dominance of positivist and individualist orientation in science and emphasized socially produced norms and practices. Planning theorists, as Watson tells us, were persuaded by the idea that social movements in liberal democracies, and the development of civil society more generally, held the key to social transformation. Jürgen Habermas’s writings on communicative rationality and his conception of the “Public Sphere” provided the key foundation for their approach.

Based on a historical narrative of circulation of newspapers, printed books, trading journals, as well as informal discussions in different public spaces in eighteenth century Europe, Habermas theorized the Public Sphere as a realm of social life that mediates between society and the state. The Public Sphere, he proposed, is an autonomous political space where critical public discussions could be held institutionally to produce public opinions on matters of common interests. For this sphere to function appropriately, Habermas set forth two rules: first, access should be guaranteed to all citizens, and second, participants should bracket their individual interests and social status so as to engage in an impersonal and rational discourse on public issues.

Planning theorists such as John Forester and Patsy Healey, among others, drew inspiration from Habermas to pose rational communication as the most important aspect of planning practice. It is possible, they argued, for rational and inherently democratic human beings to reach consensus and coordinate action through a deliberative planning process. Such a process, Healey suggested, could address the “democratic deficit” between the state and civil

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society, recover a new participatory realization of democracy, and reconstitute a vigorous and inclusive public realm that could focus the activity of governance according to the concerns of civil society. The state in this schema, as Watson points out, was downgraded as a role player relative to non-state actors, and the civil society was staged as the main standard-bearer.

a. Practice Stories
Aligned with this communicative approach, Forester suggested that the critical question to be asked by planners and planning researchers is not “what to do,” but rather “how they really did it.” Collecting “practice stories,” he argued, could show how planners negotiate, mediate, and practice in a world characterized by multiple stakeholders and power relations; how they facilitate interactions among different groups; and how they reconcile differences in order to produce a consensus and a course of action. The planners in his formulation are “agents,” that is, mediators and facilitators, whose role is to interact with stakeholders, facilitate community involvement, help form rational arguments, and build coalitions across different groups at different scales.

b. Rethinking Practice Stories from the Postcolony
Forester’s 2006 article, in which he makes an explicit call for collecting practice stories, was a revised version of his public talk at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The article argued that South African planners and researchers could critically appropriate practice stories from the Euro-American context to reveal how planners work in their own context. However,

83 Forester’s use of the term planner includes community leaders, planners, community organizers, and public administrators.
Ananya Roy challenged Forester by critiquing three conjectures that form the basis of his larger argument.  

First, Roy draws on urban scholars from Sub-Saharan Africa to argue that the “urban practices” that constitute and shape cities in places like South Africa are not just incongruous but also are in conflict with the planning rationalities that underlie Forester’s proposition. Second, the “actor” that animates Forester’s “practice stories,” and the agency he ascribes to it, are in disjunction with the urban actors that navigate and negotiate their way through the time-space of uncertainties in postcolonial cities. And third, planning approaches based on consensus and civil society fail to recognize the colonial and postcolonial histories that have produced “deep differences” between social groups and blurred boundaries between civil society and the state in postcolonial cities.

Having challenged these tenets, Roy identifies a few ways to rethink planning from and in postcolonial cities: In postcolonial contexts, where cities and its states are informalized under global capitalism, what is the relationship between planning, as a future-oriented and place-centered enterprise, and urban life, which is embedded in uncertainty and fleeting social forms? In urban contexts characterized by inter-group conflicts, factionalism, and deep differences, who constitutes the “public” of planning action, and how can a consensual model of planning deal with irreconcilable differences? In contexts shaped by uncertain futures and under-resourced conditions, how do people negotiate with time and space, and what ideas of time and space can shape planning? And lastly, in contexts where the gap between planning rationalities of the state, the market, and the urban poor is increasing, how do we theorize planning from the standpoint of

conflicts? The stories that respond to these questions, Roy states, are the “practice stories I would love to hear.”  

4. Location II: Politics, Publics, and Stories

Dissensus, Jacques Rancière claims, is the essence of politics. Politics as a process of producing consensus through rational communication, Rancière argues, is always based on introducing qualifications such as rational speech, universal citizenship, discoursing over common interests rather than private needs, speaking in the public realm, and so on. In this schema, words uttered with respect to private interests are always already illegitimate with regards to domestic matters and find no place in the public realm. Such qualifications, Rancière argues, predetermine what is proper to politics, who is qualified to participate, and which is the proper space where politics can be performed, and in doing so, partition those qualified and counted as fit for democracy—ruling and being ruled—from the uncounted and unaccounted. At the level of sense, such politics, like police, Rancière argues, divide the common world of sense—the common sense—into what is visible, audible, sayable, and doable, based on specific rules of perception.

Contradistinctively, for Rancière, politics is a paradox that involves not just revealing the presence of two separate worlds but also producing a rupture in the logic of qualifications that divide the common world. Together, they form a paradoxical act of revealing the partitioning of the common world at the very moment of connecting them as being in common. Further, politics, he suggests, has no proper place. Rather, it involves transforming and qualifying a private world

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85 Ibid: 626.
as a political realm; that is, transforming a space where stories count as nothing but repetitive cries, like the consultation workshop, into a stage for the appearance of the invisible, the unsayable, and the inaudible, and qualifying them as legible. The principle subjects of this politics, he argues, are those with no qualifications to rule. The city is one such locus that holds out the possibility of those who have “no part in anything” becoming “anyone at all.”

In his writings on African and Asian cities, AbdouMaliq Simone reworks Rancière’s formulation to articulate a concept of politics with a specific reference to city life. He argues that there seems to be so much that takes place in a city that isn’t seen or said, but yet exerts a force on all other acknowledged existences. Such stagings, however, are often violently foreclosed.

Politics in such a context entails inventing a platform or a device through which: the cacophony of urban voices are made audible and become understood, and on which speakers are made visible. What is given an objective status is put into question by making visible that which has not been visible under the optics of a given perceptive field. It is given a “name,” not necessarily a “right name” but, nevertheless, a designation. This name is a technique and an instrument that allows something to affect and be affected. However, such platforms and devices are temporally provisional and they disappear at the moment of their appearance. Politics, I posit, is not an ideal social form or a state but an incessant movement.

In his book City Life from Jakarta to Dakar, Simone proposes a notion of “publics” in line with this form of politics. Publics, he argues, are forms of being together or of being

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88 AbdouMaliq Simone, City life from Jakarta to Dakar: movements at the crossroads (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 41.


90 Simone’s conception of publics is inspired by Warner, “Publics and counterpublics”. Simone, City Life from Jakarta to Dakar, 117.
connected that go beyond what a person does and where he/she/they lives or comes from. They are a form of connection, a way of feeling that one is operating in a larger common arena without needing any specific criteria of membership or belonging that can be identified, measured, or referenced. To be part of a public is to be part of a larger audience, a larger set of addressees, which is not predetermined by a specific character or identity, but comes into being simply by sharing an experience or an event. In any public, ideas, actions, questions, and provocations communicated by a specific set of actors can be potentially opened up by others to a wider set of uses than originally intended. These shared experiences, Simone suggests, affect ways of thinking and living in a wide range of contexts, where they can be put to work in multiple ways.

Instead of people coming together to consensually decide the markers of identity and common rules of participation, the public in Simone’s reading is a matter of projecting, a way of talking and regarding, which goes beyond the specificity of one’s life situation. This act of projecting is an appeal for a consideration of how that specificity may be recognized by someone else in their specific situation and put to use by them in other ways. In other words, the gesture of speaking or acting in a public is always open to translation. A public advertises its very existence to be something other than what it may appear to be. Such a conception of public helps locate an intersection between politics and publics, where stories—that is, the staging of one’s experience—allow one to partake in a common world. By partaking, Simone refers to anyone’s capacity of affecting and being affected by others, similar to Rancière’s notion of democracy as partaking in ruling and being ruled by others.

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91 Ibid: 118.
92 Ibid: 119.
5. **Location III: Poverty, Experience, and Stories**

I had accompanied my colleagues for their meeting with a few residents of Toba Tek Nagar. These residents, five men, were building contractors. They were trying to acquire a contract for repairing dilapidated infrastructures in a Rehabilitation and Resettlement scheme (RnR) from the city development authority. The RnR scheme, located at the southern edge of Toba Tek Nagar, was a cluster of six high-rise buildings that rehabilitated the slum residents displaced under Mumbai’s Urban Transportation Project in 1997. The trend under the RnR scheme, which was formulated by the state government and approved by the World Bank, was to relocate displaced slum residents from high real-estate areas into high-rises in low real-estate areas in peripheral suburbs. The high-rises near Toba Tek Nagar, like those in most RnR schemes, were built with minimal safety regulations or construction standards and insufficient infrastructures, and they had been dilapidating over years. The resident-contractors, with whom we were meeting, were trying to repair some of the infrastructural issues in order to prolong the life of the high-rises as well as acquire a work contract. Halfway through the meeting, my colleague asked the resident-contractors, “Why is it that the collaborative practices of building infrastructures in slums disappear in the RnR schemes? How did they dilapidate in the first place?” After thinking for a bit, one of the contractors answered, the “social relations developed in a habitat over years disappear when habitats get demolished and rehabilitated on terms that aren’t one’s own; what is built over years gets taken away.”

In her historical analysis of slum evictions and demolitions in Mumbai (1950–2016), Liza Weinstein argues that such politically costly and violent acts cannot be explained solely through notions of political patronage or accumulation by dispossession. Instead, they have to be understood as a display of state’s sovereign control over the city space. Through demolitions the state communicates to local power brokers, to the city’s business community, as well as to non-
local investors, that the state possesses the authority over these spaces and could carry out redevelopment if it chose to. While the larger purpose of demolition and eviction is sovereign control, the form and the rationale to conduct these acts, Weinstein suggests, is particular to specific historical moments. In his essay on demolitions and evictions of hawkers in Mumbai, Arvind Rajagopal argues that such violent state acts are inseparable from the economic relations under Indian capitalism. The law sanctions demolitions in order to protect a specific regime of value and order that gets threatened by the politico-economic relations forged by hawkers and slum residents. For Rajagopal, violent erasures and its aesthetization is significant to the creation of a neoliberal regime of accumulation and the enforcement of a commodity aesthetics. An illuminating instance of this relationship between aesthetisation of violence and the enforcement of commodity aesthetics is the television ad of a global tea brand in his essay.

The ad shows a bulldozer, flanked by sinister-looking figures, demolishing undefined shanties on the street…. A swarthy, bearded man wearing dark glasses sits in the shadowy interior of a white car, peering intermittently at a man in lawyer’s costume and his henchmen as they direct the demolition. Facing the bulldozer is a young woman in a white sari, drinking tea. Her attire suggests she is a social worker or an activist. The camera pauses a moment to focus on the glass of tea in the woman’s hand. A roadside tea stall is being demolished, and the woman has decided to resist it. Sitting in front of the bulldozer, the woman challenges the man at its wheel to run over her. A sharp exchange of words results in the bulldozer operator taking to his heels, while the crowd lies down all around the machine. Brooke Bond A-1 kadak chaap works its magic, and an unarmed woman triumphs over a gang of toughs.

In an aestheticized global market economy, where branded tea is to replace the local teashop, the pheriwalas are made invisible in both, the material and the representational space.

The violence of displacement and alienation from habitat brings to mind the anthology of writings, by a group of young writers, entitled *Trickster City*. The section titled “Eviction” is a collection of blog posts and a field diary as well as later time reflections on urban eviction in New Delhi. On April 1, 2005, Rakesh Khairalia writes in “Like a slow fire spreading through a dense forest”:

Wind, space, objects, time—everything turns to oblivion when the terror that fills the heart appears before the eyes. That sight which makes one tremble, when it finally manifests, makes the body feel as if it’s being stung by a thousand needles. Right now, the tearing down of houses in the settlement is in progress.

On March 30, 2006, Suraj Rai writes in “Remains”:

It takes many kinds of people, from different kinds of environments, to come together and make a settlement. But at this time, when the settlement is being demolished, everyone looks alike. The same kind of household things, the same kinds of wished—gathering which all of them prepare to leave for a new place…. Many people have emptied their houses. But they have left their shadows behind on the walls. Each wall tells of those who lived by it. It’s as if people leave, but the stubbornness and desires they lived with remains, printed on the walls.

In “Spreading in the air,” March 31, 2007, Rai writes again:

It takes many years for a place to become a settlement, but a settlement is turned barren in merely two days. All around things are being broken, felled. Some people are watching houses being pulled down. Each time dust rises when a house falls, they don’t turn their faces away. They seem to be trying to take it all in. They had plastered the walls and roofs of their houses with memories. Today those memories have turned into dust and are spreading out in the air.

In “Objects of desire,” April 20, 2006, Neelofar writes:

I think there are two kinds of objects in a home—those that fulfill our needs and those that express our desires. When we leave our homes, we leave behind our desires, and take along with us those things which fulfill some necessity.

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98 Ibid: 151–152.
100 Ibid: 155.
Filled with observations, notes, questions, and thoughts, the words of these writers recount the disappearance of their homes while creating a new language to express such violent urban experiences.102 Memories, experiences, and desires, which reside in other individuals as much as in things and spaces, built through years, get demolished, leaving people with necessities. Experience has indeed fallen in value.

In his 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin tells us that with modern capitalism, “experience has fallen in value, we are impoverished.”103 The shocks and rhythms of modern industrial capitalism, the fast-paced urban life, modern technology, modern warfare, economic inflation, and the rise of information culture, he suggested, have diminished the capacity to experience and tell a story about that experience. During the same period, as scholars of colonial histories and discourses show, modern capitalism under colonialism was accompanied by modern forms of information, bureaucracy, and disciplinary practices, and was transported to the colonies and tested in areas spanning from governance to culture (music, planning, architecture, governance, education, and religion). It was this rationalization, or the disenchantment of life through the cunning use of reason, and its re-enchantment through aestheticization of violence that Benjamin associates with the poverty of experience and death of storytelling. Both reason and myth, he tells us, have cast their spell on humankind. Exploitation, for Benjamin, was a cognitive category, not an economic one—it injured every one of the human senses, paralyzing the imagination of the subject, alienating the subject from itself.104

Buck-Morss’s article “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics” is erudite on Benjamin’s conception of cognitive experience and its alienation.105

Benjamin’s understanding of modern experience, Buck-Morss tells us, was neurological and centered on shock. Drawing on Freud’s insights that consciousness is a shield protecting the organism from trauma of excessive stimuli by preventing their retention as memory, Benjamin suggested that without the depth of memory, a subject’s experience is impoverished.106 While Freud was thinking of shocks experienced during war, Benjamin argued that in the modern world, and particularly in the modern city, the battlefield experience of shock had become a norm. Perceptions that occasioned conscious reflections were now the source of excessive shock-impulses that consciousness must evade. Memory is thus replaced by automated response, and without this depth of memory, experience is impoverished. What Benjamin had in mind, Buck-Morss suggests, were two things: first, the automated, mechanized system of production, which sectioned time into a sequence of repetitive moments without development and forced the body (like Charlie Chaplin’s broken movements) to mimetically adapt to these movements as a sort of

105 Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” 13. The senses, Buck-Morss suggests, are effects of the nervous system, composed of hundreds of billions of neurons extending from the body surfaces through the spinal cord to the brain. This sensory circuit is not contained within the body’s limits, but is part of a culturally specific and historically transient external world. The world is the source of stimuli and the arena of motor response. The sensory circuit, which extends from the nervous system to the external world and back, corresponds to experience as a mediator between the subject and the object. According to Buck-Morss, this aesthetic system, composed of sensory circuits, stimuli, and motor responses, as well as internal images of memory and anticipation, constitutes a “synaesthetic system.”

106 In his essay “The Public Realm,” Richard Sennett (1974) traces how the realm of the public as a proper domain for free speech got formed. In Simmel’s conception of the metropolis, he argues that individuals in the city withdrew their emotional beings and became rational to protect themselves from the over stimulation of the city (Simmel, 1969). It was a necessary withdrawal of the emotional and at the same time a construction of the rational. Thus strangers in the city developed a new way of relating; without giving out to much information they developed a new code of being with each other in the same space—bodily gestures, lack of staring, peeking and glimpsing, hand-shakes, raised eyebrows. It was a way of being within the same space, understanding each other without voice, but still developing a stranger relationality where everyone could coexist and understand each other. The shift to speech occurs, with Arendt, who took Simmel’s rational individual as repressive and opened onto him a public domain, wherein he could exercise the right to free speech, not as someone attached to a class or race but as a mere being. Arendt’s formulation, Sennett suggests, shifts the role of bodily politics and body politic from movement and gestures to speech and writing. Richard Sennett, “The Public Realm,” in The Blackwell City Reader, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (New York: Blackwell, 2010): 261–272.
shock absorber. And second, the alienation of the workers from their product that is produced through this process—“the article being worked on comes within the range of action and moves away from him just as arbitrarily. It injured every one of the human senses, paralyzing the imagination of the worker.”107 “The body feels,” Kharalia writes in “Eviction,” “as if it’s being stung by a thousand needles.”108 For Benjamin, sensory alienation lies at the source of the aestheticization of politics under fascism as well as capitalism. His response to alienation was to politicize art, that is, to undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium and to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses through use of new technologies.

However, I find it rather strange for someone like Benjamin, whose entire oeuvre was dedicated to evoking life in dead and petrified objects through what he referred to as child’s play, to announce a death—a death of experience and the art of storytelling. I want to take up the task of giving experience and the art of storytelling a new life. And what better way to do this than through children’s fairy tales. With the words “once upon a time,” as Benjamin puts it, children get transported into an enchanted world where they learn cunning tricks to outwit with courage the hellish spell cast on humankind. As Michael Taussig suggests, “(i)n the figure of the fool, the tale shows us how mankind can act dumb before the myth, and the wisest thing it teaches is to meet the forces of the mythical world with courage, high spirits, and cunning. . . .”109 In contrast to Hegel’s cunning of reason, Benjamin saw in fairy tales a different kind of cunning110—a

108 Tabassum et.al, Trickster City, 152.
110 For Hegel, cunning of reason is the process by which reason itself finds its absolute meaning, its freedom. In this process, reason uses the passion of powerful rulers and nation-states to achieve its freedom. For Hegel, the realization of this reason was itself the goal of history. For Benjamin, Hegel’s cunning of reason is a process by which reason finds its emancipation while humans remained colonized by the myth of progress that is hidden in the idea of linear historical progress. For a detailed discussion on the different takes on cunning in Hegel and Benjamin see, Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, 272.
cunning of tricks by which children could shake off the nightmare of reason and capitalism, and in doing so, get emancipated—a fairy tale ending.

Storytelling, Taussig tells us, is similar to the mimetic practices of shamans, who use storytelling as a form of healing. Using certain objects, shamans conjure a story, a mental image of the form of power from which one was to be healed.\footnote{Michael Taussig, “The Stories Things Tell and Why They Tell Them,” \textit{E-Flux} 36 (July 2012), accessed March 10, 2013, \url{http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-stories-things-tell-and-why-they-tell-them/}.} The object becomes crucial, as it holds within it the memory of the contact—the lived experience, and also stands in for the tool through which the spell was cast. Thus storytelling, Taussig (following Benjamin) tells us, is an act of mimesis: using an object to call on a past experience and re-tell it in order to heal or release the subject from the spell. The notion of mimesis: the dialectical play between similarity and alterity, between the self and the other, lies at the heart of Benjamin’s theory of knowledge.\footnote{I will keep coming back to this idea throughout this dissertation.}

Experiences, he suggests, are nothing but lived similarities. Thus folk tales emerged as the passing on of lived similarities or experiences by artisans, tillers, and traders as pieces of wisdom about everyday practicalities. Storytelling thus culminates in wisdom, just as, for its part, wisdom often substantiates itself as story. For this reason, the storyteller is always someone who knows what has to be done. But to receive counsel, you have to share something too—a story. So to give the dead art of storytelling a new life and to pass on some counsel and wisdom on the practicalities of planning, I wish to go back and play a trick on Benjamin himself. What I have in mind is inverting the relationship he establishes between poverty of experience and the death of storytelling, by telling stories about spaces in Toba Tek Nagar, where experiences of poverty often get translated into stories. But before that . . .
6. . . . A Note on Spaces of Storytelling

In his historical study of the urban space, *adda*, Dipesh Chakrabarty explores a similar theme.\(^\text{113}\)

Drawing on literary and historical sources, he shows how the *adda* was instrumental to transgressing boundaries of gendered and undemocratic participation in urban Bengal. The *adda*, unlike civil society, was an anti-teleological space. It was a space for idle talk, literary circulation, and conversational pleasures. In Chakrabarty’s words, the *adda* was

> “a site where several of the classic and endless debates of modernity played out—discipline versus laziness, women’s confinement in the domestic sphere versus their participation in the public sphere, separation of male and female domains versus a shared public life for both groups, leisure classes versus the laboring classes, an openness to the world versus the responsibilities of domestic life, and other related issues.”\(^\text{114}\)

The culture of *addabazi*, he suggests, was important in establishing a sense of home and belonging among the urban middle-classes in the face of an emerging modern capitalism. In the present context, wherein slum residents are alienated from their localities through demolitions and rehabilitations, I intend to explore a similar set of paradoxical spaces in Toba Tek Nagar.

However, while Chakrabarty approaches the *adda* through Heidegger’s notion of dwelling as a cultural practice—a way of being and belonging in the face of an effacing modern capitalism, I hope to diverge from his notion of culture and explore the aesthetics of specific common spaces in Toba Tek Nagar as archives of stories told by slum residents while waiting and idling in these spaces. So who is telling stories in Toba Tek Nagar, about what, and where?

\(^\text{113}\) It is difficult to define an *adda*. The essay in Chakrabarty’s book uses literary as well as other historical sources to complicate the definitions as well as to point out specificities of what makes up an *adda*. But to put it simply using his own words: “The word *adda* (pronounced “uddah”) is translated by the Bengali linguist Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay as “a place” for “careless talk with boon companions” or “the chats of intimate friends”. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Adda, Calcutta: dwelling in modernity,” in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 180.

\(^\text{114}\) Ibid, 212.
7. **Bureaucratic Spaces and Objects**

Of the present, we know that the state apparatus, more than ever before, increasingly operates through newer forms of governmentalities that rely on bureaucratic objects and associated practices. The aura of these objects lies in its uniqueness and authenticity; thus UID is a Unique Identifying Number given to every individual. But it is also essential that for a policy to be addressed to everyone this uniqueness be ascribed to everyone. Thus it requires, as Ravi Sundaram’s\(^{115}\) work highlights, everyone to be identified by these objects, and also for everyone to identify themselves with these objects. So everyone today walks around with a number of identity cards, pan cards, voter IDs, licenses, Aadhar cards, official papers, documents, files, and bills—what Veena Das calls the “signature of the state.”\(^ {116}\) These bureaucratic objects draw their power from the arbitrariness of the sign—the Kafkaesque world of modern bureaucracy.

The sovereign power to define the arbitrary semiotic relation through a language system, like in a development plan with its color codes, allows the state to identify people and things within a specific perceptual frame and construct an order of things. However, the bureaucratic object, as Matthew Hull’s work has shown, is also an artifact, that is, a material object that circulates, that duplicates, that gets forged, torn, burnt.\(^ {117}\) It is this materiality, he argues, that allows people to change the semiotic relation and contest state power. Besides language and materiality, the object of modern bureaucracy also holds a third concept: mimesis. In his book *Mimesis and Alterity*, Taussig shows how modern technologies of bureaucracy are mimetic in nature.\(^ {118}\) This involves producing a copy—a material and semiotic copy, through bodily contact, such as


\(^{118}\) Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, 53.
photographs and fingerprints. This same mimesis, with its copy and contact, is also at play in storytelling forms such as dance, folk tales, and fairy tales. This bodily contact, its sensuous knowledge, and the storytelling that goes along with it, is visible in the everyday life outside the ration card office in Toba Tek Nagar.

The ration card office is located on the south-most side of the locality. It is a small cream-colored building with an extended asbestos roof and concrete seats. While the clerk shouts out particular residents’ names, others remain seated under the roof. The bodily knowledge of the space is evident in the ways in which the residents sit: legs folded, bodies rested against the wall, avoiding the burning sun, the cracks and spit. These bodily gestures speak of their repeated visits to the place and a tactility through which they know the place. If waiting, as Kafka hints in his short anecdote “Before the Law” (photomontage above), is an essential part of the enchantment of modern bureaucracy, conversations too begin with this time of waiting: “Which officer arrives at what time and at which window; which clerk or peon is more helpful; why is someone there, why someone’s work got done, why someone else’s didn’t, which officer to go to or which officer to avoid.” The tricks of navigating the bureaucratic world, based on one’s experience of repeated visits to the office, get shared outside the ration office. The everyday and repetitive encounters with bureaucracy become a way of understanding the modern architecture of governance. These mundane tricks then circulate into other spheres through stories told in different spaces. An instance of this circulation was the identity cards issuing process at a balwadi in Toba Tek Nagar.  

The balwadis provide pre-school education to children in the age group of 3–5 years. These are run in urban areas where children from low-income families do not have access to an Anganwadi center run by the government or any other pre-school facility run by the private sector including other NGOs. The Waste Pickers Organization does not have an office of its own and hence uses different spaces to hold their monthly meetings. This specific balwadi was housed in an extension to a community toilet block in the neighborhood. Subhash Mitra Mandal, the
8. **Balwadi**

I was waiting that day to interview Nargis at the *balwadi*. Nargis, the head of a waste-pickers organization, was one of the few Muslim women who had initiated the waste pickers’ organization (WPO) as well as a self-help group for women in her neighborhood. Having lived in the non-regularized part of the locality, which gets demolished every three to four years, she had worked with *Medhatai* on housing rights early on. As the head of the organization and an

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*Figure 2.1: Before the Law (Screenshots from Dir: Orson Welles, 1962, *The Trial*)*

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neighborhood organization, had built the *balwadi* using contributions from residents. The space was then rented out to local as well as other NGOs to run day-care centers for infants or organize monthly events in the neighborhood. Medha Patkar is a prominent social activist. She was involved in founding the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, the National Alliance of People’s Movement (NAPM), and in recent years, the *Ghar Bachao Ghar Banao Andolan*, a housing rights movement in Mumbai.
activist, she had visited different cities, met new people, learnt about their experiences, and attended various protests. At the *balwadi* that day, Nargis was filling out forms, collecting identity proofs, and issuing WPO ID cards.

Three men in their early thirties were crowding around her waiting for their chance while also observing, making a list of the required documents, and simultaneously informing others about the event on their mobile phones. Two women, recent migrants to the area, were at the table to register themselves as members of the WPO. “Which dumping ground do you work on?” Nargis asked. Unaware of the formal name, they simply pointed in the direction of the landfill. “Toba Tek Nagar Dumping!” Nargis replied sternly. “What do you collect? Which WPO are you a part of?” Without waiting for an answer she filled out the forms and answered the questions herself. The process of issuing ID cards had turned into a theatrical storytelling. Nargis was
mimicking her experience with the municipal officers, thus training the women to mimic her when they flash their new ID cards at the entrance of the landfill next time around. Without explaining, in a Homeric style, Nargis was conveying her past experiences and passing them on to the new waste pickers. “A wrong answer,” as she told me later, “can cost you your entry to work.” Here, mimicking at the flash of a card became an act of tricking the cunning of Reason with a different cunningness; one that is akin to fairy tales, where past encounters with evil mythic powers, and the tricks through which one could get the better of them, are passed on to a new generation of children or waste pickers through tales.

The story went on. When asked for ID-proofs, the women had none. Here the ID card, or rather its absence became the subject and object of the story. The women began narrating the story of how and why they came to reside in Toba Tek Nagar. Three young men, waiting at the balwadi for their chance, began recollecting their stories of arrival, whom they contacted to get ID cards and residence proofs, the purpose of the waste-pickers’ ID cards, its procedures as well as its importance, how without paper work the waste-pickers and the organization would risk access to the ground, and yet, they complained about its arbitrary nature, since urban waste was their livelihood. The storytelling then moved outside the balwadi onto the concrete benches, where others were waiting for their turn or for their family members to get the required documents. People began comparing documents, signatures, photographs, recollecting stories of how they acquired these documents, the tricks they use to fasten the process as well as the tricks shared inside the office. Such story telling about bureaucracy and bureaucratic objects has become an everyday activity in Toba Tek Nagar. Through this activity, the state-objects get steered towards their afterlife, where the intentionality of objects gets interrupted and questioned.
9. Human Rights Commission Office

Idleness: time slows down, a mild boredom takes over, and senses heighten. Boredom, the character essential for storytelling, as Benjamin tells us, was the main reason for Abdulbhai and his friends to gather at the Human Rights Commission office during the twilight hours—neither day nor night. 121

I met Abdulbhai during my research on the Human Rights Commission offices in Toba Tek Nagar. I have renamed him Abdulbhai because of his resemblance to the character Abdul from the movie Shaan (1980). The character in the film sings “Naam abdul hai mera sabpe nazar rakhta hu” (“My name is Abdul and I keep an eye on everyone”) and is the go to guy for any kind of counsel or information.122 Located in the back alley of the Nagori teashop,123 Abdulbhai’s Human Rights Commission office has a peculiar character. Bright blue in color, the office has a small table with a computer, where he checks his Facebook page in English language, which he cannot read but deciphers as images. A sheet of glass covers the table and in between the table and the glass is a photocopy of the only map of the area made by the municipality in the 1970s. Next to it are three books on planning regulations for slums and a few files with grievances filed by local residents. Storytelling has become somewhat of an evening ritual for Abdulbhai and his friends. The ritual begins by randomly placing different objects on the table each day: an electricity bill, an Aadhar card, a PAN card, a driving license, a pocket-photo of Mecca, a bureaucratic file, ration card, the development plan of the locality, or slum policy books. The men then take turns discussing these different objects and narrating stories about different related encounters. As they go around, their recollections are interspersed with

122 See Figure 4, which is a set of screenshots of Abdul from the movie.
123 The section on the Nagori Teashop is below.
short stories by Abdulbhai. For example, on the allusion of the meter reading on the electricity bill by someone on one such evening, Abdulbhai narrated stories of the first transformer in the locality, his meetings with the politician who brought electricity to the area, the illegal electricity connections, and the use of a legal connection to accumulate bills as proof of residence.

Abdulbhai was a tout in his past life. He was involved in stealing electricity and water, occupying and selling land, striking deals with local party members to reclaim land. He gave it all up and started a Human Rights Commission office. He was well traveled in the world of bureaucracy and development. He narrated stories of dusty files in the filthy small municipal offices, of the enormous wooden tables behind which sat small sized powerful officials with an enormous photographs of a waterfall hanging behind them; of his encounters with clerks in white safari suits who transported files from one table to the other through the lobbies and corridors of government offices; of visits from the district collector’s officials who sought his help with the data that had burnt in a recent fire at the Mantralaya; of the fights and attacks at night that he had had with other touts over illegal land occupations and sale, and of why he left that work. Often, he would request me to get him new policy books on slums and municipal plans. He would then sit with me and narrate stories of old mosques, infrastructural objects, and demolished slums, and of how they have disappeared from municipal surveys. Arbitrariness of the state and the sheer excess of capital in land deals were the other themes of his stories. He would often describe them through architecture, objects, and spaces. A story he often narrated was of the maze of corridors in a developer’s office. At the end of the maze, he says, was a hidden room, dark with just one tube-light, where huge piles of cash were stored to strike deals. To my mind, Abdulbhai was like Kafka’s assistant. He had traveled the world of bureaucracy and development, but was neither a member of, nor a stranger to, any of the groups; just a messenger of stories from one place to the other. In the two years that I met him regularly, never did he tell me what he did for a living.
Here, the space in which stories are told is significant to the act of storytelling. A Human Rights Commissions office—an office established in the slum for making people aware of their rights and providing them institutional support for the same. But the Human Rights Commission offices in Toba Tek Nagar are multifunctional. Most often, they are institutionally run by touts or aspiring politicians. They deal with problems of divorce, family, labor, domestic violence, election campaigns, and acquiring ID cards, and they function as gathering spaces for old and young men in the evenings. Each complaint made by a local resident is archived in files. The issues are resolved personally as well as officially, since the heads of these offices know the local residents and are involved in the affairs of the community in more than an official standing. Deals for reclaiming land, dealing with municipal contractors for civil work, supervising civil work, dealing with politicians to avoid hassles of land reclamation, assuring political support of politicians for civil work are all conducted in this space over conversations and mobile phones. Through these everyday occurrences the office becomes a common space where the dialectical tensions between personal and impersonal, rights and politics, and planning and non-planning get played out in order to create new urban forms in the locality.

10. Mosques

During an interview with the secretary of a local mosque, I asked him about the significance of mosques as a space in the locality. He suggested that mosques are more than a place for praying. One part of its significance is the act of praying in crowds. While praying, one kneels and touches one’s head to the ground, and at that moment one’s head is at others’ feet. This bodily gesture of praying together in a mosque, he suggested, makes everyone equal in front of each
other as well as before god. The other significant part of visiting a mosque is socializing with the jamaat (community). After the namaz (prayers) everyone assembles outside the mosques on the streets and inquire about each other’s daily affairs as well as about those who haven’t shown up for prayers. Some linger, particularly the older men, to sit on the platforms in the washing areas, while others go to the closest teashop. The mosques become another locale for storytelling, and particularly so on Fridays.

Figure 2.3: Speakers

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124 The secretary was explaining the gesture of praying and its relation to the mosque. As the interview proceeded, he did suggest that there are parts of Islamic beliefs that need a rereading such as the inclusion of women and their partitioning from common spaces and affairs of the mosque and expanding philanthropic work of the mosque to people outside the religious community. With regards to the latter, they have started donating and providing relief work during floods in Mumbai.
On Fridays, life in the locality begins to fade around twelve-thirty in the afternoon and begins to concentrate around mosques, of which there are around two hundred in Toba Tek Nagar. Shutting down their businesses early that day of the week, men begin to move slowly towards the mosque for the *Jumma namaz* (the Friday afternoon prayer). The streets approaching the mosques are partly shut as they are occupied by Muslim men and children praying. The police constables gather around the different mosques with their walkie-talkies to avoid any incidence of communal violence. But before the *namaz*, while men wash themselves and prepare for prayer, the Imams of different mosques give a sermon, the *Khubtah*. Most often these sermons are about ethics of life vis-à-vis difficulties faced by Muslims in today’s world, and they are delivered in the form of short stories about the god’s biggest storytelling agent—*Nabi*, the Prophet Mohammad. The stories are narrated in a melodramatic way through the loud speaker on the minaret, and each story ends with a moral lesson, reiterating how Islamic ethics can allow one to deal with everyday problems. But most times it is difficult to hear these stories in their entirety, as they collapse and merge into stories being told from the nearby mosques.

On one such Friday, the story being narrated by the Imam was a fairy tale. The devil had cast his spell of darkness on a village. The sun, the biggest gift giver of energy, was nowhere to be seen. Its disappearance had stalled all life: farming, the seasons, religion, and particularly praying. In despair, the followers decided to seek help from the Prophet Nabi. But none of them had ever seen him or knew where he lived. Everything they knew of him was through his stories, *Khubtah*. One of the followers, a child who spent a lot of time grazing goats in the field, thought of a trick. He decided to kidnap one of Nabi’s beloved goats from the common grounds and hide it. A while later, seeing that one of the goats hadn’t returned, Nabi himself stepped out in search of the goat. On reaching the village he found himself in front of the villagers with his goat tied to
a rope held by the child. The end and the moral of the story, unfortunately, drowned into another story from a nearby mosque, leaving the moral of the story to my imagination, and now yours.

To my mind, what is significant is the trick the child plays on Nabi to bring him out into the world and cast off the devil’s spell of darkness. Equally intriguing is the Imam’s story of a trick as a form of reverence to make god visible; to trick god’s messenger himself through a curious play of hide-and-seek using his beloved object: the goat. The goat, to my mind, is like the paperwork and ID cards, the beloved object of bureaucracy, used by Abdulbhai and Nargis in their stories to play the game of visibility and invisibility with the state. Isn’t, then, religion, with its stories and its storytellers, also a resource of tales and tricks? And does this not put the relation between planning, religion, and storytelling on an equal footing, where it all depends on constructing the right temporal constellation—“sahi tal mel” as one resident put it—of people,

![Figure 2.4: Dajjal Hamari Zinadagi Mein (Devil in Our Life)](image-url)
words, and things, just like the stars in the sky, so that life turns festive on earth. The stories from different worlds, which get passed on through a chain of loud speakers, mobile phones, hand speakers, mouth and ears provide the resource and wisdom to construct that right constellation.

11. A Teahouse

Noorani Teahouse is located in the municipally rehabilitated section of Toba Tek Nagar. The teahouse is a 10 feet by 15 feet unit with pistachio green walls. The walls have swollen up in some places due to moist air flowing in from the nearby creek; in other places the paint has peeled off revealing a different color beneath. There are four wooden tables in the teahouse. Each table is covered with a white laminate that is kept in place by nails along the edges. The laminate makes it easier to wipe off tea stains left by the numerous cups of tea consumed by people every day. And yet, the tea glasses remain imprinted on these tables in the form of stubborn stains. Each table has an old plastic glass holder with six steel glasses. The glass holders on different tables are alternated by colors: blue and red. A colorful board on the back wall lists the items available at the tea house using photos: Hot Milk, Nagori Tea, Lassi, Cold Drinks, Desi Ghee, Yogurt, and Maska Pav (buttered bun). Religion is integral to the teahouse in terms of conversations as well as interior decorations: a clock with an image of mosque domes is hung on the back-most wall, the celebratory Eid poster from the previous year is stuck on the left wall, and the Sunni Razvi Calendar, also from the previous year, with its page turned to November, since it has a printed advertisement of Noorani Teahouse, is next to it.
The owner of the teahouse, Husain, nicknamed “Nagori,” is a young, shy, and quiet man. Dressed in worn-out white jeans, a polyester gray shirt and a white taqiyah (cap), he sits on a stool behind the cash counter most days, while his younger brother, also nicknamed “Nagori,” prepares tea on the gas stove located right at the entrance. Next to the tea counter is a small old wooden cupboard, like the old showcase units disappearing from middle-class houses, where the

A new building is being constructed in the city. The first space that gets built on-site, even before the building’s foundation, is a makeshift teashop. The teashop is a space where construction workers rest during their work-intervals and converse about infinite things. *(Field Note, December 12, 2013)*

**Figure 2.5:** The Magic Potion (Screenshots from Sippy, R., 1980. *Shaan*)
daily supplies of sweet buns, butter, biscuits, tea, sugar, and ginger are stored. The first tea gets
made at seven every morning, and then at regular intervals till ten in the night. The Nagori tea,
specific to the Nagori caste of Muslims from Gujarat, is prepared with a two to one ration of
milk to water, a ration inversed by Mangal, a Marwari from Rajwadi, Rajasthan, at Ganesh Tea-
stall located at the other end of Toba Tek Nagar.\footnote{The tea at the Nagori teahouse is milky and smooth while at the Ganesh Tea-stall it is made by boiling water with black tea powder, green tea leaves, beaten ginger and cardamom, and milk, which smells and tastes spicier.}

At the entrance to Ganesh Tea-stall, a \textit{nimbu-mirchi} (lemon and green chilies strung
together) is hung off the rolling shutter to ward off evil spirits. Its swollen yellow-ochre walls are
crowded with photo-frames of Hindu gods. On the left wall a laminated poster lists four ways to
earn \textit{punnya}\footnote{Merits or virtues earned through good deeds.}: feeding ants, feeding dogs, feeding cows, and praying to the \textit{kalpavriksh} (a wish-
fulfilling tree).\footnote{These posters and calendars also serve other uses. For instance, the calendar in Noorani teahouse is printed every year by the Islamic educational institute Raza Academy, Mumbai and sold at local roadside stalls. Every year, the institute seeks donations from different big and small entrepreneurs to advertise their businesses and the calendar is produced from these donations. The calendar serves as a directory of institutional and commercial establishments. Each page lists names and information of schools, medical institutes, hospitals, madrasas, and businesses.} Amidst these gods is a framed photocopy of the municipal license to run the
commercial establishment, and to keep out the evil spirits of illegality and demolition. At the
right-most corner of the entrance, an L-shaped table covered with thin aluminum sheets serves as
the kitchen. Three male teenagers work in the teashop. They are recent migrants from the same
village as the owner, Mangal. They work as servers, as well as cleaners, and sleep in the teashop
itself at night. The unit is sub-leased from tenants who live in the unit above. The owners of both
these units live in a rental unit away from the main road.\footnote{It is profitable to rent out units closer to the main streets and live in rental units located in the interior lanes. A number of residents rent out their units along the main streets to shops, NGO offices, doctors, theaters, recycling units, and so on to secure an extra monthly income. Besides, one cannot buy or sell units here; they can only transfer property by transferring power of attorney to the other.} The left-most corner space at the
entrance is further sub-leased by Mangal to a \textit{pan} and cigarette shop. The \textit{panwalla}, Sahil, is a
young Muslim man from Muzzaffarnagar, UP. Dressed often in a checkered blue \textit{lungi}, a white

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\footnote{The tea at the Nagori teahouse is milky and smooth while at the Ganesh Tea-stall it is made by boiling water with black tea powder, green tea leaves, beaten ginger and cardamom, and milk, which smells and tastes spicier.}
\footnote{Merits or virtues earned through good deeds.}
\footnote{These posters and calendars also serve other uses. For instance, the calendar in Noorani teahouse is printed every year by the Islamic educational institute Raza Academy, Mumbai and sold at local roadside stalls. Every year, the institute seeks donations from different big and small entrepreneurs to advertise their businesses and the calendar is produced from these donations. The calendar serves as a directory of institutional and commercial establishments. Each page lists names and information of schools, medical institutes, hospitals, madrasas, and businesses.}
\footnote{It is profitable to rent out units closer to the main streets and live in rental units located in the interior lanes. A number of residents rent out their units along the main streets to shops, NGO offices, doctors, theaters, recycling units, and so on to secure an extra monthly income. Besides, one cannot buy or sell units here; they can only transfer property by transferring power of attorney to the other.}
baniyan (vest), and a polyester half-sleeve shirt, he sits on a marble slab, which serves as a countertop. A plastic bucket is placed next to this base for the water from the counter top to drip into through a small metal gargoyle. Below this counter is a cupboard, which forms the base of the shop. The entire structure of the pan shop is built from scrap-iron angles. A second cupboard fixed on the counter-top houses and displays cigarettes and other ingredients. The top of this cupboard is decorated with gothic forms made from scrap iron. The shop is mobile in form, and yet fixed to the entrance of the tea stall.

The teashop is open to everyone, no partitions, just four tables, some seats, and numerous glasses of tea. No stories are a taboo here; gods, kings, family, sex, love, money, drugs, deals, cars, domestic issues, community issues, mosques, contracts, happenings of the day, all meander in and out of this space. Everyone enters and exits on their own terms. But to say everyone can use the shop would be an overstatement. It is primarily a male space, like most enclosed public spaces in Toba Tek Nagar. However, one does see women in these teahouses every now and then. They do not interact much with others; they sit on an empty table or on the outer edge of the seat if already occupied. Most often they are accompanied by men and are part of a conversation that involves paperwork and files regarding family matters. Both tea stall owners keep a small diary to maintain an account of tea consumption and individual credits on a daily basis. A diary, to me, is a good device to recount the past events and conversations.129

129 Business owners and migrant workers, in particular, consume tea on credit, and the accounts are cleared at the end of the month. The credit system is also used in the local food messes called bisi, which are used mostly by migrant workers who get salaries at the end of the month or bimonthly. See Cybermohalla et.al, The Hub, Cybermohalla, for an excellent collection of essays on the diary and its relation to questions of time, space, and knowledge.
12. A Diary of Conversations

**June 21, 2013:** The teashop was crowded today. BEST\(^{130}\) bus drivers, salesmen with ties, construction workers as well as their contractor, and some local residents, all have packed themselves in the teahouse. Outside on the street, the local Shia Imam is delivering a sermon in a makeshift tent on troubles faced by Shia Muslims in today’s world. Two Sunni residents are standing at the counter and explaining the difference between Shias and Sunnis to Mangal. He, in return, tells them about the recent fight between members of the two groups in the locality. The bus drivers look harrowed, and are discussing their problems about the new bus routes assigned to them. These routes are longer, congested, and have more stops than the previous ones. The salesmen are finishing their paperwork over tea. It’s a hot day, but the hotness of the tea seems to make bodies cooler. I am waiting for an interview, writing down questions, and reading Benjamin and Lacis’s piece on Naples. The similarities in observations evoke an uncanny feeling. I don’t know if these similarities are between observations or methodologies, or both.

**July 4, 2013:** A middle-aged woman, dressed in her home clothes and covered in a nice dupatta was sitting at the last table. She was crying with two broken phones in front of her on the table. Another man sitting at the table across from hers struck a conversation. They never looked at each other; instead, they stared ahead while speaking to each other. He inquired about her work. She was a real estate agent in the slum locality and a broker for cloth trade in Bhiwandi in the eastern suburbs of Mumbai. The business was doing OK, she said. Having led her attention towards other things, the man asked the reason for her crying. She explained. Her husband, who had suffered a paralysis attack a few years back, had beaten her up that morning. The phones had been thrown at her in anger. He wasn’t taking his medicines and was instead drinking alcohol. He assured her that he and a few men from the locality would come and speak to him later that week after jumma namaz. The woman finished her tea and walked away without thanking him.

**August 13, 2013:** It was a Sunday morning. Two friends, young men in their late twenties, were sitting on the table next to me discussing their new jobs. They shared their experiences on starting work, their travel times, their travel routes and their office work culture. A few minutes later the discussion turned to questions about the future. The first friend suggested working at their new jobs for a year or two, and then branching off to start their own business. The friend agreed, but their savings, he suggested, won’t be enough to start a new business. They needed a third person to invest money in their future company. They ran through a list of different possible partners, and finally agreed to ask a school friend, a car mechanic who had returned from a year of work in Muscat. They finished their tea, which was a treat from one of them on receiving his first paycheck, and then walked out to meet their possible third partner.

**August 28, 2013:** They split two cups of teas into four cuttings.\(^{131}\) The garage owner put forth his problem: an official from the Regional Traffic Office (RTO) was harassing him for buying

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\(^{130}\) BEST stands for Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport, the public bus transit system providers in Mumbai.

\(^{131}\) Cutting is a colloquial word for half tea.
and selling cars without registering the sales with the RTO. The officer was insisting on getting a
commission on each sale that was made without registration to avoid being reported. The second
person, a mechanic in a renowned car-servicing center that sub-contracted their repair work to
the garage owner, suggested meeting his acquaintance, another RTO official in a higher position,
who could help him for a lesser amount. The discussion then turned towards issues with traffic
rules and ways to trick the traffic officials in order to avoid fines. The other two on the table
listened closely to the conversation. They all finished their tea and walked away their separate
ways. A week before, five others were discussing problems with municipal water tankers... A
week before that, proof of residence... fights within families over land... unemployment of
their kin... and so on.

September 1, 2013: Four young men were staring and comparing their cell phones over tea. One
of them asked the others if they knew of someone to rent out the vacant shop below their unit.
Mangal overheard the conversation and interjected. He inquired about the rental rate, the
required deposit amount, if it was being leased or sub-leased, and commission. The young man
answered. Mangal sifted through his mobile phone while simultaneously stirring tea on the stove.
He then made a call. In a few minutes, a middle-aged man appeared at the teahouse buttoning up
his shirt. Two of them moved to a different table and Mangal joined them with three glasses of
tea. They spoke for about two minutes, and the young man then guided his prospective tenant
towards his shop. A number of such deals and negotiations get made and broken here.

September 5, 2013: Rahimmiya, a frequent visitor to the Nagori teahouse arrived at eleven in
the morning. As usual, he was dressed in his crisp white kurta and a taqiyyah. He had just
returned from his trip to Shirdi. He struck up a conversation about this trip with Sajidbhai,
another frequent visitor to the teahouse. He began with an observation that the Hindus have taken
over Shirdi, as if Saibaba was a Hindu god. The Muslim jamaat, he thought, is not organized
enough to reclaim their right to the place. The conversation then turned towards the closure of a

132 A holy place in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, where the secular demigod Saibaba resided till the early 1900s.
mosque in their neighborhood in Toba Tek Ngar. Rahimmiya argued that the infrequency of its users, and the shift of neighborhood residents to the mosque in the next block, was the prime reason for its closure. Sajidbhai suggested that the reason was the improper management of the mosque by its new secretary that had resulted in diminished donations from Bollywood actors and technicians to the mosque. The issue and its causality remained open ended. A few months later, a member of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the militant Hindu organization, had made a call in popular media that Hindus shouldn’t pray to Saibaba as he was a Muslim.

**October 15, 2013:** Parents of a married couple were sitting with a lawyer on the table across from mine at Ganesh Tea-stall. They were discussing an ongoing divorce between their daughter and son. They were meeting that day to find a solution that could help avoid a divorce. The lawyer arrived and called for tea for everyone. They each put forth their perspectives on the issue. The father of the husband suggested to the wife’s parents that they convince her to return, and resolve issues with the husband in person and within the house. The wife’s father agreed. Their wives were having a parallel conversation with each other about the same issue. The lawyer paid for the tea and they all walked out after saying their goodbyes. A few days later, the men (fathers and the lawyer) returned and exchanged the divorce papers.

**November 9, 2013:** Rahimmiya, a regular at the teahouse, and Husain, the owner, were arguing about who is the greatest of Mughal kings: Aurangzeb or Akbar? Rahimmiya suggested Akbar and narrated a story. “One day the king disguised himself as a fakir (a beggar) and sat in the center of a market square where no one would recognize him. The point of this disguise was to spend his time as an ordinary subject and understand the true state of his subjects.” That story for Rahimmiya was greater than any conquest of any king. Nagori argued that the story wasn’t about understanding his subjects. Akbar had actually disguised himself as a fakir to go listen to Mirabai’s songs, which he found mesmerizing. Sajidbhai, who had joined in by then, argued it was actually to go meet Jodha, his love interest. Regardless of a resolution, the conversation moved from Akbar to the present politicians. Would any of them ever do anything like that to experience people’s problems? “No! They are not imposters in love.”

**November 16, 2013:** I had scheduled an interview today at the teahouse. The teahouse was a preferred location for most male interviewees. That day, Abdulbhai was sitting on the next table with the secretary of the local ward councilor and a young guy. Abdulbhai introduced me to the secretary and asked me to interview him for my research. I thanked him and went on to read my book. Abdulbhai was making arrangements for reclaiming land at the back end of the locality. The sand trucks were to arrive that night. The young guy and a few of his friends were to accompany the truck across the Octroi toll-booth nearby. The secretary made a few calls. Before leaving, the secretary’s number was shared to make sure that the sand arrived without hassle. The conversation lasted about ten minutes. A few weeks later, new houses were erected with bright shining asbestos and blue tarpaulin at the back of Toba Tek Nagar.
13. *Phaltu Bethna Sakht Mana hai!*

“Idling here is strictly prohibited!” It’s written in bright red paint over the fading yellow ochre walls of the teahouse. The sign is not specific to the teahouse; it can be found in state institutional buildings, public spaces, traffic zones, and tourist spots, among many others spaces.

There are two ways of reading this sign: first, time is of value (money); hence idling is strictly prohibited. And second, this space is meant for a specific use—buying and selling; do not sit here idling, without buying or paying. Both readings determine a specific value and order of time and space. The first determines the value of time as money (commodified time), which cannot be
wasted; and the second determines an order of space by assigning it a specific function—a space for consumption. In a broader sense, the sign highlights the ideology of “work” that shapes the time and space of a city under capitalism.133

a. I have no faith in time!

“I no longer have faith in time” wrote Gabriel Gauny, a French joiner-aesthete and intellectual, to a Saint-Simonian preaching the religion of work and time to artisans. The latter was urging Gauny to join them in their mission of time: spreading in the Eastern world the new Western faith of progress, universal peace, and happiness through collective industrial work134. But time, wrote Gauny, can no more be an object of faith for him because it is too circled. Time for workers like Gauny, Rancière tells us, meant the constraint that left them bogged down in their place—the time of the day at work, the time spent in search for work, and the implacable alteration of daily work and evening rest that alienated the worker from the undivided time of leisure. The homogeneous and desacralized time emerged victorious, Henri Lefebvre tells us, the moment it supplied the measure of the time of work. It was modeled on abstract, quantitative time of watches and clocks, which could then be equated with money or commodified135. Beginning from that historic moment, it became the time of everydayness, subordinating other aspects of the everyday to the organizational logic of work. As a philosophical category, Adorno136 argues, time got associated with the myth of human progress under the Enlightenment. Progress, that always-deferred time of future and the linear path of history, became the modern messiah who would never arrive “in time” for the “other” of history: the worker, the colonized,

134 Ibid, 77.
and the slum dweller, who are always behind time waiting and struggling to catch up. The orientation towards a predetermined future—a teleological end, Adorno argues, allowed reason to be used instrumentally by both, capitalism and the state.

b. World-Class City and the Ideology of Work
In his work on the symbiotic relationship between protestant work ethics and modern capitalism, Max Weber notes how wasted time was considered a moral sin. In his words:

“Waste of time is (...) the first and in principle the deadliest of sins. The span of human life is infinitely short and precious to make sure of one’s own election…It is infinitely valuable because every hour lost is lost to labor for the glory of God. Loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary for health, six to at most eight hours, is worthy of absolute moral condemnation….inactive contemplation is also valueless, or even directly reprehensible if it is at the expense of one’s daily work.

In his book Societies against the State, Pierre Clastres argues that work is the imperative of modern state apparatus. The work model is the invention of the state in that people will only work or produce more than their needs require them when forced to. In an argument akin to Marx, Clastres suggests that work appears only with the constitution of a surplus, whereby work is always overwork—alienated and commodified work. In this model of work, everything is measured and identified through numbers: money, miles, degrees, minutes. Time, space, people, and things are all to perform the work of producing a surplus value. It is in contrast to this work

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model of state and capital that Paul Lafargue, Kristin Ross suggests, proclaims “a right to laziness.” This proclamation is not a demand for leisure, the constituted opposite of work, but a challenge to the bourgeoisie’s reservation of laziness as the time of pleasurable intellectual work for itself; a challenge to the division of time into the dyad of work and leisure.

Modern planning under colonialism in India, as the introduction to this dissertation states, drew together utilitarian, liberal, and capitalist discourses to shape the material space that was not “in time” with the empire. Outside India, the ideas of utopic thinkers such as Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Robert Moses, among others, which have been influential in how we plan cities, were based on a disdain for the city as a place not “in time” with modernity. This non-contemporaneous city had to be built anew based on a new instrumental order. In the case of Corbusier specifically, this instrumental order was based on a factory—a societal form that reflected modern technology, hierarchy of activities, bureaucratic control, and division of time and space based on their functionality so as to produce a perfect city, just like a modern commodity.

The “world-class” city phenomenon is no different. It’s an imagination of a city “in time” with the global processes of capitalism. And to be “in time” everything and everyone has to be “on time” and “ordered”. Most of the projects undertaken by the state have been infrastructural projects that forge connections (flyovers, roads, skywalks, expressways, metros) for fluid circulation of money, goods, people, and automobiles, as well as replacing obsolete industries, economic activities, and land-uses with contemporaneous economies. Another

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140 One can also think about this aspect of ‘in-time’ in relation to the ‘just-in-time’ economies and their logistical world.
aspect of the “world-class” city is to make not just time and people, but also space perform work through the most economically efficient forms of land-use and ownership. In Locke’s terms: “the highest and best use.” This relationship between time and space based on the ideology of work and surplus value can be summed through the sign in the teashop: “Phaltu bethna sakht mana hai!”: “Idling is strictly prohibited” in terms of both, time and space.

c. Idling, Storytelling, and Planning

Thus Gauny’s loss of faith in time, to return to Rancière’s fable, means a loss of faith in the long run programs that promise happiness in an always deferred future and the division of everyday time into work, leisure, and constrained time. This loss of faith, however, is no despair to mourn about. Instead, Rancière tells us, it is another way of dealing with time, another way of transforming it. Transforming not the future, but the present—the everyday time. Time is a form of circling power; it cannot be attacked from the front. One has to walk around it to transform the space that it constructs and the gestures it imposes. This dislodging of time, he argues, is a two-fold operation. The first operation consists in loosening the circle of time by wandering in space and experiencing a common world; and second, writing that experience back into the common world. This writing is an act of weaving together everyday elements so as to provide time and space a new rhythm in forms such as poetry and diaries. The word ‘weaving’ has a specific significance to the two forms used in this dissertation: stories and constellations. Both weave together anachronistic elements (from past or afar), and in doing so, short circuit the temporal

143 Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in Modern World*, trans. Sabina Rabinovitch (London: Continuum, 2000[1971]), 51. For Lefebvre, everyday time in a capitalist modern world governed through bureaucratic state-power is divided into three categories: work time, leisure time, and constrained time. The last category is time that is neither work nor leisure but time spent in performing compulsive activities such as commuting to work or waiting in bureaucratic procedures. This constrained time increases at a greater rate than leisure time and starts to usurp it.

144 Rancière, “I No Longer have Faith in Time”, 77.
distance between the past, the present, and the determined future, which is at the heart of “world-class” city’s teleological dream of being “in time” with global capitalism.

Idling is a refusal or a dis-identification with the time-space model based on the logic of work, which partitions everyday time and space into specialized zones for work, leisure, and commuting. In other words, it is refuses the logic of commodification by challenging the division of time and space between oppositions of leisure / work, activity / passivity, wasted time / valued time. Furthermore, this challenge to the oppositions is posed by creating an autonomous form of time-space between the two oppositional forms. Thus, idling is not the passive time of inactivity, but a paradoxical union of activity and passivity, autonomy and heteronomy; the and, not the or. The translation of idle time into storytelling about everyday experiences and objects highlights this paradoxical union.

As opposed to the other forms such as a novel, a newspaper, or an information pamphlet, stories have their origin in the mimetic form of oral folk tales, which are reciprocal. The mimetic aspect of stories is significant to this reciprocity. In the stories narrated above, encounters with people, objects, and spaces in everyday life, and the experience these encounters produce are weaved together to present a story to an-other. These stories, if you recall, are not dedicated activities but narrated before specialized divisions of time: before prayers, between ID card sessions, twilight hours, or waiting. By viewing together different temporal and spatial elements, the story weaves together a new time and space.\(^{145}\) In the space of the story, the mimetic correspondence and its dialectical tensions between the self and the other as well as similarity and alterity play an important role. The story (think of the story told by the Imam) brings the

\(^{145}\) A second significant aspect of this dis-identification is the use of objects (ID-cards, proofs of residences, ration cards, electric bills) by which one gets identified in a community (state or religion) as subjects of stories. These objects are appropriated to create a non-identity not just with these objects but also with the time and space of a city, which these objects aim to construct.
other into the time-space conjured by the story. At the same time, the storyteller splits the self into an-other by imparting or sharing a part of their experience to an-other. Thus both the self and the other are drawn out of their selves into this autonomous and common conjured time-space of the story, only to return in an altered form (think of tricking out the messiah to bring back light). Stories hold the possibility of weaving together elements from the past into the present so as to create an altered time as well as subjectivity. Idleness—activity and passivity; mimesis—similarity and alterity, the tensions between these dialectical oppositions are paramount. The tensions between them aren’t resolved, but played with to create a not-yet existing altered reality. I have always wondered why Benjamin would assign the role of awakening to fairytales, the modern version of folk tales, while we often use them to put a child to sleep. Maybe the point is to reverse this relationship: put the ideology of work to sleep through idling and storytelling.

In a broader sense, one my aims in this chapter is to construct that autonomous time and space for the reader to think about an altered form of planning based on the model of idling and storytelling. What if the teahouse was a planning office? What if the planning office was a loose network of idle spaces? What would the activity (and passivity) of planning look like then? What would the city look like then? I wonder! Unfortunately, there is never a space or time for idling in a plan nor in the act of planning.

14. Why Tell Stories?

To end, and be true to the logic of circular time, let me go back to the story with which we started and insert my tricks into it.
So a meeting was organized. Different apostles had assembled. The topic of discussion was slums. Regardless of the mandate of the meeting, the event became a platform for slum residents to narrate stories. Stories of displacement, violence, bribes, sorrow, demolitions, rights, and legalities were narrated. But there seemed to be an impossibility of translating stories into a reasonable policy. So why tell stories?

a. Story as an Allegorical Device

“Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto. With him lie buried all the arts and mysteries of short story writing. Under tons of earth he lies, wondering if he is a greater short story writer than God.”146

During and post-partition, Aamir Mufti tells us, the Urdu afsana, or Urdu short stories, got established by a new generation of writers, particularly Saadat Hasan Manto, as a “minor” genre in juxtaposition to the novel—the bourgeois literary tool of nation building and history writing that dominated the scene on the Indian Subcontinent.147 Although “minor” in genre, the stories Manto wrote intended to do the “major” work of putting into question the all-encompassing meta-narratives and the totality of the nation-state. Manto’s epitaph, Mufti suggests, is directed not so much at the existence of god, but at questioning god’s epic ambition reflected in the construction of a nation-state. The subject or objects of Manto’s short stories were often everyday things such as black trousers, a blouse, railway tracks, five rupee notes; figures such as the prostitute, the pimp; or experiences such as sex, filth, puberty, and so on. These objects, figures and experiences were allegorical devices through which Manto put into question the totality of the nation-state. And he did so in two ways. First, his stories on love and betrayal in the life of sex-workers interrogate the pure, asexual, and totalizing signifiers of the Motherland through which the nation-state is imagined, and second, this task of interrogation is performed by

displacing these signifiers with ordinary figures, objects, and experiences that are not easily subsumable within clear categories. They are excessive and lay in between categories. The short story *Toba Tek Singh*, the inspiration for naming the slum I studied, provides an apt example.

The story is about Bishen Singh, an inmate of a lunatic asylum, who refuses to reside in a country after partition, and decides to die in a no-man’s land called Toba Tek Singh in between the two newly divided countries. This non-acceptance of partitions and choosing to live and die in a no-man’s land, to my mind, is a characteristic that renders the stories and the spaces in my quasi-fictional Toba Tek Nagar with significance.

In a slum locality, where resources might be meager, words and images circulate in excess, and stories find their source from all kinds of experiences, spaces, objects, events—and then travel. On the one hand, the stories told in the locality, similar to the one narrated in the consultation workshop, often refer to the arbitrariness of state power: the unknowingness of why planning law allows certain forms of development, while others are forbidden, the excess of violence experienced through demolition, the excess capital accumulated by developers by displacing slums. And on the other hand, stories told by figures such as Abdulbhai, Nargis, or Imams are about passing wisdom regarding everyday practicalities of urban life. Thus the everyday act of storytelling while idling perform three things: first, it points out how state planning, despite its rational appearance, is based on an arbitrary logic that reproduces alienation. Second, it refuses the division of common world into spatio-temporal zones and the identities assigned to people, and creates new new times, spaces, and subjectivities between these divisions. The transformation of time and space in bureaucratic offices, the teashops, the *balwadi*, and the Humans Rights Office are important instances of this recreation. And third, these everyday acts produce a storytelling public, where the division between planning and non-planning are erased. In this public, planning is understood not as rational speech, but as a sharing
and staging of experience that can be put to use by others in their own ways. These performative characteristics reveal that city planning itself is nothing but an ordinary act common to everyone. This art of storytelling—demystifying the partitioning of common world, and re-enchanting the world with new imaginations—is what I take Benjamin’s call for politicizing art and Rancière’s evocation of the term politics to be.

b. Non / Translatability

Let me return to the first story once more to focus on a different aspect this time. When other apostles conjured planning dreams based on information, the Platonists could translate those heavenly dreams into a policy for earth. But when it came to the stories narrated by residents, this act of translation failed. So why tell stories?

My overall interest in this dissertation is to explore the politics and potentiality of the phaltu, which is a part of the title of this chapter; the phaltu, the idle time, the wasted time, and what people do with it. By excess, following Bataille, I mean things that are sacrificed in the synthetic dialectical movement of knowledge and history; things relegated or reduced to the world of non-knowledge or non-meaning. It is no accident, then, that the slum is always described through terms such as chaos, filth, mess, which find no place in the progressive movement towards a ‘world-class’ city, and hence can be dispensed. To my mind these objects and ideas belong to the realm of experience or aesthetics such as pleasure, laughter, horror, art, erotica, and death. These are unemployable experiences that do not perform the labor of dialectical progress. But what is it that one can do with these unemployed negativities?

For Bataille, the experiences of non-meaning are radical experiences. They hold the possibility of interrogating and transgressing the limits of what is understood as meaning. The relationship between meaning and non-meaning, the two polar opposites, is one of non-relation,
that is, of rupture, a rupture in the logic of the order of things, a rupture in the partition between meaning and non-meaning. Hence, in most of his work, Benjamin was obsessed with rubbing opposites up against each other in order to make sparks fly. By sparks, he meant the opening of new possibilities, to which I add, between the two oppositional terms. Such experiences, Jacques Derrida tells us in his reading of Bataille, are unique; they exist as singularities that cannot be translated into a universality but are universally communicable. In other words, this non-translatability into a singular-universality does not prohibit the possibility of imparting and transmitting these experiences infinitely, so that others, who recognize a similarity with these experiences, can use them in their own situations. It is this play between the opposites of translatability and non-translatability that gives storytelling its power to interrogate noble lies and open up future possibilities. But this is no easy play; it involves a cunning game between opposites: the self and the other, visibility and invisibility, activity and passivity, so as to create new forms. We know of cases where detailed studies of slums have become an arsenal in the realm of law as evidence of illegality. Thus it has become important today to mimic storytellers of Toba Tek Nagar and become conjurers and couriers of tricks and tales.

149 For Benjamin, Translation is an act of sharing, of imparting, which is giving away a part of oneself, one’s experience to the other. See: Samuel Weber, “Translatability I: Following (Nachfolge)” and “Translatability II: Afterlife,” in Benjamin’s -abilities (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) 53–95.
150 I make this claim in response to Said’s provocation of rethinking the relationship between knowledge and resistance in neocolonial times. See the methods section in the “Introduction” to the dissertation.
Chapter 3

Double Dekho\textsuperscript{151}: Repetition and Play

1. The Quicksand and the Siren

Sudhir Mishra’s film \textit{Dharavi}\textsuperscript{152} opens with a film-scene (a film within a film). A don and his henchmen are standing atop a water-tank overlooking a slum. The don instructs his men: “\textit{Jala dalo is basti ko!}” “\textit{Burn down the slum!}” The hero of the film,\textsuperscript{153} a benevolent don who grew up in that slum, walks into the screen space. This film-scene, we are then shown, is being screened in a small video-theater in Dharavi, one of the largest slum clusters in Mumbai. The camera pans onto the slum residents in the theater; their faces are filled with anticipation and they are completely engrossed in watching the film. The onscreen hero screams, “\textit{Yeh basti meri hai!}” “\textit{This slum is my home!}” and then goes on to kill the don and his henchmen. The slum residents whistle and clap. At that very moment a heavy-throated voice echoes in the room: “\textit{Yeh koi na samjha, yeh koi na jaana, garibo ki thokar main hai yeh jamana . . .}” “\textit{No one understood, no one realized, that the world is at the blows of the poor . . .}” The title of the film (in the film) flashes on the screen: “\textit{Shahar Ka Shahenshah}” (\textit{The Supreme King of the City}). Just when the onscreen hero kills the don and his men, the video-theater’s screen gets set on fire. The don’s henchmen in the off-screen slum of Dharavi are shown beating up a slum resident. This violence escalates and the video-theater burns down. A second title flashes on the screen: \textit{Dharavi}, translated as “\textit{Quicksand}.” A bullet hits the title-text that bleeds onto the screen. Reality, we are told, is more violent than the fantasies on screen.

\textsuperscript{151}Translation: “Seeing Double.” As the chapter goes along I use this phrase to refer to double characteristics of elements.

\textsuperscript{152}\textit{Dharavi}, directed by Sudhir Mishra (1991; Honolulu, HI: Asia Pacific Films), DVD.

\textsuperscript{153}The popular Hindi film actor Anil Kapoor plays the hero in this scene.
Mishra’s film *Dharavi* tells the story of various slum residents who aspire to get themselves out of quicksand—a metaphor used to describe the squalor and violence in slums. These residents, four male friends, devise a business scheme and plan collaborations to buy and run an old cloth-dyeing factory in Dharavi. The film’s main protagonist, a taxi-driver named Raj Yadav, activates all his networks and invests all his resources into this factory. However, as the film’s narrative advances, these schemes and collaborations fail for various reasons, and by the end of the film the residents find themselves at the same point from where they started, but worse off. The film ends with a scene where the main protagonist, Raj Yadav, is shown sitting next to his friend in a taxi narrating a new business scheme. Although the film ends with a new beginning, the film mimics directly, rather than dialectically, two movements: first, the sinking of the residents in the quicksand, and second, the circular movement of time reminiscent of the

![Figure 3.1: The Siren (Source: Dharavi, directed by Sudhir Mishra)](image-url)
eternal return of the same in a hellish modern urban world. This interpretation of modern urban life in slums is symbolized by another metaphorical figure in the film—a beautiful film female actor in a red saree. She is a fictional imagination of the taxi-driver’s mind, an object of his love as well as an image of his dream. She draws him in, gives him hope, enchants and seduces him, but never commits; neither her love for him, nor the hope that his dreams will come true. In the film, when the taxi driver follows her advice and decides to buy the factory to fulfill his dreams, his dreams and the female actor both die. To my mind, the figure of the imagined-actress resonates with the sirens in Ulysses’s story. However, the Ulysses of the film, the one with reason, is neither the tax-driver who follows the song of the siren-actress, nor the alienated slum dwellers that are deaf and blind to this fantasy. Instead, it is the film director, Mishra, the one demystifying the fantasy—the third voice echoing in the video-theater: “No one understood, no one realized, that the world is at the blows of the poor.” Reality of slums and slum residents, we are reminded, is not as wishful as onscreen fantasies. What then, I ask in this chapter, is the relationship between the virtuality of films and the actuality of everyday life in slum localities like Toba Tek Nagar?

2. From Sirens to Angels

The previous chapter explores the relationship between an excess of time and space, the collective forms of publics, and urban politics by showing how slum residents translate past experiences into everyday storytelling practices, and how these stories play a significant role in

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154The role was played by the popular Hindi film female actor Madhuri Dixit. Mishra plays with this relationship between fantasy onscreen and reality in his choice of actors. The “real” slum residents are portrayed by actors such as Om Puri, Shabana Azmi (who then went on to become a real life housing rights activist of slum dwellers in Mumbai), and Raghuvir Yadav, from the “parallel cinema” realm, while popular Hindi film actors portray the “fantasy” characters. In this regard, the first scene portrays slum residents as an ideal spectator, one completely interpellated by the film. Dharavi.
the planning of individual and collective lives in Toba Tek Nagar. This chapter follows a similar line of thought. It explores the everyday life around films in Toba Tek Nagar in order to grasp specific moments of cinematic experience that open up transformative possibilities.155

Overall, the chapter is divided into three parts. The first is an ethnographic exploration of video-theaters in Toba Tek Nagar. These video-theaters are small neighborhood-scale cinema halls that screen movies throughout the day, seven days a week.156 The viewers are primarily men, both old and new migrants to the locality. This part of the chapter explores the video-theater as a physical and social space. It documents the everyday life in video-theaters, how different residents use the space and the workings of the video-theaters. Then, it highlights how video-theaters allow different residents to move between the actuality of life in slums and the virtuality onscreen and in so doing afford residents, particularly the cinephiles, moments to journey into and re-create spatio-temporal elsewheres in the present. In this sense, I posit that the video-theaters become therapeutic and transformative spaces for the slum residents. The second part of the chapter focuses on a YouTube crime series produced by a youth group called Shivaji Nagar Boyzz (SVJ Boyzz) in the slum locality of Shivaji Nagar. The crime series, produced, directed, scripted, and performed by the youth group, revolves around local issues such as drugs,

155By cinema, I draw on Brian Larkin’s notion of cinema as total event. I explain this term in the later part of this section. Brian larkin. Signal and noise: media, infrastructure, and urban culture in Nigeria (Duke University Press, 2008), 151.
156The video-theaters in slums do not fall within the hierarchies of A to D circuit cinema exhibition spaces. However, they do reflect the older hierarchies in colonial Bombay when cinema was becoming a popular form of mass entertainment. As Kaushik Bhaumik shows in his history of cinema in Bombay from 1896–1928, the theaters in older parts of Bombay would be used by the Europeans, Eurasians, and upper class Indians, while the theaters outside of it, which came up with the expansion of the city, would cater to students, lawyers, clerks, shop-keepers, petty-traders, and workers living in the areas surrounding the Grant Road-Lamington Road axis. The cinema theaters grew outside this geography as the city moved northwards with the expansion of northern suburbs till Borivali. The audience in these areas differed from that which followed the exhibition circuit. Thus there existed a system of first-run, second-run, and in some cases even third-run cinemas. In this schema, films were first released in the upmarket theaters and then, depending on popularity, were exhibited in suburban and industrial-area theaters. While the video-theaters do follow this hierarchical logic of exhibition, they nevertheless dismantle it since the films screened here do not necessarily follow the same logic of exhibition as the multiplexes or single screen theaters, except on weekends. Kaushik Bhaumik, “Cinematograph to Cinema: Bombay 1896–1928,” Bioscope 2, no. 1 (2011): 54.
water, and related violence. Here, I show how the crime series provides the youth group members an avenue to fulfill their desires of becoming a part of the film world, as well as an avenue to re-present the slum locality to itself. In the second section of this story, I explore how the re-presentation of the locality to itself through films produces an altered collectivity. I end the chapter with a short proposal for a minor film project that I intend to produce in collaboration with the youth group. The common thread tying the three parts together is cinema, and my overall aim here is to open up this question: Why should critical planning take cinema seriously?

My interest in film and its relationship to slums is threefold. First, representations of slums in films often become a major point of focus in scholarly literature. The portrayal of slums in cinema, specifically films such as *Slumdog Millionaire* or Rem Koolhaas’s film on Lagos, have received much attention in critical scholarship and have been used to unpack the Euro-American construct of slums in cinema, as well as to rethink the relationship between urban theory and slums. However, cinema in slums has not received much attention. This neglect can be ascribed to my second point. Most scholarship on slums, albeit with a few exceptions, tends to focus on utilitarian technological-infrastructures such as water, toilets, and houses, among others, in order to think about urban politics, while infrastructures and technologies of pleasure are partly relegated to the realm of excess—in Bataille’s sense, sacrificed.

Lastly, in the scholarship that does pay attention, the relationship between slums and films has either been understood as one of reflection, that is, the film is the point of view of the slum dwellers, or


158 I do not want to generalize that films are an important part of slums everywhere. However, if films and film theaters are of significance to the slums in Mumbai, there exist similar spaces in other cities.

one of incongruity, the films are spectacles that do not match the reality of slums, but provide an aspirational fantasy. My interest in films is in highlighting the political significance of film as a realm of pleasure and excess for those living in slums, so as to debunk the binaries of dreams vs reality, pleasure vs needs, which are symptomatic of inquiries into slums and the lives of its residents. To put it simply, the point of this chapter is neither to discern if films are spectacular constructions of reality, nor to show that they are ideological tools for inverting reality. Instead, the point here is to look at film theaters and film-making as an avenue for slum residents to participate in a world of circulating images so as to sensorially experience them, to interpret them, to connect them to one’s own life, and to construct and present an altered worldview.

Drawing on the writings of Benjamin and Miriam Hansen, among others, this chapter shows how cinema becomes a medium through which residents move between the actualities of one’s life and the virtuality of an-other, imagined world.

If the film Dharavi oscillates around the figure of the Siren—a figure central to Adorno’s work on the Enlightenment and his call for the autonomy of art from the relations of production, the figure that fascinated Benjamin was the “Angel of History.”[160] Benjamin saw in it a figural depiction of a dialectical historian. The angel is shown standing amidst the temporal storm called progress, with its face turned towards the past, while the storm violently propels it into the future. The angel wants to stay, collect pieces from the past ruins, and create a dialectical image out of these pieces so as to awaken the past in the present in order to create a new future. If the “Angel Novus” of Paul Klee’s painting was a figural depiction of Benjamin’s notion of dialectics at a standstill, and its form and method of exploration was a montage, he found these principles employed explicitly in the mimetic technology of film. In his exploration of cinema in urban

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space, Ravi Vasudevan suggests that as an apparatus that orchestrates sense perception, cinema is involved in a fundamental transformation of the horizons of human experience. But to understand these transformations one needs to look at “How does the sensory field relayed by cinema relate to or impinge on everyday rhythms? And how does going to the cinema relate to the sensory experience of cities?”\footnote{Ravi Vasudevan, “Cinema in Urban Space” Seminar 525 (May, 2003), accessed, December 12, 2014. \url{http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525/525%20ravi%20vasudevan.htm}} Similarly, Brian Larkin in his work on cinema in the Nigerian city of Kano suggests looking at “cinema as a total event.” This involves paying attention to the spectacular affective images, the arresting sounds, and the narrative devices internal to the film, as well as the urban space of the cinema, the encounters among the audience, and the place of cinema within everyday city life.\footnote{Larkin, \textit{Signal and Noise}, 161.}

Drawing on these suggestions to explore urban space and cinema as an interlinked constellation, let me jump into the everyday life of video-theaters in Toba Tek Nagar.

### 3. Anand Video-Theater

A small, bright green cinema hall called Anand Video-Theater is located right opposite the \textit{chota} (smaller) Toba Tek Nagar bus depot.\footnote{The ethnography for this chapter was conducted in three different video-theaters at different times of the year and different times of the day. Anand Video-Theater described here is presented as a montage of the ethnographic details collected in three theaters.} Its entrance is marked by a small verandah whose walls are covered with film posters.\footnote{Above the posters is a red sign that says in Hindi, “In case of power failure money won’t be refunded. In case the video player stops working, money won’t be refunded.”} These posters form the backdrop for Hasan, the manager of the video-theater. A short, middle-aged man with gray hair, he usually sits behind a waist-height blue cupboard unit selling tickets while smoking cigarettes. The tickets for the next two film shows are placed on top of a cupboard unit behind an erect wooden plank, where the VCD or
DVD covers of the movies to be screened are displayed. The tickets are green or pink depending on the time of the show. The ticket collections are kept in the drawer at the top of the cupboard unit, and the VCDs and DVDs are stored in a large overused white plastic bag in the cupboard’s main compartment. An unpolished wooden box, which houses the two DVD and VCD players used to screen movies, is located at the top corner of the right wall in verandah. A small pink gadget with wires peeks out of this box; one end of these wires travel into the box and the other into the cinema hall. The pink gadget has a small toggle button that allows Hasan to switch between the two film players. A red sign below the box reads: “Half-glass for Rs. 3, Full-glass for Rs.5”; a mark left by one of the many past users. The sound amplifier for the theater’s audio system is located on a black granite seat, which is also used to shelve neatly folded film posters.

Figure 3.2: Anand Video-Theater
The entrance to the screening space is through a bright-green wooden door, draped with an overused, heavy, red-velvet curtain. The curtain prevents the sunlight from traveling in and the sound inside from traveling out. The screening space is a twenty-five-foot-wide and forty-foot-long rectangular hall. A fifty-inch LCD television is fixed at the center of the wall at the opposite end of the entrance. It’s dark inside, and the constantly moving images on the screen gleam over the entire space. The sloping roof above is built with L-shaped iron sections and covered with asbestos sheets. These sheets fail to meet at the center, allowing faint rays of sunlight to enter and fall onto the cobwebs on the roof. But these light rays don’t distract the viewers engrossed in the film, or those sleeping. The off-white walls of the screening space are covered up to waist-height with white ceramic tiles, similar to the verandah. There are about twenty-five benches in the theater for seating. These benches, about a foot deep, are made of cast iron by the iron-grill shops near the city highway. The benches vary in height from the back of the theater hall to the front, creating the steps required for film viewing in a theater. They are narrow and hard to sit on, and yet, about a hundred men sit on them cramped up with their bodies touching each other, while smoking, sleeping, flipping through their mobile phones, or watching the films. The floor is laid with green kota stone, which Hasan cleans meticulously every morning before the first show. The show times are painted in red on the right wall of the hall: “9 a.m., 12 p.m., 3 p.m., 6 p.m., (and last show) 9 p.m.” Next to them is a sign that reads: No Spitting or Smoking...Fine INR. 200. Despite the sign, the walls of the theater are covered with spit. “SPITT!” and it finds its way onto the wall through the narrow rows of people watching movies and drips down towards the floor. Dark red, layer upon layer, hardened over time, they

165 These shops procure the iron from demolished buildings and slums in Mumbai as well as from abandoned industries in places as far away as Delhi. Most window grills, ladders inside houses, boxes to secure water pumps, and furniture in Toba Tek Nagar is designed and manufactured by these shop owners and their technicians.
are fossils that speak of the time passed by different men in the video-theater. “Time-pass,”
which is what Hasan says these viewers visit the theater for every day.

Figure 3.3: Screening Hall

4. **Everyday Time in a Video-Theater**

There are five shows daily at the video-theater, which include old and new Hindi films and a few
regional films. The choice of the film to be screened depends on the audience for that particular
show as well as the films that are being screened in the neighboring theaters. The early morning
9 a.m. show is a randomly chosen Bollywood film from the 1990s; it’s the least watched show.
Its audience is made up of a few *hamals* (porters) who work late nights and early mornings at the
manufacturing units or at the nearby city of Octroi booth, along a few young boys from the
locality who wander into the theaters on their way to colleges. The 12 p.m. shows are Bollywood films from late 1980s and 1990s or Bhojpuri films. Hindi-dubbed Telugu and Tamil films, which feature male mega-stars such as Rajnikant, Nagarjuna, and Chiranjeevi, are screened on rare occasions. The Bhojpuri films, too, usually feature popular male actors such as Sujit Kumar, Manoj Tiwari, Ravi Kishan, or Dinesh Lal Yadav. The noon shows attract the manufacturing-unit workers in Toba Tek Nagar. These are seasonal migrants from the region around the borders of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand, where Bhojpuri language is spoken. They work overnight in the manufacturing units, watch films until the afternoon, and then go on to sleep till late evening so as to work again through the night. “Films and cricket,” one the manufacturing-unit owners told me, “are the only activities that they choose to spend money on; the rest of the money is sent to families back home. They love their films.” Often these workers and porters, tired from working through the night, end up sleeping during the film screening, while others are half-awake trying to watch the film. The others that make up the audience for the morning and noon shows are the daily wage laborers from Toba Tek Nagar. They congregate outside the video-theater in the early morning (around 6:30 a.m.) to be picked up.

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166 Bhojpuri—a dialect of Hindi—is spoken in the eastern part of the state of Uttar Pradesh and the western part of the state of Bihar, and in some parts of Jharkhand. Bhojpuri films, as the work of Akshaya Kumar shows, have been in production since 1963. The dramatic growth of the film industry, its star system, and its consolidation into a territory of Bhojpuri cinema is due to the spread of the Bhojpuri-speaking migrants, who travel in search of work all across the country, specifically in cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, and more recently Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Chennai, among other cities. The main audiences of Bhojpuri films (as well as Bhojpuri music) in urban centers are construction laborers, porters, rickshaw-wallahs, and taxi drivers. See Akshaya Kumar, “The Aesthetics of Pirate Modernities: Bhojpuri Cinema and the Underclasses,” in *Arts and Aesthetics in a Globalising World*, ed. Raminder Kaur et al. (Oxford: Berg, 2015), 185; and Akshaya Kumar, “Bhojpuri Cinema and the ‘Rearguard’: Gendered Leisure, Gendered Promises,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 33, no. 2 (2016), 151. In the latter article Kumar suggests that there is a close relationship between the film genres, exhibition practices, and the absence of female audience for the “fringe genres” such as action films, non-A circuit films, and Bhojpuri films.

167 Madhavi Tangella’s work on Telugu video-theaters show the significance of the video-theaters for migrants from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in a slum locality in the western suburbs of Mumbai. Madhavi Tangella, “Sagar Cinema: A poor man’s multiplex,” (Independent Fellowships Sarai-CSDS, 2005). Postings can be accessed on the Sarai Website: http://sarai.net/

168 Interview, 2013.
up by contractors for work on a daily basis. Those who do not get hired for work that day enter
the video-theaters to pass time. But they are never completely engrossed in the films. They move
in and out of the theater responding to calls on their mobile phones. They watch films in the
intervals while waiting for a call from their contractor or friends for work. After a while they
give up on getting any work that day and end up watching the film while continuously flipping
through their phones to arrange for work the next day or to see photographs of families, homes,
mosques, and fields that they have left back to come to the city. They move between the films,
their life in the slum, and native homes—different times and spaces, in the video-theater.

The 12 p.m. show starts off empty most days, but by the end of the show the theater is
over-crowded with viewers. These new viewers are the older residents of Toba Tek Nagar—the
shop owners, the landlords, the manufacturing-unit owners, who do not work through the day
and come to watch the noon show post-afternoon namaz and lunch. They enter the screening hall
and crowd the corridor, making it impossible for others to enter. At that moment, the show is
stopped midway and the tube lights are switched on. Hasan then rushes in and begins to walk
back and forth frenetically, swearing to awaken those sleeping or lounging on the seats. Once
everyone is up, he pushes and squeezes the audience to accommodate those standing. A few
viewers get tired of the crowded space inside the theater and walk out to begin conversations
with Hasan on the verandah. Others who are bored with the movie walk out to wait on the
verandah for the next show to start. The new migrants sit by quietly overhearing the
conversations between the older residents and Hasan. These conversations, as those in the
previous chapter, range from everyday events in the locality to visits to native places to films.
The video-theaters are one of few places in Toba Tek Nagar where older residents encounter and
share space with seasonal migrants. The more typical lack of interaction is due to the routines of
the migrant workers—they sleep during the day, eat at a bisi (a food mess), and work through the
night, as well as to a common perception of the seasonal migrants as temporary residents with no attachments to the locality and no moral boundaries.\textsuperscript{169}

The 12 p.m. show is about to end. The movie gets stopped just when the end titles begin to roll on the screen, and the lights are switched on. Hasan walks in and shouts for everyone to show their tickets. Those sleeping wake up and sit up, while others begin to walk out. Those who hold tickets for the next show are allowed to stay, and those without one are rudely pushed out of the theater; \textit{“Phokatchands!” “Freeloaders!”} Unlike the new migrants, the older residents are pushed out with respect and humor. They exit and stand outside on the verandah smoking, flipping through their mobile phones, discussing different aspects of the film, and staring at the posters, all at the same time.

The evening shows, similar to the early morning shows, are randomly chosen Bollywood films from the 1990s. On Sundays, the latest Hindi film releases are screened at the video-theaters. They are screened throughout the day on a loop. They are usually downloaded through torrents at a nearby cyber café or bought from vendors near the railway stations. The everydayness gets suspended on Sundays as male residents, old and new, young and aged, seasonal and permanent, all watch films at the video-theater without any routine. But as the day passes and night approaches, the theater begins to empty and those in the audience start moving towards their homes to prepare for the routine that is to follow the next day.

\textsuperscript{169}Interviews, 2013. The lack of moral boundaries refers to the mobility of temporary migrants, who move in and out of the locality without any familial attachments (family or property) within the locality. However, one of the common concerns expressed by the older residents (mostly male) was eve teasing and sexual violence towards their daughters.
5. The Climax: On Repetition

There is a certain everydayness to the life in the video-theaters, but one that is filled with encounters both on-screen and off-screen. The films screened at noon usually tell stories about male-migrants in the city or about male protagonists in rural north India. These stories revolve around urban encounters, revenge, and redemption. For example, a common film narrative is of two male migrant friends who come to Mumbai to make new urban lives. But as they move through the city, they encounter crime, corruption, love, death, and money.\(^{170}\) The films show how these encounters transform their lives and their personhood. Most times, the narratives involve cruel landlords in a rural setting who grab land from farmers by forcing them into debt. Here the story is one of getting revenge in the name of family, land, and love.\(^{171}\) Other times, the narratives entail conflicts between the male migrants and an urban gangster. In these narratives the male migrant takes on the nexus of the slimy urban politician, the corrupt police, the capitalist businessmen, and their crime world in the city.\(^{172}\) The cruel world in the film, governed by money and greed, becomes the space for encounters, accidents, transformations, and realizations for the film’s male protagonist. Most days, as the movie is about to end one, of the spectators hurriedly walks out to alert the others that the climax of the film is about to start. Everyone on the verandah leaves their conversation abruptly and hurries back into the screening hall to watch the film’s climax.

The climax is usually a fight scene. The hero, beaten up by the villain’s goons, is laying half-dead on the ground. But at that moment, just when it seems as if there is no hope, the hero

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\(^{170}\) See for example movies such as *Yamraaj*, directed by Raj Babbar (1998; Mumbai: Abha Films); and *Keemat — They are back*, directed by Sameer Malkan (1998; Mumbai: B4U Productions).

\(^{171}\) See *Saugandh* (An Oath), directed by Raj N. Sippy (1991; Mumbai: B4U Productions).

\(^{172}\) These Hindi films from the 1990s belong to the action genre but are hybrid in nature. The film moves through moments of comedy, action, crime, romance, and family drama. See, for example, *Ghatak: Lethal*, directed by Rajkumar Santoshi, (1996; Mumbai: Santoshi Productions).
gathers the strength to get up and destroy the villain. This redemptive power is usually associated with an utterance or a flash of a past moment that involves the death of the hero’s beloved one: a mother, father, sister, or friend. The viewers are well aware of this turn, not just because of the usual climax-scene structure in Hindi films but also because viewers have watched the climax scene many times before. And yet, they repeatedly enjoy this moment when things turn around.

During my interviews at the video-theaters or while I would hung out on the verandah making notes, the managers or interviewees would often interrupt me and urge me to go watch the climax. They would narrate the climax and its details and tell me what details to pay attention to while watching it. What drives this pleasure (or what is the pleasure-drive) in cinematic repetition? And what does it do?

In her book *Cinema and Experience*, Hansen suggests that Benjamin ascribed two critical tasks to cinema: first, the task of consciousness-raising and revolutionary transformation of the collective (masses), and second, a more modest therapeutic task of undoing the self-

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173 This turn of events during a climax scene is a common motif in Hindi films. Sometimes this turn is doubled or even tripled, wherein the hero and the villain keep getting an upper hand over the other due to some occurrences at the scene of action.

174 One of the most watched scenes is the fight between Akshay Kumar, a Hindi film actor known for his martial arts skill, and the World Wrestling Federation’s wrestler undertaker in Umesh Mehra’s 1996 film *Khiladiyon Ka Khiladi* (Player of Players).


176 Benjamin assigned to films the role of awakening the masses. This awakening was in two senses, which can be understood through the term optical unconscious. At the level of anthropological materialism, the collective also refers to a corporeal body, a lived body. In this sense, there are things we cannot see due to anthropological restrictions—not just our backs and the back of our heads but also minute details. Thus the camera, due to its capacity to enlarge and slow down reality, assumes secularized prophetic powers as a technology and opens up the scope of play with nature and expands a field of action. In its second sense, Benjamin also ascribes to films the critical consciousness raising role of awakening the masses out of the sleep of capitalism. Here, the masses were in the dream-world of capitalism, particularly referring to the notion of commodity fetishism as well as its capacity to produce material dream-worlds of commodity everywhere (malls, exhibitions, arcades), and the film as a mimetic technology could not only reproduce it but also explode it on the screen and in doing so awaken the masses out of their dream to take hold of commodities in reality. This awakening required innervation—an interpenetration of “body-space and image-space,” through technology. “Only when in technology body- and image-space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes body collective innervation, and all bodily innervations of the
alienation at the individual and collective levels. My interest is in exploring the latter. While the earlier task—that is, cinema as a technology that can produce critical consciousness at the level of the individual and the collective, which Benjamin elaborates explicitly in his artwork essays—has been much discussed as well as criticized, the latter—the modest task of films in everyday life—hasn’t received much attention. One of the reasons for this inattention, Hansen suggests, is Benjamin’s decision to omit the latter point from his third and most widely published version of the artwork essay. This omission was due to criticism from his friend Adorno as well as the ongoing changes in the European context, particularly the growing Fascist mass mobilization.

Benjamin’s interest in cinema, like in the art of storytelling, is due to its dialectical relationship to the alienation of individuals. The alienation of senses and the waning of the individual’s capacity to experience under modern industrial capitalism, Benjamin argued, could be undone on the terrain of art and technology. “As a technologically based art form, cinema offers the possibility that mass psychoses engendered by the industrial-capitalist mis-adaptation of technology might, at the very least, be diffused and neutralized.” It holds out the possibility of shaking up the audience through viscerally experienced, collective laughter. In this regard, Benjamin refers to Charlie Chaplin as the “the ploughshare that cuts through the masses; laughter loosens up the mass.” This reading was based on two aspects. At the level of specific films,

collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by communist manifesto”. Hansen, Cinema and Experience, 140.


178 Hansen, Cinema and Experience, 99.

179 I explain this aspect in detail in the second chapter on storytelling.

180 Hansen, Cinema and Experience, 99.

particularly Chaplin’s *Modern Times*,182 the masses came in contact with their own alienation on screen through a proletarian mime mimicking the fragmentation of their bodies under modern industrial capitalism, and at an overall level, films provided a medium to articulate a new form of interplay between technology and the body at the level of production as well as reception. Thus Benjamin, Hansen tells us, makes the famous dictum in *One Way Street*: “People whom nothing moves or touches any longer learn to cry again in cinema.”183 This wasn’t a sign of a mere reversal of the alienated self to some unalienated, unitary self, but one of a new fusion, an interplay between the body and the technology—unlike the violence of technology on the body in factories and in war. Hansen summarizes this relationship through her notion of “cinema as a play-form of second nature.”184 I expand on this relationship between films and play in the next part of the chapter. But for now, I want to explore cinema’s therapeutic role of undoing alienation, which Benjamin saw most explicitly in Charlie Chaplin’s comedy films, in the context of the video-theaters in Toba Tek Nagar. And I want to do this by focusing on repetition.

Comedy and play, Hansen suggests, have in common the principle of repetition.185 For children, repetition is the soul of play; nothing makes them happier than doing the same thing over and over again. They ascribe to repetition both its therapeutic role of domesticating trauma by transforming a shattering experience into habit through repetition and a more productive task. In the latter, repetition as difference entails reliving the past moment repeatedly with the aim of redeeming its elements for a different future; the same is reproduced over and over to the point of its being unrecognizable—different. Repetition in Benjamin’s writings, Hansen suggests, oscillates between two notions: first, Nietzsche’s eternal return of the same, which we saw in the

183 Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 100.
185 Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 194.
narrative structure of the film *Dharavi*, and second, Proust’s notion of repetition as difference, wherein the past is reproduced through a play between similarity and difference. In this regard, film as a medium of mechanical reproduction, for Benjamin, allowed for infinite reiterability and improvability at the level of production (numerous takes) as well as reception (exhibition practices and distribution). Based on this repeat-ability of cinema, which is therapeutic and redemptive, Benjamin, Hansen tells us, invested in cinema the hope that it could heal the wounds inflicted on human bodies and sense by technologies predicated on the mastery of nature by fascist and capitalist regimes. The hope was that as a sensory-reflexive medium of technology, films offered a second chance of reversing sensory alienation and the numbing of human sensorium in the modern world. It is in this sense, or these senses, that I see the repetitive act of the audiences in the video-theater: watching the same climax scene over and over again, where the actor onscreen redeems the strength to take over the evil forces, with the same intensity every time. However, while a few of them enjoy the scene, there are others who use films as a therapeutic moment to sleep in the video-theaters; those that remain half-awake move between the psychic unconscious and the optical unconscious onscreen; and then there are those that move in between the world of the theater, their attempts to find work for the next day, and their mobile phones. So what does this redemptive moment look like when one watches films, the same films, over and over again to enjoy specific moments while moving between different worlds? What sort of moments does the video-theater offer to them? And lastly, what is it about the exhibition practices in video-theaters that provides an impulse for the emergence of these moments in the everyday life of Toba Tek Nagar?
6. **The Last Show: On Cinematic Excess and Cinephilia**

Unlike the empty theater on Sunday nights, the night shows (9 p.m.) the rest of the week at the video-theater are packed with audiences. The last show, at 9 p.m., at Anand Video-Theater is an old Bollywood film from the 1970s or 1980s. Its primary audience is made up of the older male residents of Toba Tek Nagar. They return home from work in the evenings, have dinner, and then come to watch films at the video-theater. The show goes on till midnight, and the discussions then continue over smokes, pan, tobacco, and spit for another hour or so, outside the theater. On one such night, two friends, Khalid and Jackie, were standing outside Anand Video-Theater having a conversation about films. They, like me, had just walked out of the 9 p.m. showing of the 1975 film *Khel Khel Mein (All in the Play)*.

Khalid, a man in his late sixties wearing a white baniyan and a checkered lungi, was an older resident of the non-notified part of Toba Tek Nagar and a cinephile who loved older films. He had been a frequent visitor of the night show at the video-theater for the past fifteen years. One of the reasons for showing older films in the evenings, Hasan told me during an interview, was the demand from viewers like Khalid. His love of films goes back to his days in the city as a young teenage migrant. Jackie, a man in his early seventies, wearing a pink shirt and gray pants, was a philosopher. He was not from the locality, or even the city, but was visiting Khalid. He was new to the video-theaters, but had dabbled in questions of film theory, art, and aesthetics in his writings on workers. I stood by my motorbike, smoking a cigarette, and overhearing their conversation. They too lit their cigarettes. As they exhaled the smoke, Khalid initiated a conversation:

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186 This conversation is a fictionalized account based on my interviews with two older residents and film-lovers at the video-theaters. The fictional part is not the conversational side of Khalid, but rather Jackie. I decided to stage these interviews as a conversation between a cinephile and a philosopher thinking about films in order to show the similarities between questions being broached by the two as well as bringing the two on to a common plane and world of ideas. As a result of this, the conversation might seem a bit disjunctive and incoherent. On a different note, I have not figured out if it is coincidence or a cinematic aspect that I would have a great interview with the two resident-cinephiles (who together form Khalid here) after we had all watched the movie *Khel Khel Mein (All in the Game/Play)*, and that I would use Hansen’s ideas on “cinema as a play-form of second nature” a year later.
**Khalid:** When I came in the 1970s to Mumbai I was working as a daily-wage *hamal* near Kamathipura, just like some of the new migrants in this locality. The locality was filled with single-screen cinema theaters that sold tickets at a somewhat affordable price. They would screen all kinds of films, English as well as Hindi. Most of the businesses in the area, and for whom I worked, were owned by Muslim businessmen. Every Friday, work used to be really slow, since the day of the businessmen revolved around the *Jumma namaz* (the Friday afternoon prayer). I would take the day off to watch films in the single-screen theaters. I would watch three shows on the same day in different or the same theater. I relive that feeling today while watching those films in this video-theater. I live in that world today through films.

**Jackie:** Do you mean through memories?

**Khalid:** It’s the experience of those moments—of youth and the city then, which for me are attached to those films. Those films, now considered old films, had and have *mohabbat* (love). They (the films) remind me of the city’s *mahol* (milieu) then, and my life in it as a young migrant. I had to move to Toba Tek Nagar in 1980 with my family. We moved due to the demolition of our older house in Byculla. After we moved, the first religious riot between Hindus and Muslims broke out in Toba Tek Nagar soon after, in 1984. Things have changed since then. They are more violent now.

**Jackie:** Which means although your individual time is governed by the time of the city, your individual time, the time you live in, that is, through films, is not the same as the time of the city.

**Khalid:** We have to live in this time of violence. But I also want to live in that world, a different world; in the world of those older films, and the world in which those films were screened. Today, films in theaters are violent, but that is because *duniya ka mahol hi vaisa hai*, (it’s the milieu we live in). This not the violence of the *bhais*, the gangsters; their time has waned. But the violence of religion and money; everyone is after land and money. Even the dead are not safe here; their bodies get excavated and burnt, to accommodate new ones. But the younger generations, my children, they can relate to it; they have grown up with it. They find their way in and out of it. I can’t, I am too old. I live, or want to live, in that old world. I, we, do it through the old films. Those memories, those times, are preserved through films in this video-theater.

**Jackie (interrupts):** “*Duniya ka mahol!*” Foucault uses a similar concept of “milieu.” He collapses the boundary between the social and the natural, but shows how they are all entrapped within forms of power. Is that what you mean by your idea of violence? And are there intervals in this milieu? For me, intervals are created when individuals and collectives renegotiate the ways in which they adjust their own time to the divisions and rhythms of domination dictated by the system.

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187 Kamathipura is the historical as well as present-day red light district in the inner city of Bombay. The film theaters he refers to were one of the early film theaters that were built in Colonial Bombay during 1920s in the Grant Road-Lamington Road area. See Bhaumik, “Cinematograph to Cinema,” 50.
Khalid: The films in this video-theater, you must have seen, don’t have intervals. But the film itself is an interval for some, not for all. Today, things do come and go very fast; nothing lasts. That is how time is made to work. So we watch films to preserve memories.

Jackie: I also feel that it doesn’t take long to think. Intervals allow for that time to appropriate the breaks in work to become breaks for leisure, particularly for workers whose time is governed by rhythms of work, like the migrant workers here who work over night, and then come watch films in the mornings.

Khalid: Ours is a time governed by elections, religious conflicts, work, development, demolitions, evictions, and violence, among other things. In this time, watching film is an overwhelming experience. You relive the lost moment and enjoy it, at the same time you long for it since it’s not here. The overwhelming feeling has its sadness and pleasure… In the old films there was always a song, a shayri (poetry), a dialogue, or a scene, which would stick with us. We would repeat it to each other, over and over again; find moments to use it. It made the film and that time, a memory, which we relive today when we see that dialogue or scene or song in the same film again. Watching it today, in this theater, reminds us and lets us enjoy the love of those times. Just that song, that dialogue, and you get transported into a different world.

Jackie: And that world is also in this world; that time is also in this time.

As they turned to exhale their cigarette smoke away from each other’s face, Khalid saw me overhearing the conversation and turned back towards Jackie.

Khalid: But don’t get so serious. Look at this young guy listening with such seriousness. Film is about entertainment; the pleasure of feeling the sorrow as well as the sorrow of not having pleasure today.

At that moment, the manufacturing businessman’s words came back to me: “… films and cricket are the only activities that they choose to spend money on. The rest of the money is sent back home to families …they love their films.”

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188 Writing on the inability of the traditional tools of film theory scholarship to understand the relationship between films and society in the case of Bombay cinema, Kaushik Bhaumik emphasizes the sonic elements of films: “… the Bombay film is predominantly built in terms of its sonic structures with the main impact of the film depending on a complex layering of sounds that encompass dialogue, music and songs. The sonic map of the film sets up the rhythm of the film, acting being subsidiary to sound.” Kaushik Bhaumik, K. “A Brief History of Cinema from Bombay to “Bollywood,” History Compass 2 no. 1 (2004): 1–4.

189 Interviews, 2013.
In his essay-cum-interview, the film-theorist Paul Willemen makes a case for writing critical film-theory from the point of view of cinephilia. He suggests that cinephilia designates a process, a relationship between the film and viewer, where the film allows you to think or to fantasize a “beyond” of cinema, a world beyond representation, which only shimmers through in certain moments of the film. Willemen ascribes two significant aspects to cinephilia and the relationship it entails between the viewer and the film: first, a moment of revelation and second, related to the first, an aspect of excess, wherein the act of watching is always in excess of the way the film is coded or programmed to be watched. This excess points towards a moment of potential dislocation, of seeing something beyond what is given to you to see. This moment of dislocation, he suggests, is also a resistance, that is, an act of viewing the film in ways that go beyond how the ideal spectator is imagined or interpellated by the film. In another sense, cinephilia, he suggests, has a relationship to necrophilia, that is, a relationship to something that is dead, past, but alive in memory; this necrophilia, he stresses, is not negative. But this act, as Khalid suggests, also has a close relationship to pleasure, or what Lalitha Gopalan calls a surplus pleasure that finds its impulse from cinematic elements, the viewer’s relationship to films—cinephilia—to which I would add, the cinephile’s drive for pleasure, that is, to journey into non-alienated worlds.

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191 Lalitha Gopalan argues that Indian cinema, while following certain logics of the Hollywood film industry, is also distinct from it. This distinction is based on certain elements peculiar to Indian cinema, which she argues produce interruptions in the narrative structure. These elements include dance and songs, the half-time interval, and the censorship regulations, among others. These elements of Indian cinema make cinema, she suggests, a constellation of interruptions. To explicate, the songs and dance, those peculiar tropes of Indian cinema, often get shot in foreign locations, involve dance troops and dance sequences, which do not add or subtract anything from the narrative of the film. These interruptions, she writes, produce a “surplus pleasure.” Lalitha Gopalan, Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema. (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 21.
7. “Double Dekho”: Possibilities and Impossibilities

Despite the openness in terms of its use, the video-theaters are a space primarily used by men. Even the narratives of the films screened there revolve around male protagonists. As a space for exhibiting films, the video-theaters do not offer women the same experience both off-screen and onscreen. Thus women are never seen here, neither are children, unless one sneaks in. It’s usually Javedbhai’s son, Rahim. Javedbhai sells samosas and papads in different video-theaters of the locality. He walks back and forth in the theater with a large tin box in his hand shouting “Rs. 20 for two samosas . . . Rs.10 for 2 papads.” After five minutes or so he moves on to the next video-theater. In summer he sells a green pistachio-colored ice-candy instead of papads. Rahim’s mother cooks this food to be sold in the mornings, and Rahim comes to deliver the tin of food after school in his school uniform as they live close by. After delivering the tin, Rahim tries his best to stay back in the theater as long as possible. He squeezes himself into the seating spaces that are left vacant. Usually it’s somewhere in the middle of the theater. The backs and

192 Most video-theater managers ascribe the absence of women in the audience to the lack of a separate seating section in the screening hall. The quest for pleasure, the struggle against sexual and gendered violence, and access to public spaces, feminist scholars Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade have argued, are deeply connected. One of the common ways in which urban policies in Mumbai have attempted to resolve the issue is through segregation—avoiding contact between men and women in public and semi-public modes of transportation. However, this strategy of segregation, the scholars show, also ends up arresting their movement under the trap of protection and, in turn, denying them their right to public spaces. In the case of leisure and pleasure as non-purposeful activities in public spaces, they write, if women cannot manufacture a sense of purpose for which their presence is mandatory in the public space, they must instead be where they really belong, that is, in the domestic spaces. The significant issue here, they argue, is one of rights rather than of protection—the right to pleasure thus includes the right to public spaces. See Shilpa Phadke, “Dangerous Liaisons: Women and Men, Risk and Reputation in Mumbai,” *Economics and Political Weekly* 42, no. 17 (2007): 1510–1518, and Shilpa Phadke et.al. “Why Loiter? Radical Possibilities for Gendered Dissent” In *Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia’s Cities*, ed. Melissa Butcher and Selvaraj Velayutham (New York: Routledge, 2009), 185. The relationship between leisure, gender, and stratification of public space can be seen explicitly in the case of film exhibition spaces in Mumbai. The figure of the single woman audience has been absent in the realm of film exhibition as well as film genres. Women were and are always seen as a part of a family or as accompanied by men. In the case of film theaters, the balcony sections, seating sections elevated above the stall sections, which were divided based on class segregation also became “safe spaces” for women. In other instances, theaters would house a separate “family-box section” that would be located behind the balcony sections. In recent years, one of the major appeals of viewing films in multiplexes has been their portrayal as “safe spaces” for women. See: Kumar, ‘Bhojpuri Cinema and the ‘Rearguard’, 158.

193 In one of my interviews with a theater manager, his reason for the absence of women was the seating arrangement in the theater. He suggested that they sell tickets without seat numbers and that there be no seats or seat dividers.
the sides of the hall get occupied first since the walls offer backrests, and the front seats get occupied last due to their low height and proximity to the screen. Now having sat in the middle, Rahim can’t see the film screen in its entirety as the big male bodies sitting in front block his view. The adult men in the theater manage to find their view around others’ heads and make up the whole of the movie from images seen from different points of view. But Rahim has to deal with huge bodies, not just heads. He constantly moves left and right to find a clear view in between these bodies. Tired and irritated after a while, he slowly begins to crawl up and stand on the footrest of the bench. Just when the view is perfect up there and the whole screen can be seen in one view, the person behind slaps him hard on his head. TAPP! Rahim looks behind with anger and shock, but sits down. A few minutes later, he slowly crawls up again. TAPPPP! The second time around the slap is harder. Rahim looks back and abuses with a whisper of anger and fear at the same time, “Chutiya sala!” “Fucker!” He gives the person an angry stare as if to get over his small size with the anger in his face. “Fucker!” Frustrated, he crawls out of his seat and decides to go sit on the floor right below the television screen. Just then, Javedbhai picks him up by his ear and asks him to run on home. The next day, Rahim shows up again and continues his struggle to find a clear view of the screen. Rahim’s attempts are similar to those of other children in Toba Tek Nagar. They stand outside the theater staring at the film posters, and most often an elderly person passing would stop and drag her/him by their ear. Other times the manager of the video-theater himself drives the child away rudely. “Bhag idhar se chutiye! (Run off you little fucker!)” The video-theaters in Toba Tek Nagar are perceived as spaces for footloose single migrant men with no fixed relationship to the locality. The youth and children from family households are forbidden and discouraged from visiting these theaters. The latter,

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194 Based on field notes.
and women as well, watch films in their homes or at the nearby single-screen theaters and multiplexes. While the extensive use of theaters by seasonal male migrants is a significant reason for residents’ contempt towards the theaters, another reason for the condescension towards the video-theaters has also to do with their history in Toba Tek Nagar.

A few years back, there were around fifteen video-theaters in Toba Tek Nagar. They were located along the main street that connects the locality to the city highway. These older theaters screened Hindi movies, just like the newer ones, but their primary source of income was screening porn movies during the daytime. They screened English porn openly, literally openly! Curtains used to be half open, as Hasan told me, so that the moaning and orgasmic sounds would creep their way out the entrance to attract more men. They didn’t have to run porn for too long; the shows lasted only twenty minutes. “The young chutiyas, the young fuckers, would wet their penises in a mere five minutes. They couldn’t handle twenty minutes.”195 The theater managers earned a lot those days as they charged for their small shows. “We earned so much that I even took a trip with my family to Dubai and a Haj to Mecca.”196 But those times waned. “The chutiyas, all charged up from porn inside the hall, would come out and tease women in the locality.”197 That provoked the jamaat (community) and got them together against the video-theaters. They filed a complaint at the police station. The Commissioner of Police came down and the video-theaters were shut down. Today there are just about seven video-theaters in Toba Tek Nagar. Four of them are located near the small bus depot and the other three are dispersed in different parts of the locality. The days of porn have passed. Today, even the breasts of a woman in a bikini on a film poster are covered with a newspaper. The theater managers try to maintain a

195 Interviews with a Video-Theater Manager, 2013.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
cordial relationship with the community and try projecting the image of the video-theater as a respectable business like any other in the locality. The video-theaters that share a wall with the plot of a temple or a mosque refuse to screen Hindi-dubbed English films, but the ones located away from public spaces and in smaller lanes do still show films from the action genre such as Conan the Barbarian, Xena the Warrior Princess, Lady Terminator, and Zero Dark Thirty.

As the days of porn and its substantial income waned video-theaters have struggled to earn enough money to survive in the locality. Running video-theaters isn’t profitable anymore. “It’s a risky business that is slowly declining.”198 Pointing to the unit next to Anand Video-Theater, Hasan suggested that this unit was an old video-theater that was shut down a year back due to a lack of income. Today, a construction-material provider uses it as a small warehouse to store his wares—an image that illuminates the transition in cities from being spaces of pleasure and play to spaces of work and construction. At another video-theater located at the edge of the slum, the manager had started a side business of sorting and selling recycled waste in order to sustain his theater. He managed to sustain it just for a year.199 The galas or units in which these video-theaters are run are rented out for INR.15000 (USD. 240) a month. If one owns the gala, the business is profitable. But most of the owners moved out of the locality to peripheral areas of the city. Today, most video-theaters are contracted out on a five-year basis and the weekly collections are shared with the owner. The owners come collect their share every Monday night. The owner pays for the entertainment tax and the license to screen moves from distribution companies from these collections. Managers such as Hasan have to deposit an amount of INR. 500,000 (USD. 8,000) in order to lease out the theater from the owner for a period of five years.

198 Ibid.
199 In another video-theater that I studied, part of the screening hall was being used as a storage space for waste recycling, while the verandah was used to sort waste. The manager, who had leased out the theater from its owner for five years, was unable to sustain the venture without having a parallel business of waste recycling.
Besides these costs, the managers also pay a monthly hafta (an informal weekly bribe) to the police. In the old days of porn screenings, the theaters would pay a monthly hafta of INR. 18,000 (USD 300), but since the screening of porn films was stopped, the hafta was reduced to INR. 7,000 (USD 110). When I returned the next year to meet Hasan, he had left the video-theater, as it wasn’t profitable enough to sustain his family. A new group of young boys from Toba Tek Nagar had taken over the management. They had pooled money as a group to run the video-theater. The first time I visited Anand Video Theatre was to pass time in between my interviews. But over time I became a frequent visitor of the theater. Hasan, the theater manager, was intrigued by my presence and inquired about my visits to the locality. A short man in his mid-forties, he was a rude character, particularly towards younger migrants and children. He would sit outside the theater selling tickets in a polyester half shirt and dark trousers or a white vest and a blue lungi. “Double dekho! Tees ka double dekho. Pet bharke dekho. Khana mat khao, film se peth bharo!” “See two movies for 30 Rupees only. Fill your appetite with films, forget the food.” “Salman Khan is up next and Akshay Kumar after. . . .” He had been managing theaters for past twenty years in different slums of the city. Most of these theaters were leased from police inspectors, municipal bureaucrats, or older residents who had moved to the peripheral suburbs of the city to live in apartments. During one of our conversations, Hasan, trying to make sense of my interest and questions about his theater, asked me the “real intent” of my questions: “Are you planning to run a video-theater?” My immediate response was “No!”

8. Needs = Desires = Pleasures

Over the next few months however, Hasan’s question distracted me from my own conception of planning. As I thought about his question, I wondered: Why do we never plan a video-theater in
a slum? Why does an intervention always address basic needs of development? Why intervene through “mega-projects” and not “minor-projects,” such a video-theater, which afford residents the pleasure of seeing, experiencing, and connecting times and places—that forgotten play so central to Lefebvre’s writings on cities? And how would this minor-project differ from mega-projects such as mall-multiplexes that are being built across Indian cities as part of the new urban leisure economy?

In his essay on the figure of the pirate within the intellectual debates on intellectual property rights, Lawrence Liang argues that the figure of the pirate, and the practice of piracy, has remained an anomaly in rethinking questions of urban commons due to its association with the world of pleasure and desire rather than with meeting “pure needs.” While Liang goes on to argue for rethinking piracy through the aesthetics of the everyday world it creates, for the purpose of this chapter I am interested in his thoughts on the supposed difference between needs and desires. Liang begins his ideas on pleasurable transgressions through an interesting case of a typical intervention in the field of the digital divide.

An NGO in Bangalore that works in the field of information and communication technologies for development was conducting a workshop on accessing the Internet for the information needs of rural women working to empower other poor rural women in India. The facilitator guided the women through the basics of the Internet, including how to access information relevant to their work, which ranges from providing access to credit to promoting women’s health. The training was highly appreciated, and all the women volunteers seemed to be enjoying themselves while fiddling with the computers and exploring the Internet. At the end of the training, when the NGO started cleaning up the computers, including the browsing histories and the cached copies of the sites accessed, they were a little aghast to find that most of the women volunteers had been surfing pornography—and a range of pornography, at that. So while the trainers were holding

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201 Ibid: 367.
forth eloquently about the real information needs of the poor, the poor were quite happy to access their real information needs.202

The links between pleasure, desire, aspiration, and trespass, Liang goes on to tell us, have always been complicated, and the closer that the transgressive act is to the domain of pleasure, the more difficult it seems for it to be redeemed socially. Thus, while projects and practices that deal with questions of livelihood and survival are easily justified, projects that deal with new subjectivities and pleasurable transgressions are avoided and excluded. The moral dictates, he insists, that govern the lives of the poor are imposed not only by the state but equally by those who theorize the lives of the poor—“Be aware of your class. Don’t get trapped by false consciousness.” When people start moving out of the frame of representation carefully crafted for them, they have to be shown their true essence; their transgressions have to be brought within the terms of their representative class. The (information) needs of the poor have to be something other than wanting to watch films or become a filmmaker. Such injunctions, Liang concludes, tell us more about the fantasies of the state and the intellectuals than about the fantasies, desires, and aspirations of people.203 The video-theaters I have been describing so far, found only in slums such as Toba Tek Nagar, allow for such possibilities and fantasies to coexist along with their limits. Their price affordability (INR. 30 or USD 0.8 for two consecutive shows), the anachronistic form of film exhibition, an openness to using the theaters in no particular way, the mixing of men from different contexts, and the provision of cinematic spaces for cinephiles, among other aspects, play a significant role in providing the residents moments to space-out into other worlds. They are spaces where individuals can experience, interpret, and translate films so as to connect different cinematic elements to their own particular situations, and travel into different spatio-temporal worlds.

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9. **Double Dekho: Time at a Dialectical Standstill**

The phrase “Double dekho,” circulating in the space outside the video-theaters in Toba Tek Nagar can be understood in two senses. In one sense, the phrase connotes a capitalist economic relationship between the activity of watching films and money: “Double Dekho” as “Get the full value of your money.” This capitalist relationship between full value of money and watching films underlies the proliferating new urban leisure economy that is replacing the older deindustrialized spaces in Mumbai. This urban leisure economy finds its concrete manifestation in the urban type: mall-multiplex. The history of the multiplex in India, as Adrian Athique and Douglas Hill show, is closely tied to the big corporate retail economy as well as the corporatization of film exhibition practices. 204 Both sectors gained prominence post-1990s due to a shift in the state economic policies at the national level towards a service-oriented economic paradigm. At the urban level, this shift resulted in urban authorities adopting policies with an

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entrepreneurial orientation that would spatially transform urban environments to meet the needs of investment capital and those able to actively participate in a lifestyle centered upon rising consumption. The emergence of the multiplex-mall can be located at this juncture in economic policies.

One significant aspect of the mall-multiplex phenomenon, Athique and Hill suggest, is the coming together of retail, film-exhibition, and real-estate development as an organized sector. At the scale of an individual urban typology, the mall-multiplex complex is constituted by four major players: first, the mall developer, who puts up the property and collects rents; second, the multiplex operator, who gains access to infrastructure and a public suited to the staged show times and small auditorium model; third, the retail chains who defray infrastructure costs by moving into the malls and benefit from the crowd-pulling power of the multiplex; and fourth, the food courts that service the mall and capitalize on dining-out practices. All four players benefit from the browsing behaviors of consumers and share the footfalls from each other’s activities. As opposed to the mass in-and-out crowds formed at set intervals at the older cinema halls, Athique and Hill suggest that the mall-multiplex format is based on a continuous flow of mobile high-value audience. As one of the mall operators quoted in their book suggests, the multiplex-mall involves “a day out experience where you shop, go to a food court and watch a movie, enjoy yourself, take the whole day and go….” The ideal consumers

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205 Their study shows that most multiplex operators are either subsidiaries of private housing developers, mall developers, and/or multi-media conglomerates, or are transiting towards becoming one of the three.

206 The small auditorium format has also changed the genre of films that are being produced as well as the proliferation of independent filmmakers. The older and larger single-screen theaters primarily screen Bollywood masala films that attract a mass audience alongside English films (dubbed Hollywood films) and pornographic films during the matinee or the morning show.

207 Ibid:75. Specifically, the multiplex cinema is said to increase footfalls in a mall by forty to fifty percent.
are young upwardly mobile people with high disposable income looking for quality as well as good value for money, is aspirational and want the best for himself/herself & family.\textsuperscript{208}

Another significant of the multiplexes, Athique and Hill show, is the tax benefits they receive from the state. In their desire to foster prestige commercial development projects, a number of economically central states, including Maharashtra, have elected to give multiplexes complete entertainment tax exemptions for the first five years and allow for dynamic ticket pricing, while leaving the high entertainment tax on single screen theaters intact (forty-five percent in Maharashtra).\textsuperscript{209} The uneven tax system has created a boom of multiplexes in major and smaller Indian cities, while making it difficult for family-owned single screen theaters that cater to a mass audience consisting of families and single male subjects to compete with the multiplexes and sustain in cities. Furthermore, the multiplex business in most cities has been dominated by a handful of players who aspire to build a chain of exhibition spaces at an urban and national level in order to achieve economies of scale.\textsuperscript{210} In 2009, five companies operated two-third of India’s multiplexes, which is a marked departure from the disaggregated form of film exhibition sector that existed in India up until 1970s.

In a city being shaped by an organized corporate form of urban leisure economy and experiencing closures and redevelopment of older affordable single-screen cinema theaters, small video-theaters housed in slum localities such as Toba Tek Nagar are one of the few spaces where cinema still exists in its affordable and public format. Writing on the transformative relationship between film genres, digital cinema, economic circuits of cinema, and alternate

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid, 65.
\textsuperscript{209} Athique and Hill argue that the states have provided tax exemptions for the first five years in order to allow multiplexes to develop a strong business in the first five years, which can then be taxed at the regular rate. This is a long term strategy on the part of the state. However, a number of multiplex operators, their study shows, believe that they would continue to receive tax benefits even after the five year period.
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid, 58.
forms of cinema publics, Vasudevan argues that to gauge key contests and differences in film cultures and publics, we need to look at new forms of experience emerging from the global video and TV networks of film circulation, rather than formal circuits of film culture. Similar to Liang (above), Vasudevan’s emphasis is on the pirate media circuits that are a crucial component of everyday film consumption. However, his broader point is that we need to pay attention to the differentiated circuits and exhibition forms of cinema that rest alongside the formation of the mall-multiplex culture. While the latter, he argues, seeks to braid the spectator into a network of branded consumer culture characteristic of the contemporary, multinational-driven constellation of the commodity world, the other avenues of exhibition lead to a much more differentiated range of output and offer a new lease of life for cinema as a public form.

According to Vasudevan, one of the significant elements that allows the mall-multiplex form to maintain its dominance is novelty. He suggests:

> The main threat to the theatrical property is the simultaneous release of the video through cable broadcast and in video markets (including piracy). We can see the cinema as event – the point of the first release, a critical moment for its gathering of audiences and actualization of the value of novelty – being split into theatrical and domestic viewing situations.... The position of the cinema spectator is as it were copied and distributed from its legal locale into a host of dispersed and unregulated spaces. Global and regional circuits of film copying and digital transmission inundate the unofficial market, challenge the theatrical trade and reconstellate publics, copying and dispersing viewing from its desired temporal sequence into a simultaneity produced through a new regime of technological relay and access.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the state’s aspiration for the world-class city is based on a capitalist logic, where both time and space organized through the logic of work is divided into clear categories of work, leisure, and constrained time (bureaucratic waiting, commuting, and so on). Here, I want to explore a different aspect of division of time in relationship to novelty as the moment of realization of value under the new leisure economy specific to cinema exhibition.

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The term novelty connotes two aspects of time. First, as Vasudevan suggests, newness or the point of first release, where the value, following the capitalist logic of producing surplus value, is accrued from the newness of a commodity. The second aspect of novelty is its linearity. The notion of newness is based on dividing time into a succession of moments, which separates not just past from the present, but also what belongs in the present from that which belongs to the past, and consequently, the future. It is no coincidence that Ghertner’s inquiry into aesthetic governmentality in the world-class city context starts with a scene about two court verdicts regarding the planned-ness of an illegal mall and unplanned-ness of a legal slum. In the first instance, the court, despite acknowledging the mall’s “flagrant violation” of planning law, allowed the mall to be constructed because the commercial complex “looked planned.” In the second instance, an adjacent slum, despite conforming to the Master Plan, was demolished without compensation because it looked “unplanned.” Despite being illegal, a mall-multiplex looks planned since it belongs to the “normal” division of time—a time contemporaneous with the novelty of the global economy. The slum, on the other hand, looks unplanned since it does not belong to this normal division of time; it belongs to a time to be passed (given up). The distribution of time produces a temporal distance between the past and the present, which works as an interdiction that commands what is to be preserved and what is to be passed in the movement towards a future.

However, if we were to follow Khalid’s logic of time, the time of the video-theater, or for that matter the time of Benjamin’s Angel of History, then we arrive at another (the second) sense of time connoted by the phrase “Double Dekho.” In these instances, the temporal distance between the past and the present is short-circuited to produce a time of simultaneity, which is

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212 Ghertner, Rule by Aesthetics, 2–3.
also time at a stand-still. Simultaneity because temporal elements of present and past (real-time and virtual-time) are brought together in the here-and-now. And stand-still because the short-circuiting interrupts the linearity of time and historical progress. In this time at a stand-still, the temporal elements from the past and the present play against each other dialectically to free the viewer from the constraints of linear time and facilitate her/him/them leap into an-other temporal world. Khalid’s dialogue (above) with Jackie communicates his leap, which is predicated on his participation in the common viewing of films in the video-theater.

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**Part 2**

**10. Films as Spielraum—A Room-for-Play**

Much of the discussion of Benjamin’s critical, testing, and illuminative function of films, Hansen suggests, overshadows the elements of play and humor. Benjamin considered the latter elements as key to film as a mimetic form that allows for an alternative innervation of body and technology. Aligned with these latter elements of film, Miriam Hansen reads Benjamin’s artwork essay (the second version) from the perspective of spiel, and films as “Spiel-Raum” or “room-for-play.” Spiel, she suggests, provided Benjamin with a term and a concept that allowed him to imagine a mode of aesthetics on par with modern, collective experience, an aesthetics that

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could counteract, at the level of sense perception, the political consequences of the capitalist and imperialist uses of technology.\textsuperscript{215}

The German word \textit{Spiel} can be translated in three ways: play, performance, and gamble.\textsuperscript{216} Play for Benjamin, particularly with reference to children, was a form of creative mimesis wherein reception and creativity played equally important roles. He understood a toy as not just an object of play but also as a medium for playing, which involves repetition—a liberating and apotropaic function. In its sensuous and historical formats, play involved miming nature through the medium of the body, like in dance. Thus the body was a medium of play as well as its presentation, its image. This second aspect of play, Hansen tells us, points towards the second meaning of \textit{spiel}: performing or acting. Here, too, receptivity and creativity are in exact correlation, specifically, in the act of performing in front of an audience with imagination and improvisation. Thus in performance, Hansen tells us, play and imaging are two sides of the same coin. However, this improvised form of play is to be distinguished from the more controlled, coded, and tested exhibition, or \textit{dis}-play. The last and third meaning of \textit{spiel} is gambling, which for Benjamin has a particular relationship to the decline of experience under capitalist-industrial modernity. As a symptom of the decline of experience, the gambler exemplified for Benjamin a mode of attention of the worker in a factory, who parries experiences and memories in the wake of mechanical shocks of the modern world. But in the gambler, this demise of experience is replaced with a different sort of experience, of innervation, a heightened sense of receptivity and a bodily presence of mind open to chance. Heightened receptivity and response are involved in “reading the table” so that one bets at the right time, before the ball has fallen into the slot; this is an ability to play the bet with a bodily presence of mind in the moment of danger so as to cease

\textsuperscript{215} Ibid: 183.
\textsuperscript{216} This section draws heavily from Miriam Hansen’s two essays Miriam Hansen, “Room-for-Play and Hansen, “Play-Form of Second Nature,” in \textit{Cinema and Experience}, 183–205.
the current of fate.\textsuperscript{217} Here the danger is not so much of losing than of “not winning,” of “missing one’s chance or arriving too late”—of turning an uncertain future into a fulfilled now. In the act of “reading the table,” the gambler comes close to the astrologer who reads constellations of stars mimetically to grasp the fate of things on earth.

So far, this chapter has focused on the role of films and local video-theaters in the life of Toba Tek Nagar and its various residents. In the second part, we move from the video-theaters to a group of aspiring filmmakers and actors in a different slum locality to explore the notion of films as room-for-play. Specifically, I look at Shivaji Nagar Boyzzz (SVJ Boyzzz), a youth group that produces the online YouTube series “Govandi ka CID” (Crime Investigative Department), which was shot in the locality and exhibited to its residents in a community hall. My aim here is to explore films as a medium for playing and transforming relationships between bodies—individual and collective, human and nonhuman, and at the level of production as well as reception. This specific story, I should note, is not based in Toba Tek Nagar but in Shivaji Nagar, a slum cluster located in Govandi in eastern Mumbai, close to Toba Tek Nagar.

\section{11. Govandi ka C.I.D (Crime Investigation Department)}
I first heard of SVJ Boyzz through an outdated poster about their film screening at a local community hall in Shivaji Nagar. The screening had been organized to premiere the first episode of their crime series \textit{Govandi ka CID}. After inquiring around, and calling on a few of their friends, I finally met a few members of the SVJ Boyzz at a teashop in Shivaji Nagar. The teashop, where the group meets every other day, was also where they conceived of the crime

\textsuperscript{217} Hansen, \textit{Cinema and Experience}, 187.
Back then, SVJ Boyzz was a small group of seven young men that included three college students interested in acting, a street-side food-stall owner who wrote scripts in his free time, two men in their early thirties with regular office jobs, and last, an actor, singer, and director, who worked as a technician in small-budget B-circuit Hindi films. All of them wanted to be a part of the film industry in different capacities. However, none except Afzal had the experience or the technical knowhow of filmmaking. The group decided to make a film in order to learn the technical details of filmmaking. They wanted to face the camera for the first time, learn the commands of “cut” and “action,” learn to recite and act out dialogue, write out a script, and produce an audition tape to get work in the film industry. The goal of producing the show was to merge fun and learning. The idea for a crime show came from the group’s storywriter, the food-stall owner, who thought of it while watching the popular series C.I.D on primetime television at home. However, rather than choosing a random crime as the subject of the show, they decided that the show should revolve around a problem in their own locality.

For a while now, the city media as well as city residents have perceived Govandi, where Shivaji Nagar is located, as place of crime, drugs, and violence. This stigmatization is associated with its location near some marshes in the city’s periphery, the high concentration of slum clusters as well as poverty, and also its locational centrality to two religious riots. In many ways, the locality had a history similar to that of Toba Tek Nagar. Most members of the SVJ Boyzzz were born and brought up in Shivaji Nagar and have experienced this stigmatization. As one of them told me, “If a resident goes for a job interview with Govandi as the address on their resume, no matter what their qualifications are, they don’t get a job.” Another member added, “Even

218 The conclusion section is based on interviews with the group as well as a study of their YouTube series. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBdNj7qJhBtWW6P0k-v3Q, Accessed August 2014.
219 Afzal, the director of the show, had graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Mass Media from the Zee Institute of Media Arts, and was well versed with the technicalities of filmmaking.
lovers suffer from this problem. One can’t express his love to someone from a different area, just because they live in Govandi . . . The name also prohibits us from becoming actors; it represses our talents.” On the one hand, the “black listing” of their locality, a term they used to describe it, has constrained their desires for love and work, among other things; and on the other hand, a lack of money, they argued, based on their idea of the film-industry, has restricted their entry into the film-industry. As one of them argued,

Talent is closely related to money.221 People like us don’t get acting roles; you need money, a lakh (USD 1800) at least, just to get a small role. We do go for auditions, but never get in. We don’t have the money, nor the familial connections in the film industry. But we have talent. We have grown up in Shivaji Nagar, seen the struggles of its residents, their experiences, and their suffering . . . and we wanted to show it to others through this show, prove that Govandi has talent.222

I take this association between experiencing everyday struggles in a slum locality, showing them onscreen, as a reference to possessing a “talent” in two senses. First, a capacity to present oneself, one’s locality, and its issues beyond the avenues of electoral leaders, NGOs, and media,223 and second, “talent” as a will or desire to do so. The crime series, they told me in hindsight, was a medium to do all of these things. During my interactions with them, it seemed to me that their reflections on the crime series carried the weight of these personal and local struggles, which they convey in the crime series through explicit monologues that are dramatized with sound effects and camera-work; but there are certain elements of the show detached from this intentionality, which provide an image of their play with hierarchies and identifications of the self, the locality, its spaces, and its things. Let me elaborate on this last claim using the crime series.

221 Etymologically the word talent has references to terms such as will, desire, leaning, as well as to weight, balance, or sums of money.
222 Interviews, 2013.
223 As one member of the group claimed during the interview: “Politicians give speech, NGOs carry out programs, Media circulates news, but nothing gets the attention of people like films.” Interviews, 2013.
At an overall level the crime series has a standard format. Each episode, of which there are just two (since the group is now preoccupied with a music album and music video), revolves around a local issue, water or drugs, and its relationship to crime and violence in Shivaji Nagar. This everyday issue is then translated into a crime case—a mystery—in the locality: a murder in the first episode and kidnapping in the second. The members of the youth group, who perform the role of Crime Investigators (as well perpetrators), then go on to solve the case. Within this larger format, I want to focus on a few significant elements: the aesthetics of the film, film credits, locations, instruments used to solve the crime, and the post-credit scenes.

**Figure 3.5: Govandi ka C.I.D**

In the first episode, *Khoon Pani—Case No. 1 (Blood and Water)*, the camera work has an amateurish quality—abrupt zoom-ins and zoom-outs, certain parts where the director is shouting

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224 When I asked them about their favorite films, one of them said that they like films with a message, which meant films that revolve around a social issue. So their favorite films include classics like *Mother India* (1957) as well as contemporary films such as *Chak De* (2007) and *Three Idiots* (2009).
at the acting crew for screwing up are muted to show just the visuals, the actors playing crime investigators are dressed in casual clothes, the dialogues aren’t scripted, and the film opens to a blank blue screen which then transitions into credits (like in a PowerPoint presentation). One of the hardest parts of producing the first episode, the members told me, was financing the film. The film was shot with a borrowed hand-held camera and edited on Afzal’s laptop due to a lack of money. The second episode, *Laapata Bacchaa Shivaji Nagar Ka—Case No. 2 (The Absconding Child of Shivaji Nagar)*, has a more expert aesthetic quality, which is partly due to the hiring of a professional editor, renting out of costumes, and a high-definition camera, all of which required an investment of INR 80,000 (USD 1300). The money was put together from the “pocket money” of the non-earning members with a more substantial contribution from the earning members of the group. By the time they shot the second episode, the youth group had expanded via YouTube and Facebook to include many more members, from the locality as well as outside, who participated as off-screen volunteers during the shooting of the film. The first episode was produced to acquire experience and as an audition tape, which could then be circulated for jobs in the film industry. However, the endeavor expanded beyond that to become a project on its own. This history of the youth group is presented through the text: “This is a student project show, not commercial. Made by Shivaji Nagar Boyzz (SVJ) for their acting improvement, only that.” A shorter version of this text runs across the screen at equal intervals. The point here is not just the transition from amateur to auteur quality, but also the self-identification that appears in the opening and end credits. In the credits they identify—which
also a play of de- and re-identification—themselves as filmmakers: creative team, actors, art director, writer, videographer, editor, storywriter, and so on.

Furthermore, the scenes in these episodes are shot in local spaces such as Farooq's Chinese Stall, Dr. Ali’s Clinic, 90 Feet Road, Shivaji Nagar Bus Depot, and Teesri Khadi (Third Creek). These locations are acknowledged in the end credits alongside the names and titles of the crew members. To my mind, the use of local spaces as filmic locations for different scenes in the series, and the re-naming of these sites in the end credits alongside the group members, is also an assignation of “talent” to the spaces in the locality—an assignation of capacity to spaces to become something else. This play with the self and spaces also extends to the different things used in the episodes. In one episodes, a piece of a galvanized iron pipe is used as a microscope in a makeshift lab (in a local school classroom) to examine blood samples from the crime scene. The film, unlike reality, provides that room for playing with identities, roles, and things; anything and anyone in this world can become something else—and isn’t this becoming what migrants come to the city for: to become something other than what they were—a writer, an artist, a businessman, a cooker, an engineer or even an actor?226 At the overall level, the crime series entails another play, one akin to the surrealists, where the youth group, as CID, attempts to “illuminate” the mystery of everyday issues (the translation of water politics into a murder mystery) and the everydayness of mystery (using everyday elements from the locality to make everyone aware of something they already know but didn’t pay attention to). In regards to this aspect, the film mimics the role of the galvanized iron microscope: it enlarges and opens up something that has always existed, but does so in a new way.

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226 The “making of film” section at the end of the second episode ends with different actors mimicking on camera popular Hindi film actors and their popular dialogues, not just their voices but also their movement, in a comic style, playing with the originals.
12. Altered Physis: Community and Technology
If the filmmaking process allowed the youth group to play with their bodies, spaces, things and identities at the level of production, what do films do at the level of reception?

Unlike the Frankfurt School critiques of technology as being instrumentalist in mastering nature (first nature), Benjamin saw in technology the capacity for play between humanity and nature, body and technology, and subject and object. With technology there is a paradigmatic reconfiguration of physical space—the space of body and lived experience—in relation to perceptual space, the space of images. In this regard, the cinema, in particular, marked a paradigmatic shift in perceptual regime. Referring to films of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, Benjamin suggested that film is the only prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment—the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure—are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way. By bringing the world that one inhabits into visibility on screen, film creates a “new realm of consciousness”; it enables human beings to represent to themselves their “technologically altered physis” through play. In doing so, films play with the distinction between the subject and the object, the first and second nature, and open up the possibility of producing an altered physis. However this physis, I posit, is both individual and collective, and in this last section I want to explore what the screening of the youth group’s crime series about the locality to the residents in the community hall does to the collective physis—the collective body (a community), and what sort of an altered collective physis does it produce through and in relationship to technology? I ask this question with a particular reference to the past and present minoritzation.

\[\text{227There is a certain added dimension of seriality in technologies such as television shows, magazines, and newspapers. However, the crime series being explored here has only two episodes so far, and the episode that was screened in the locality was the second one. It was screened more in a movie format. Hence I ignore the serial dimension in my analysis of the screening here.}\]
and estrangement of urban Muslims in Mumbai, and the ongoing mobilization within Muslim community based organizations (CBOs) in Toba Tek Nagar to redefine their scope and practices through deliberations on Islamic ethics in the contemporary moment.²²⁸

At the time I interviewed the SVJ Boyzz, a number of events were being organized by different actors in Shivaji Nagar to deal with the serious problem of drug use among youth in the locality. One such event was organized at the local youth center by a local CBO. I was invited to the event by Sagirbhai, a secretary of a mosque in Toba Tek Nagar, to help me learn about the problems faced by the community. The men who attended the event included local- and city-level religious scholars, Imams, secretaries of mosques, as well as a few local residents, both Shia and Sunni. The aim of the event was to discuss a very particular question: How do we deal with the high usage of drugs among the youth in the locality? As the event preceded the maulvis, the Imams, and the local religious leaders were invited on stage to share their views on the topic. Their mediations, provocations, and their solutions were framed by asking the question a bit differently: How do we as a Muslim community deal with the high usage of drugs among our youth? The question thus posed demanded a very particular response, which involved a critical self-reflective evaluation of religious ethics within this Muslim community. The different speakers turned to religious texts, religious learning, as well as previous movements by Muslim leaders (such as the Khilafat movement under colonial rule) to reflect on the issues and devise a way forward. The solutions to the problem of drugs ranged from restricting youth access to the corrupt technologies of mobile phones and the Internet, strengthening everyday religious practices such as going to mosques and madrasas, everyday surveillance of youth activities, use of physical force by partnering with police and politicians, and checking the growth of corrupt

²²⁸I recount this history of religious violence and its relationship to Toba Tek Nagar in detail in the next chapter.
activities such as the growing number of alcohol stores in the locality, among others. Such self-reflective evaluations, Sagirbhai argued to me later, were part of their strategy to internalize ethical questions and discipline oneself, rather than channeling their vexation outward towards others through hatred and violence.\textsuperscript{229} Such internalizations and self-reflections have become an important part of their strategy to not just reconstruct the image of the “good Muslim” in the present, but to also discard the territorial stigmatization attached to Muslim-dominated neighborhoods such as Shivaji Nagar and Toba Tek Nagar. This imagining of a community, like any imagined community, although necessary in the context of Muslim minoratization, is also based on producing a right order of things, where technologies such as mobile phones, Internet access, and films are to be replaced with religious scholars, texts, and schools. The SVJ Boyzz, who have no relationship with this CBO except that they exist within the same milieu (mahol), decided to speak about one form of intoxication: drugs, through another: filmmaking. Religion, drugs, and filmmaking, have a close relationship to each other; they all speak to the question of profane experiences and illumination—divine, hallucinogenic, and profane, respectively.\textsuperscript{230}

After the second episode was finalized, a trailer was cut and shown to the local area politician. The politician provided some money to hold a premier show in Shivaji Nagar. The premiere was held at the community hall, which on other occasions is used by politicians for job fairs for the local youth. More than three thousand residents, both men and women, attended the premier. It was the first time that men and women from the locality were present in the same enclosed space for a movie screening. Post-premier, the film was also broadcasted in the locality.

\textsuperscript{229} I should note that Sagirbhai was one of the more progressive organizers in the locality. During the interview he reflected a lot on the exclusionary nature of certain religious practices, both Hindu and Muslim, and undoing them, he suggested, was one of the biggest challenges of organizing in the locality. He was involved in a number of projects that ranged from small infrastructure projects, expanding activities of the CBO during moments of emergency such as floods, as well as programs for youth in the locality.

\textsuperscript{230} Films, particularly so, because they depend much on the play of light and shadows.
through a local cable-TV operator. The screening received a great response from the local residents as well as from family members of the youth group. One of the peculiar things about the second episode is the presence of a young female actor, although not from the locality; she plays the part of a female officer. The presence of a girl onscreen, one member of the youth group suggested, inspired girls from the locality to become part of their group. Post-screening, a few young women approached the group commending them on their work and expressed their interest in becoming part of the group’s next project. Others who saw the show via the Internet became online fans of the group’s work and expressed an interest in starting a similar endeavor in their own neighborhoods. The film conjured a community (a virtual community) that didn’t exist as yet (actuality). This film community is based on no specific identities but simply on a de-identification of people, things, places, and their capacities. However, this signification of the transformative capacity of their film should not to be taken as an idealization of the youth group itself. Since the group, too, is based on the model of a community that reproduces the logic of criminalized youth. During an interview, members of the group revealed that those with any criminal records or history of drug use are not permitted, and neither are the temporary migrant workers.  

But the possibility of detaching the film from its makers (im-parting), and the affects it produces during its after-life, as I have suggested in the previous chapter in reference to stories, points towards the excess of cinema and its secular magic of transforming (alterity) individuals and collectivities by producing similarities (mimesis). Lastly, this transformation, as I hope this section has shown, is not based an identification between the individual and a community (of things), but on de-identification.

231 The interview with the youth group also reflected the same disdain that the older residents have towards the video-theaters and the temporary migrants.
13. The Case of the Absconding Poets: A Planning Proposal

Up until several years ago, there were a few poets in Toba Tek Nagar. They wrote about love, dawn, life and its experience, but nothing about reality.\textsuperscript{232} Once every month, the poets held a recital of their poetry in the assembly hall of a nearby municipal school. The residents from the locality attended these recitals, but in small numbers. During these recitals residents would ridicule the poets through humor of reality. When a poet recited a poem about the experience of dawn, the residents would respond with a joke about their dawn and the time they spend at the street-side tap filling water drums. As Nizam,\textsuperscript{233} one of the older residents of Toba Tek Nagar and a cynical viewer of the recitals, said: “Who has the time for such fantasies?” By the time I was conducting my research, the laughter and its ridicule had forced the poets to withdraw from the public eyes and ears. Despite my efforts, I was unable to trace down these poets. Needs and desires, reality and fantasy, it seemed, don’t really go together here, nor do they find the time and support to become something more substantial. The next case for the crime investigation team of SVJ Boyzz, for which I aim to raise some funds, is The Case of the Absconding Poets. The collaborative film project hopes to achieve three things: first, to raise new questions about the representations of the urban poor and slums in urban scholarship; second, to archive artistic practices that fall off the map in urban studies on slums; and third, along with the youth group to dig into the history of the locality. By doing this I hope to expand the notion of planning interventions to include interventions and projects that help erase the partitions between needs and desires, art and planning, as well as the poor and the intellectuals.

\textsuperscript{232} Based on conversations with residents of the locality.
\textsuperscript{233} Nizam makes his appearance in the next chapter.
Chapter 4
*Kaminey: A Tragic-Play*

1. **Kaminey**—The Film

“The Beta Charlie, life badi kuti cheez hai, aur is duniya mein kutton ka sirf ek hi jawab hai... KAMINEY.”234  As he stands amidst the railway tracks and a local suburban train speeds by235, Charlie reflects on the city by recollecting the words of his dead father: “Life here is a bitch and the only answer to the dogs of this world is a Scoundrel.” The film’s main protagonists, twins Charlie and Guddu, are sons of an Uttar Pradeshi migrant. Both have speech impediments, an expression of not theirs but the city’s inability and refusal to understand the speech and desires of the outsider—the other. Charlie is a small-time gangster. He fixes horse races and dreams of

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234 *Kaminey*, directed by Vishal Bhardwaj (Mumbai, UTV Films; 2009) DVD. For lack of a better translation of the word Kamina or Kaminey, I use the word scoundrel. However, as I argue in this chapter, the figure of the Kamina is a strange mixture of different words such as bastard, trickster, and scoundrel. Also, I should clarify that my aim in this article is to break open categories and foreground in-between figures and their characteristics in order to make a case for newer forms of politics afforded by such in-betweeness. My aim is not to ignore or refute the masculinization of politics in the space I am describing here. Given the methodology adopted and the male-domination over these spaces, you wouldn’t find a kamini in this chapter.

235 I take the train as a metonym of the movement of different people, technology, things, money, their networks, and their histories in the city.
having his own betting counter at the race course. Guddu, on the other hand, is a college student and volunteers in his free time at an NGO to raise AIDS awareness among sex workers. Guddu’s girlfriend, Sweety, is the sister of a nativist “Mumbaiker” politician cum gangster, Bhopebhau (Brother Bhope), who is trying to marry her off to a developer’s son in return for election funds.

The film is based in Mumbai, and most of its characters are migrants: three Bengali brothers who are bookies and arms dealers; a drug lord named Tashi and his two African brothers-in-law who have arrived to exchange diamonds for drugs; and lastly, two corrupt Indian police officers from the anti-narcotic department: Lobo and Lele.

The film moves incessantly through a series of twists and turns in the plot, which unfold over the course of a single day. As it develops, every character, at every turn, is trying to outdo the others for drugs, money, power, or love. This movement, however, also holds within it intervals, where choices opens up between becoming more deeply involved in the plot and walking away from it. At these intersections, Charlie, conscious of the fact that becoming

\[236\] The movie never specifies which part of Africa.
involved might be a huge risk, cunningly reasons: The choice to fulfill one’s desires is not
between a right way and a wrong way, but between a “short cut and a shorter short cut”: “We get
screwed not by the path we choose, but the path we leave behind.” Caught between territorial
movements of religion, state-power, capital, and Hindutva-regionalism, the kamina in the film—
as well as in this chapter—connotes a complex relationship between desires, morals, and urban
politics.

2. The Kamina as a Mimetic Figure
In using the word kutta, or “dogs,” the film evokes the figure of the kuttan kamina—a filmy
figure that connotes pure negativity or evil. Its polar opposite is the figure of the “Black Sheep”
in Italo Calvino’s short story by the same name.237 The surreal tale is about a nameless city
founded on larceny, where everyone is a thief. The citizens work in the day and steal at night.
Here trade involves cheating on the part of both buyers and sellers. Even the city government is a
criminal organization; it steals from its subjects, and the subjects, for their part, defraud the
government. The “Black Sheep” of Calvino’s story is an honest man, whose arrival in this
larcenous city creates a societal imbalance.

In contradistinction to such singular identities, the figure of the kamina is a mimetic
figure. Mimesis, following Benjamin, refers to a cognitive drive in humans to see and reproduce
similarities between the self and the other.238 It’s based on recognizing affinities rather than

237 Italo Calvino, “The Black Sheep,” in The Numbers in the Dark and Other Stories, Italo Calvino, trans. Tim Parks
238 Gebauer and Wulf, Mimesis, 267.
affiliations. Its ontogenetic form is visible in the child’s imitation not just of a teacher or an engine driver, but also of objects such as a windmill, car, or train. Its phylogenetic form is visible in the dances and gestures through which humans produce similarities in nature sensuously through the medium of the body, as well as in language and writing, where words imitate or present nature through a non-sensuous correspondence. Benjamin’s notion of mimesis, Hansen tells us, is not a category of representation, but is a relational and reciprocal practice—a mode of accessing the world through a non-coercive engagement with the other that resists dualistic conceptions of subject and object. In its darker vein, as I have suggested earlier in the introduction, mimesis also signifies “a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become same and behave accordingly.” In regard to this darker side, Taussig’s work on the state as a mimetic machine, which reproduces cultural and social forms to naturalize its rule over society, is particularly illuminative. In her elaboration of this dark side of mimesis, Buck-Morss points towards its role in self-alienation. Writing of the industrial landscape, Buck-Morss uses the example of Charlie Chaplin to show how the body of the worker adapts itself to the shock and rhythms of modern capitalism mimetically. The body imitates and coordinates itself with the movement of factory machines in order to shield itself from the violence of work under industrial capitalism.

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239 The distinction between mimesis as recognizing affinities, rather than affiliations, is significant here. While the earlier keeps the tension between similarities and difference in play, the latter bring the other within by establishing a familial relationship between the self and the other.

240 Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 147.

241 For Adorno and Horkheimer this negative connotation of mimesis was at play in the “organized manipulation of mimesis” under fascism. Taussig’s work on the use of the mimetic faculty by the state under colonialism and neo-colonialism has been particularly revealing. Mimesis, he argues, is the primary instrument of the state-machine’s power. It uses cultural and social production, subtended always by the mimetic operation, to naturalize its rule, so that the state and its appurtenances come inevitably to be regarded as natural.


Thus, we can conclude that mimesis is a double-edge concept. One the one hand, mimesis has this darker side of naturalizing the given and alienating the subject from its capacity to experience, and on the other hand it also holds the potential to transform the given world. In regard to the latter, Adorno is instructive. To reiterate, Adorno suggests that to mime the original in a new modality requires the organizing principle of “exact fantasy.” The concept connotes a fantasy (not a dream) guided by the object or the materials presented to experience by a specific phenomenon as well as the subject’s drive to rearrange the elements of the phenomenon until they open up a new cognitive understanding. Thus, elements are not merely duplicated or reproduced but transformed through a mimetic rearrangement. This rearrangement involves a dialectical play between similarity and difference, and the subject’s transformational movement between the material world (objective world) and the self (subjective world) without allowing either to take over its consciousness. As a conceptual and performative operation, mimesis is destructive and constructive; it presents existing elements in a new configuration to reveal the hegemonic imperatives as well as highlight transformative possibilities.

The writings of both Benjamin and Saadat Hasan Manto were filled with mimetic figures: the flâneur, the sex worker, the storyteller, the pimp, the rag picker, and so on. For Benjamin, these were allegorical figures located at the margins of a hegemonic world and standing for a mimetic movement between polar opposites: subject/object, exterior street/bourgeois interior, artist/worker, and seller/buyer. They inhabited an in-between space of non-identity, of doubleness, by never belonging to either world completely. Similarly, Manto’s

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244 Buck-Morss, Negative Dialectics, 86.
245 Mufti, “Saadat Hasan Manto,” 177–210. Sadat Hasan Manto was an Urdu short story writer who often wrote on urban objects and figures in Bombay as well as on the India-Pakistan partition and its violence. His short stories, as Amir Mufti tells us, have a particular relevance to the “minoritization” of Muslims in the South Asian context. During and post partition, Mufti argues, short stories or the Urdu afsana, were established by a new generation of writers, particularly Sadat Hasan Manto, as a “minor” genre, in juxtaposition to the novel—the bourgeois literary tool of nation building and history writing, which dominated the scene.
short stories revolved around “minor” figures whose desires and characteristics made it impossible to draw moral boundaries of purity and impurity or good and evil around them. They are excessive and move in-between categories. An apt example are his stories on love and betrayal in the lives of sex workers, which not only interrogate the pure, asexual, and totalizing signifiers such as the Motherland (the nation-state), but also displace these signifiers with ordinary figures, objects, and experiences that are not easily subsumable within clear categories. This non-identification and in-betweenness, to my mind, expresses a desire for the freedom of movement.

a. Trickster Figures

To draw another reference from the world of stories, the figure of kamina has affinities to the use of trickster figures by different West African and North American First Nations communities. Often, these are figures are part-human, part-spirit, and part-animal. They are conjured and mobilized by individuals or communities in specific historical context. Thus Anansi, a figure from Ghana, whose stories traveled with plantation slaves to Caribbean islands and were significant to their anti-slavery struggles, is a spider-human. The Anansi, the story goes, is good in the home for eating insects and other pests, but beware, he may bite you. He lives on the ceiling, looking at everything upside down, inverting your life and spinning webs of intrigue.

246 I should clarify that my use of the term between in this dissertation does not mean hybrid nor does it mean multiplicity.
247 Several indigenous scholars in Turtle Islands (Canada) have pointed out that trickster figures are used by scholars and artists uncritically. Oftentimes, the figures are dehistoricized and decontextualized; celebrated and symbolized as subversive subalterns; and overlaid onto the communities as their representation. Fagan, Kristina. “What’s the Trouble with the Trickster?: An Introduction,” in Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations. Ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier UP (2010): 3-20.
Scholars writing about these figures argue that the role of these figures, as well as their stories, was threefold: to set and transgress moral boundaries of the community, to pass on intelligence in times of need, and to set peace in the community using gifts from gods such as a bottle gourd filled with intelligence or a tobacco to be smoked by everyone in a congregation to avoid “ends” in precarious times. Through these acts, the tricksters would rearrange the elements of the world and recreate it. The ways in which these tricksters come to possess these gifts are stories themselves. The tricksters, for individual reasons such as pride, arrogance, and even selfishness, rescue these gifts from god, often by tricking both fellow animals as well as gods. They exploit their wisdom and the folly of co-animals to wriggle out of the tightest corners. They epitomize behaviors and identities that defy the good versus evil binary that characterizes the European concept of morality and order. Rigid oppositions between these figures or speculations

Figure 4.3: Anansi (https://mrpsmythopedia.wikispaces.com/Anansi)
about their honesty, morality, or religiosity, scholars suggest, are unnecessary, because these characters all have flaws that play an equally valid role in stories. In his essay *Fate and Character*, Benjamin comments on modern law and its ethics based on similar lines. Critiquing the deterministic relationship between guilt and fate in the mythic world and character and judgment in modern law, that the scoundrel as a figure that dismisses such pseudo-moral arguments in the real world. To return to the film, the figure of the kamina, similar to the tricksters, is an in-between figure who stands at the intersection of polar opposites such as evil and good, positivity and negativity, where both reside in suspension without taking over the figure completely. However, while the plot of the film revolves around the object of a cocaine-filled guitar, the plot of this article revolves around a particular developmental object: the toilet.

3. **Toilet: An Exact Fantasy**

“Could you tell me about one object in your neighborhood that you find beautiful?” Siraj, a local resident answered, “Our toilet.”

The toilet in Siraj’s neighborhood was one of the first toilets built under the Slum Sanitation Program (SSP) in Toba Tek Nagar. It replaced an older toilet that was built through local politician’s funds in the 1980s. In the early 1950s, slums were largely perceived as spaces of disease and crime, which were to be remedied through demolitions under the Slum Clearance Act of 1957. It was not until the 1970s that the Maharashtra state government began to think of slums as possible solutions to temporally defer the housing shortage in the city. The state

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249 The figure of these tricksters, as the work of African and non-African scholars have shown, played a huge role in the anti-slavery struggle of African workers in the Caribbean plantations. M’Baye Babacar. *The Trickster Comes West: Pan-African Influence in Early Black Diasporan Narratives* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).

government launched various “self-help” and “self-build” housing programs as well as slum improvement programs to upgrade basic infrastructural facilities through funds allocated to local politicians. The older toilet was part of the changing slum related policy framework. However, the toilet was permanently in bad condition. It housed only eight seats for men and women each in a neighborhood of fifteen thousand residents. The toilet was built on a septic tank that was overused due to its lower carrying capacity. This meant that the sludge would regularly overflow into the neighborhood along with its smell. The lack of maintenance and adequate infrastructure had forced the residents to depend on private tankers to dispose of the sludge and on local thugs for water. These were huge expenses for most residents and particularly for those below the poverty line. Every other year, just before the elections, the residents would deposit letters and petitions with all politicians along the electoral scale to rebuild or repair the toilet, but without any success. Pink in color, the toilet was built with a load bearing brick structure that sank into

**Figure 4.4:** The Pink Toilet
the marshy land with time. Without water, electricity, or sewer line, the pink toilet stood for an ever-recurring circular time of dependency and development governed by electoral politics.

The SSP was launched by the Mumbai Municipal Corporation in 1997 as an integral part of the Bombay Sewerage Disposal Project (BSDP) to resolve these problems.\textsuperscript{251} Funded by the World Bank and the state government, the BSDP aimed to strengthen the sewerage infrastructure of the city. The implementation of the SSP was proposed by the World Bank as a mandatory condition for providing funds for the BSDP. The SSP aimed to address four key areas: providing sustainable sanitation facilities in slums and connecting them to wider city sewerage networks; reversing the client-patron relationship between local politicians and slum dwellers by shifting the “supply-based” provision model to a “demand-based” model; encouraging community participation by involving NGOs and forming community based organizations (CBOs); and lastly, developing a sense of ownership among slum communities through a financial model. The primary condition and one of the significant goals of the SSP was to build capacities among slum communities to maintain and operate these toilets. This involved forming a CBO, formalizing it as a registered group, and producing a sense of ownership among the residents through an initial household contribution of INR 100 per individual (USD 1.5) to a maximum of INR 500 (USD 9) per family. In return, these households would be provided a family pass for minimal costs (INR 120 or USD 2 per year). For the maintenance and operation costs to be sustainable, the

\textsuperscript{251} A survey conducted in 2001 found that 63% of the city's informal population or 3.92 million people were dependent exclusively on public toilets for their sanitation needs. The average ratio of persons per toilet seat in informal settlements was 81:1 often resulting in queues lasting two hours or more. MW-YUDA, 2001, 4; cited in McFarlane, “Sanitation in Mumbai's informal settlements: State, ‘slum’, and infrastructure,” Environment and planning A 40, no. 1 (2008): 90.
participation of seventy-five percent of households was deemed mandatory for the initiation of any SSP toilet project.\textsuperscript{252}

In contrast to the older toilet, the SSP toilet in Siraj’s neighborhood is one of the most aesthetically striking built forms in Toba Tek Nagar. It’s built with a raft foundation and its piles pierce thirty feet into the ground to find stability in the hard rocks below the marsh. Its surfaces are clad with careful attention. The outsides are clad with rough off-white ceramic tiles and the insides are clad with gray, brown, and off-white glossy tiles. These tiles, both on the inside and outside, are interspersed with a tile pattern of red and black geometric forms that resembles Mondrian’s painting. The sludge is disposed into the septic tank and from there into the local nalla (a natural stream that carries waste water) through an ad-hoc pipe that was absent in the plumbing drawings submitted to the municipality. The toilet has formal electricity and water connections, however, and an extra pump bought from local contributions is fixed near the underground tank to exert an extra pull on the low pressure of water in the municipal connections.\textsuperscript{253} The taps inside the cubicles work on a spring action to save water. These taps require a strong force to push the faucet and for the water to flow into tumblers. These tumblers are plastic versions of the older ceramic pots used by Moghul kings and queens for morning ablutions. The permanence and durability of the reinforced concrete construction (RCC) prevents the toilet from sinking into both the reclaimed marsh and the dependency on local politicians.\textsuperscript{254}

\textsuperscript{252} The original plan was to get consensus from at least seventy-five percent of the residents, which was then scaled back to 50 percent. See: R.N. Sharma and Bhide, “World Bank Funded Slum Sanitation Programme in Mumbai: Participatory Approach and Lessons Learnt.” \textit{Economic and Political Weekly} 40, no. 17 (2005), 1784–1789.

\textsuperscript{253} See Lisa Bjorkman, “Un/known Waters Navigating Everyday Risks of Infrastructural Breakdown in Mumbai,” \textit{Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East} 34, no. 3(2014): 497–517, for a more detailed ethnographic study of how the politics of water connections get mitigated in a different slum locality of Mumbai.

\textsuperscript{254} During interviews, a number of members of CBOs spoke of lack of cooperation as well as resistance from local politicians and thugs to the building of a new SSP toilet. The reason for this is that the project bypassed their involvement in the projects. But in a few other cases, as interviews with NGO members revealed, the local politicians had taken over the toilet projects. Appropriations here meant that the residents’ initial contributions to the
But this does not mean that building the toilet didn’t involve them. Their blessings were taken so that the residents and the politician could collaborate on other issues. Blessings here meant that the auspicious process of striking the first blow to the land, the breaking open of a coconut and spreading its water on the site, the distribution of *prasad* (sweets) were performed by the local politician. In addition, a black granite tile with his/her name engraved in golden letters is placed at the entrance to the toilet.

![Toilet as Exact Fantasy](image)

**Figure 4.5:** Toilet as Exact Fantasy

The cast-iron staircase at the back of the toilet leads to the terrace. The floor of the terrace is laid with red oxide and interspersed with broken-colored ceramic tile pieces. The edges of the terrace are beautified with potted plants. A small channel made of cement runs around the terrace.
edges to carry rainwater and the overhead tank overflows into the underground tank.

Mehmoodbhai’s office is located next to the overhead tank. One often finds him here sitting behind his desktop computer, checking for news, documents, or reports while listening to loud Bollywood music or meeting visitors. A short stout man with a cropped beard and small eyes that sparkle, he often dresses in a white baniyan (vest) and a checkered lungi (sarong). The space outside his office is used occasionally for different community activities. On the other end of the terrace is a big room partitioned into two. Mehmoodbhai and his family of six reside there. Earlier, he owned a house right next to the older toilet, which, according to him, he gave up for the bigger thirty-two-seat SSP toilet. Rather than being relocated, he took on the role of the caretaker, who could live above the toilet and maintain it.

In terms of its workings, the older residents of the neighborhood avail a monthly family pass against the payment of INR 50 (USD 1.00). The residents who moved into the neighborhood after 1995 avail it as and when they get their proof of residence. This inclusion of new residents is specific to Mehmoodbhai’s toilet and not a part of the SSP program. Unlike the older residents, the migrant workers and the sub-tenants are not provided a family pass. They pay INR 2 (USD .025) per visit. These migrants, mostly single men who work and live in manufacturing workshops around the toilet and leave for home seasonally, form the largest group of “pay per visit” clients. The income from these “pay per visits” is the prime source for maintenance and upkeep of the toilet. However, the family pass does not provide members a privilege to the use of the toilet before the non-members during rush hours. All have to stand in line outside the cubicles, while the caretaker walks around banging doors with a plastic pipe at intervals, demanding residents speed up their morning ablutions. As opposed to the various residents, the relatives of residents who visit their families from villages or other parts of the city are provided free service. For Mehmoodbhai, it is a matter of pride when visitors fall in awe of
the toilet or get envious of their relatives who are its members. Every year, he celebrates the World Toilet Day. The toilet gets covered with colorful lights, music is played on hired speakers, and a chief guest, such as a well-known builder, an important municipal official, or a local politician, is invited. The toilet becomes a space for a festival and the festival a space to develop affiliations with prominent actors in urban development. During one of our many conversations, Mehmoodbhai explained his renovation plans while arranging the tile pattern for the outside walls on his table. “They are Spanish and catch less stink than the usual tiles. The inside tiles will be glossy, while those outside will be rough. It will give the toilet a natural look from the outside and a posh look on the inside . . . I also want to fix three speakers,” he said smiling. “It’s very rare, and you don’t see it often, right!” I agreed and said you can play songs on it. “Not songs” he insisted, but “news, melodies, and instrumental music. It will help people relax while using the toilet.” He wanted the toilet to be an object of everyone’s attention as well as be pleasurable—what an exact fantasy!

4. Toilet: An Object of Tricks

Now the story of Mehmoodbhai’s toilet outside his neighborhood, particularly among other toilet initiators is a bit different. According to Nizambhai, a toilet initiator in a different neighborhood of Toba Tek Nagar, Mehmoodbhai had tricked residents who couldn’t afford to pay the initial contribution towards the toilet. He had convinced them to sign up for the program by offering to pay their part of the contribution. The plan was to get approvals from a minimum of 100 households so that the project would go through. Once the toilet was built, Mehmood refused to hand these residents their family passes and demanded they pay per visit until they paid their part of the contribution. Most of these residents were the ones below poverty line. Furthermore,
Mehmoondbai, according to Nizambhai, never really owned a house next to the toilet. Instead, he took on the role of a caretaker and gave the older unit out to his brother despite the fact that the two don’t really get along with each other.

Over the years, Mehmoondbai’s toilet has become one of the “best practices” of slum sanitation. Photos of award ceremonies, certificates from international organizations, travelogues of international conferences, newspaper cuttings and photographs of visits by NGOs, researchers and foreign visitors, all are archived on his computer. Some are put up on the walls of his office as well as social media. A few years after the toilet was built, Mehmoondbai started a city-wide organization to discuss and take up issues of sanitation in slums across the city with the municipality. Mehmoondbai used the toilet to insert himself into a world of bureaucracy and
development, and has much to offer to his fellow residents today. As I would wait in his office during my visits, residents from Toba Tek Nagar would come to him to figure out bureaucratic procedures for getting themselves onto the Below Poverty Line lists, for resolving issues of illegal occupancy or land conflicts, for availing water and electricity connections, or simply to use his knowledge about the right person in the right government office so that their paperwork gets done quickly with less hindrance. The residents use his knowledge and networks to resolve both individual and common issues. Mehmoodbhai, for his part, assists these residents in all possible ways without any expectations. Furthermore, specific NGOs showcase the toilet to funders as “their” best practice model to attract more funding. In turn, Mehmoodbhai calls upon these NGOs, when required, for favors related to toilet projects in his or other localities.

Unfortunately, so far his renovation plans haven’t found a favorable donor. All NGOs have politely refused any contribution. Mehmoodbhai, in turn, has politely refused to offer his toilet for their work henceforth. Unconvinced about renovating the toilet on the shoulders of the residents’ contributions, who, according to him, were paying a lot more than they could afford, he was looking for donations through other networks.

Residing at the other end of Toba Tek Nagar, Nizambhai, who brought to my attention the trick behind Mehmood’s toilet, has his own toilet story. Nizambhai and other residents of his neighborhood were relocated to Toba Tek Nagar by the municipality in the 1970s. Their neighborhood lacked most services then. Nizambhai and some of his neighbors got involved in setting up a few of the infrastructures: getting an access road reclaimed, connecting illegal

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255 Arjun Appadurai presents an inverted relationship of knowledge sharing between NGOs, CBOs, and residents in his essay on “deep democracy” and “grassroots governmentality”. Based on his study of the Alliance, a Mumbai based NGO that consists of three sub-institutions, he argues that NGOs and CBOs build on local knowledge and translate them into precedents, which are then presented to the state or donors as legitimate models for investment. Arjun Appadurai, “Deep democracy: urban governmentality and the horizon of politics,” Environment & Urbanization 13, no. 2 (2001), 34-36. I take up a more engaged discussion of his ideas in the following section.
electricity lines, making the locality visible on the public transport bus routes, and so on. A few years later, he left his job as a security guard and began working with a local NGO that had just set up its office in the locality. As months passed by he grew frustrated with the NGO’s ethical stance as it prohibited any interventions outside the set field of development work such as health and education. So Nizambhai began organizing informal waste-pickers and jari workers in his own free time. To get more actively involved, he quit the NGO and started his own organization with a few friends. Aside from Nizambhai, all the other members of the organization earned their incomes by renting the additional floors of their housing units.

For their first project, the organization applied for funds from the community awareness and community organization component of the SSP. The plan was to obtain an SSP contract and continue their organizational work in Toba Tek Nagar. But to their disappointment, the organization was assigned slums in a different part of the city. The organization decided to work in the assigned locality as per the terms of the contract. Nizambhai built relationships with municipal officials, local politicians, contractors, and other local leaders through the SSP contract. A few months later he decided to resume his work in Toba Tek Nagar. To do this he redirected funds from a failed SSP project to build a twenty-four-seat toilet in a non-notified slum in Toba Tek Nagar that had no toilet facilities. Nizambhai drew on his relationships with bureaucrats and contractors to have the toilet project approved and built. The toilet was handed over to Nizambhai’s organization for operation and maintenance on a five-year lease, like any other public toilet in Mumbai. Although the toilet was built outside the auspices of the SSP, Nizambhai the toilet had clear affinities with the SSP model. His goal was to the maintenance
and operation model of the SSP.\textsuperscript{256} A few months later the term of the SSP contract awarded to his organization terminated, and Nizambhai stopped being actively involved in the organization soon after due to ill health. His absence resulted in a lack of leadership, and the organization became defunct within a few months.

A couple of years later, the NGO that was assigned to build toilets in the non-notified neighborhood under the SSP approached Nizambhai. The NGO wanted to demolish his toilet and rebuild a bigger, forty-seat SSP toilet in its place. The NGO, like most involved in the SSP, ran a private construction company that had been awarded the contract to construct SSP toilets. The NGO and its associated company both had much to gain from demolishing and rebuilding the toilet. This involved availing itself of international development funds and contractual funds from the municipality for construction work. After a few informal conversations, a face-to-face meeting was organized between the NGO, the contractor, and Nizambhai at the local youth center. The local NGO, which had institutional affiliations with both parties, was called on as the mediator. After a few exchanges, Nizambhai, who was in need of money due to ill health, offered the NGO a buyout. He offered to sell the toilet for a price that included its cost of construction and his expected income over the next three years. At the time I ended my fieldwork, the NGO and its construction company were deliberating how much they would gain and lose in the deal.

\textsuperscript{256}During my fieldwork in Toba Tek Nagar I found that a number of toilets built under the older sanitation model were being maintained and financed by communities using the SSP model.
5. **The Developmental World of SSP**

Since the SSP’s inception, there have been polar responses to the programme’s political form and broader framework. On one hand, it has been problematized as being undermocractic, and on the other, celebrated as an example of “deep democracy”.

R.N. Sharma and Amita Bhide, who were involved in the preparation of its Monitoring and Evaluation Report, highlight some key issues regarding the SSP’s “participatory approach.” The “participatory approach” was enforced by the World Bank on to the municipality to put a check on the corrupt, inefficient, non-accountable, and manipulative state machinery. This insistence, they suggest, resulted in the municipality being pressured to create a space for NGOs by forgoing significant rules of tendering and implementing the programme. Despite these changes, most NGOs lacked required resources, skills, and ground presence, which led to a single Giant NGO (GINGO) with considerable presence in Mumbai’s slums monopolizing the programme in its second phase. The GINGO became the “super contractor” that had direct access to higher bureaucrats, politicians, and actors in the international donor agencies, and could change the terms of the programme to fit its needs and capacities. At the locality level, the authors tell us, the municipality and the NGOs were ill equipped to mobilize a “community” across internal divisions based on religion and caste. Rather than work with the conflicts, the actors often bypassed the mobilization and participation stage by working with already active CBOs, individuals, or local politicians. This led to the further exclusion of already excluded residents of slum localities, and in some cases reproduced the older patronage system between residents and politicians.

Furthermore, other scholars have pointed a range of issues such as: siphoning of money by different actors (contractors, NGOs, politicians, CBOs), a lack of accountability between residents and NGOs, the privatization of SSP toilet blocks by CBOs with close relationship to
NGOs or local politicians, the replacement of a state body by a GINGO, and use of fraudulent ways to bypass monitoring and evaluation process, among others.\textsuperscript{257} Despite these failures, the World Bank has continued the programme by forgoing some of its core principles and influencing key changes in slum-related state policies. One of the significant changes was the Maharashtra state-government’s decision to stop all other forms of toilet provision systems to make SSP as the only possible way of accessing toilet blocks in slums. The decision was made under pressure from the World Bank, influential NGOs, and higher-level bureaucrats.

The recent scholarship of Colin McFarlane on informal sanitation in slums of Mumbai has taken these critiques a step further.\textsuperscript{258} Based on his ethnographic research, McFarlane argues that the techniques (approaches and practices) and models (representations and formal arrangements) employed by programmes such as the SSP are instrumental to creating neoliberal subjectivities by devolving state responsibilities onto slum dwellers and encouraging urban entrepreneurialism.\textsuperscript{259} The latter is facilitated, he argues, by the shared ideological interests among international funding agencies such as IMF and the World Bank, specific civil society groups, corporate groups, and entrepreneurial slum residents. “The privileging of partnership, participation, empowerment and cost-recovery that promotes the thrift of the few over the implied passivity of the many, generates new forms of marketization and values particular forms

\textsuperscript{257} These reflections are based on conversation with different scholars and researchers that were involved in funded evaluations of the SSP in 2004-2005. They are also based on my participation as an undergraduate researcher in some of these evaluations. One of the fraudulent ways in which the NGOs were known to cheat donor agency evaluations was by introducing the evaluators to the same set of slum residents, who also worked for the NGO, in different localities. Further, a number of toilet blocks that were built in the earlier phases of SSP now lie defunct. In some cases, the monetary contributions made by the local residents never concretized into a toilet block.
\textsuperscript{258} Sharma and Bhide, “World Bank Funded Slum Sanitation Programme in Mumbai,” 1788.
of disciplined subject.”260 The convergence of ideological interests through networks between actors produces what James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta have called “transnational governmentality”.261 Thus, McFarlane’s broader argument is that these dominant actors see urban informality as a form of social and economic capital, and poverty and sanitation as potential sites for entrepreneurialism. To further his point, a key aspect of reproducing a neoliberal milieu is ownership. The “participatory approach” adopted under the SSP implies not just a governing model but also a financial model: monetary contributions from slum residents are a mandatory precondition. Both the financial and participatory model have a close relationship to the current mantra among civil society groups to produce “a sense of ownership” among communities. The logic at work here is one of tying good citizenship to ownership; “when you own something you feel a sense of belonging and hence take care of it.”262 This sense of ownership is also evident in the model’s exclusion of tenants (immigrants) and post-1995 residents from participating in the program.

The second response to the SSP has been its celebration as a democratic model. Arjun Appudurai’s essay on Alliance, a GINGO in Mumbai composed of three affiliated organizations, has been influential to its celebration.263 Appadurai locates his essay in a context characterized by three shifts: first, the exhaustion of Marxist vision to produce change; second, the failure of the modernization and development paradigm to address questions of poverty; and third, the constitution of a networked globalized economy, in which world cities increasingly operate...

261 Ibid, 2807–2808.
262 “Property ownership is identified with feelings of belonging and being in control. This coincides with President Bush’s rhetoric of the “ownership society” that builds on (older) liberal discourses about property ownership as a prerequisite to citizenship, as he introduced it in his 2004 campaign: “I believe our country can and must become an ownership society. When you own something, you care about it. When you own something, you have a vital stake in the future of your country (The Ownership Society, 2004).” Caitlin Cahill, “Negotiating grit and glamour: young women of color and the gentrification of the lower east side,” City & Society 19, no. 2 (2007): 202-231.
independently of national and regional mediation, while poorer cities and populations seek ways of claiming space and voice. In this context, the political form, techniques, networks and vocabulary of grassroots organization described above constitute, according to Appudari, “deep democracy”, “globalization from below”, and “counter governmentality”. In his account, the problems identified by the above scholars connote the agency of NGOs to create a space within the state, form alliances with higher level actors in the developmental world, implement programs in a participatory manner, hold a neutral position towards the religious ideologies of political parties, and use the governmental tools of the state at the grassroots level to hold the state accountable. To my mind, Appadurai evades any critical ethnographic engagement with the “grassroots” at the research level, and builds a broader argument about “deep democracy” by turning the problems identified by other scholars on their head. A great example of this upturning is the establishment of networks between different organizations from local to global scale. While in the earlier scholarly approach this convergence is identified as a conduit of neoliberal transnational governmentality, for Appadurai, it highlights as a democratic convergence of vertical collaborations (local and national) and horizontal learning (global)\textsuperscript{264}.

In relation to this debate, my own fieldwork experiences have affinities with the inferences drawn by the earlier set of scholars. However, my attempt here is to construct a productive dialectical tension rather affirm the critiques or identify a new category of subjectification. Besides, I am not sure where figures like Mehmood and Nizam, and their toilet models fit within these critiques and categories. Nor I am sure of the veracity of the stories the two narrated to me, since most information in circulation about the latest deals and alliances in Toba Tek Nagar is always in question. Thus, rather than check the veracity of stories and re-

\textsuperscript{264} Ibid, 42.
categorize subjects, I feel a more productive path would be to look at the amount of attention the residents pay to the policies, deals, and stories that circulate in the locality and what they do with this information in material terms. To my mind, the critiques of SSP are important, but they tend to reproduce the bureaucratic gaze of the state with an academic gaze, which replicates the state’s practices and its pronunciation of judgments and codes that are fixed and bounded (“neoliberal,” “entrepreneurial,” “informal,” and so on). To go beyond pre-given categories requires seeing things as situated and in process. As Judith Butler notes, the subject is enabled through the discourse, rather than being a pre-figured subject who performs the discourse. In this regard, the work of Alexiei Yurchek and Kajri Jain on the performativity of language and images, respectively, is insightful.

6. **Performativity and Stories**

Drawing on the work of John Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler, Yurchek identifies two dimensions of a speech act: constative and performative. The constative dimension presents a fact, description, or opinion (“It is cold”), while the performative dimension *does something* with words—that is, they perform an action that changes things in social reality instead of merely describing them (“You are guilty”). These two dimensions, Yurchek argues, do not exist in a binary, either-or relationship; rather, they are indivisible and mutually productive. Their relative importance can never be completely known in advance and drifts historically. In his work on the

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265 Most actors I interviewed for this research, such as the municipal officials, NGO workers, slum residents, and CBO members, were well conscious of the issues with SSP I have listed earlier. There was a general assumption about my position and the goal of my research. For them the research inevitably involved gathering information to critique NGOs and the municipality. Such presumptions about research and academic work forced me to rethink the argument of this chapter in terms of moving away from problems or celebrations of SSP and focusing on figures and forms of politics that lie between and dis-identify with any neat categories.


transformations in the hegemonic forms of ideologies and discourses in late Soviet socialism, through a historical-ethnographic study of ritual acts, official texts, visual cultures, personal diaries, and speeches, Yurachek shows how participating in ritualized acts of authoritative discourse and reproducing their forms was significant to reproducing the self as a “normal” Soviet person within the given system of relations, collectivities, and subject positions. While this participation was significant to reproducing the constative dimension (the hegemonic opinion), its performative reproduction enabled the emergence of diverse, multiple, and unpredictable meanings in everyday life, including those that did not correspond to the constative meanings of authoritative discourse.\(^\text{268}\) In the process, the performative dimension of the ritualized acts and speech acts rose in importance, while the constative dimension became open-ended, indeterminate, or simply irrelevant. Yurachek terms this transformation a performative shift.\(^\text{269}\) The acts of authoritative discourse, he suggests, were replicated not simply because of institutional power relations, control, or threat of punishment, but because of the performative dimension, which enabled people to engage in new, unanticipated meanings, aspects of everyday life, interests and activities, which sprang up everywhere and were not necessarily defined by the ideological constative meanings of authoritative discourse.\(^\text{270}\)

In her work on mass-produced images (calendar art), Jain shows how images acquire affective values through an intersubjective exchange while moving across different economic networks. Drawing on Judith Butler’s work on performativity, Jain shows how masculinity and femininity were reproduced as normative categories through mass-cultural images of Hindu gods and goddesses, in order to reproduce hierarchies of gender and caste with the rise of Hindutva nationalism. However, while the mimetic circuits of these images—which involve images,

\(^{269}\) Ibid: 26.
\(^{270}\) Ibid: 27.
bodies, and performances mimicking each other—are significant to how unequal power relations are operationalized and institutionalized through performative reiterations of normative categories, Jain also suggests that within these circuits there exist repetitions with differences, whose subtle bending of the rules exposes the social conventions underpinning these normative utterances and thereby renders them vulnerable to reformulation. Here, Jain draws on the work of Taussig and Jayamanne, who’s re-reading of Adorno and Benjamin reanimates the notion of mimesis as a productive, performative encounter rather than a matter of accuracy or verisimilitude. Identifying these transformative possibilities requires looking at the networks of circulation—the mimetic circuits—and attending to the context in which the mimetic form (utterances) is reproduced. So let me use this method to contextualize the toilet stories within other (hi)stories of Mumbai—a city. . .

7. . . . Where Life Is a Bitch

Toba Tek Nagar, where these toilets are located, is a montage of individuals and objects, which do not necessarily belong together as some form of an ideal “community.” Nizambhai is one of its older residents. He migrated to Mumbai (then Bombay) in the 1950s. The city then was an industrial center. Like many other older residents of his neighborhood, he migrated from rural parts of west India to slums around the textile industries in South Bombay (Byculla, Parel, Worli, and Sion, among others) in search of work. These residents were relocated to Toba Tek in

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271 Jain, Gods in the Bazaar, 316.
274 Yurachak, Everything Was Forever, 23.
275 Many of the older residents often recollected, during conversations, their memories of the city then such as the images of huge crowds of workers moving in and out of the industries and the streets being completely covered with workers.
1976. It was the year when the first census of slums was conducted and those found eligible were given a photo-pass and an alternative site for rehabilitation. The relocation of Nizambhai and the other residents was part of a sustained and disciplined move to control the growth of slums in prime areas of the city by moving them to peripheral lands. They were brought in trucks en masse onto the marsh of Toba Tek Nagar and asked to rebuild their houses on ten-by-fifteen-meter plots of a site and service scheme. The smaller blocks within these neighborhoods were divided and named after the older areas from where they were relocated.\textsuperscript{276} In a few years, the locality expanded around this site and service scheme. Twelve new neighborhoods were created by newer migrants using the infrastructures set up for the site and service scheme while simultaneously developing their own infrastructure through various means. While the new residents migrated from rural areas in search of work or to get away from crises in their villages,\textsuperscript{277} the older urban residents of the city moved to Toba Tek to break away from joint families or due to demolitions. Mehmoodbhai had migrated to Byculla (in South Bombay) from Muzzafarnagar, UP, in 1950s. In the 1970s, he moved to Toba Tek due to demolitions. He, like with many others, bought a small plot of land from touts, who in partnership with local politicians had reclaimed marsh with urban debris.

The 1970s was a peculiar time for the city. Textile industries across the world had begun using better manufacturing technology and producing cheaper textiles. Unable to compete with cheaper manufacturing costs, the industries in Bombay began fragmenting into smaller units and moving out to the city’s peripheries. The flight and fragmentation of industries triggered a number of shifts: the dispersal of the working class and their unions; a rise of service and finance

\textsuperscript{276}Interviews, 2013.
\textsuperscript{277}The migrant groups who moved into Shivaji Nagar and its adjacent localities included Dalits who moved from different parts of Maharashtra, Muslims from UP, and Konkani-Muslims and Christians from Konkan region along the West Coast. The Dalits moved to the city for different reasons. Some moved due to drought in their villages while the others moved to get away from caste discrimination (Interviews, 2013).
industries with high-skilled jobs; the rise in real-estate markets, and so on. During the same time, the discontent over food shortages, rising prices, growing income disparities, and asset disparities between regions translated into state and industrial workers’ strikes as well as protests across India. Caught in a force field of migration, inflating real estate prices, a growing civil society of upper-middle class people and multinationals, and newer non-regulated economies, the urban space became a contested realm for territorialization by different actors.

One of these many actors was Shiv Sena, a populist nativist political group in Mumbai. It established its dominance over the city, as Jayant Lele shows in his insightful essay, by deflecting the attention of the masses away from the consequences of unchecked capitalist development in industry and the state-assisted distortions of land, housing, and jobs to a regional

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politics. This involved identifying itself as a group of Marathi-speaking “sons-of-the soil” as opposed to the city’s “outsider” or “traitors”—the South Indians, the Communists, and the Muslims. On one hand the Shiv Sena sutured, as Appadurai tells us, “a specific form of regional chauvinism with a message about Hindu power through the deployment of the figure of the Muslim as the archetype of the invader, the stranger, the traitor”—an alien other; and on the other hand, it forged complex links and collaborations with three groups: the cleaner capitalists (big and small industrialists and service and film industry magnates), the undersided chaotic capitalists (builders, import-exporters, smugglers, bootleggers), and underemployed and unemployed youth. In his seminal work on urban violence, Thomas Blom Hansen theorizes Shiv Sena as an expression of “vernacular modernity.” Through hyper-masculine gestures and assertion of plebeian identities, he shows, Shiv Sena fashioned by the 1980s a new mode of urban politics in Bombay that undermined the older elitist political democracy of “classical Bombay.” Its alliance with the BJP in 1984 publicly pronounced its turn toward Hindutva and Hindu nationalism. These territorial assertions of identity and politics were consolidated into a spectacle of violence in 1993—the Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay. The 1993 riots, for Appadurai, “marked a conjuncture between the violent efforts to create Hindu public spheres and spaces, to depopulate Muslim flats and neighborhoods, to destroy Muslim bodies and properties, and an ongoing form of civic violence directed against Mumbai’s slums and street dwellers.” As Appadurai describes the riots, “Muslims were cornered in slums and middle-class areas. With

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280Jayant Lele’s account is one of the more revealing narratives of Shiv Sena. He sketches the relationship between the rise of Shiv Sena in the urban space, Bombay’s changing electoral politics, and the rise of capitalism. Such a narrative is often left out in other accounts that focus on Shiv Sena’s regionalist politics and its religion-based violence. Shiv Sena played an important role in breaking down the lower-caste and class-based industrial workers’ struggle as well as the communist movements in Bombay. Lele, “Saffronisation,” 190

281Hansen, Wages of Violence, 49–68.


lists of names in the hands of organized mobs Muslim businesses and properties were relentlessly put to the torch.” Life in this city indeed is a bitch.

Toba Tek Nagar was one of the many localities where the Hindu-Muslim riots unfolded violently. It was the second in a series of religious riots and left its mark on the neighborhood this time. During and after the riots, most non-Muslim residents left the locality to return to their villages or moved to non-Muslim dominated slums. The inter-city movements turned the locality into a Muslim dominated neighborhood. This change in demographics raised concerns among other non-Muslim groups, redrawing new lines of fear, abjection, and identity with respect to Muslims. It is not an uncanny coincidence that in a city being territorialized by nativist myths of “sons of the soil,” a local Muslim poet incites his audience to carry the “burden of the soil” to address Muslim minoratization.284 “Why do you walk with your head up in pride, when the

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284 The poet’s quote is from an event organized by the Civic Action Force (CAF) Foundation, an organization established by a few Muslim men to deal with civic issues in the locality. This particular event was organized to
reality lies down there in the soil? The Muslim head is not to raise, but to carry the burden of this soil. It is in this soil that the flowers bloom.” Pointing to the Khilafat Movement as the flowers of past Muslim leaders on Indian soil enjoyed by present day Muslims, the poet enjoins his audience to follow in their footsteps and continue that work for future generations. Situated in a city where Muslims are being continually alienated as outsiders, traitors, and abject citizens, such self-reflective discussions on Muslim ethics and locating oneself within the larger schema of religious territorialization have attained everydayness in Toba Tek Nagar.

If the 1993 riots marked a conjuncture of ethnic urban cleansing, post-riot slums became vulnerable to the assertions of the market and its violence. The liberalization of state policies shifted the state’s role from provider of public necessities to facilitator by the early 1990s. In the specific context of Mumbai’s housing policies, this shift resulted in the adoption of market-based mechanisms to provide mass housing. The city’s slum policies paralleled this shift. In 1995, Shiv Sena formulated the populist Slum Redevelopment Scheme to address its own unpopularity in electoral politics. It instituted an in situ free-housing program, where the cost of rehousing slums would be cross-subsidized through private-sector development and controlled through land regulation policies. This meant that private developers could redevelop slums that had been established prior to 1995 and recover their cost by building an equal amount of floor space in situ and selling it on the market for profit, or could carry the floor space to more profitable parts of the city in the form of Transferable Development Rights. This change occurred concurrently with the decentralization and devolution of governance to the local level and resulted in the increased

discuss the increased use of drugs among Muslim youth in Shivaji Nagar. Although the discussion was on the use of drugs among Muslim youth, it was framed within the larger ethical framework of being/becoming a Muslim today. For an interview-based account of post-riot migration in Mumbai, see Jyoti Punwani, “My Area, Your Area”: How Riots Changed the City,” in Bombay and Mumbai: The City in Transition, eds. Sujata Patel and Jim Masselos (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 235–265.
participation of local and international NGOs in the implementation of developmental programs in Mumbai. In an island city with limited land resources, slum-occupied lands have become one of the biggest sources of profit today. As an architect working on slum redevelopment schemes highlighted for me during an interview, “The profits are as high as 400 percent since the land is completely free of cost and real estate prices are at its peak.”

This exposure of slums to market mechanisms provides the means to alienate them and reify them into land parcels with a developmental value. This history, as a housing right activists narrated to me, has resulted in a three-fold alienation of slums: first, the alienation of slum residents’ from their life-work, memories, and desires that are embedded in the locality; second,

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286 Interviews, 2013.
287 I use the word *alienation* not in the sense of alienation from human nature but as a partition, separation, and process of making one a stranger in one’s own place of belonging.
the alienation of residents from the physiognomic experience of heat, rain, and social life in the new “pigeon-holed” high-rises where they are rehabilitated; and third, the estrangement of Muslims in slums through their identification as traitors and abject citizens. It is this movement in the city’s history that connects Hansen’s conception of Shiv Sena as an expression of “vernacular modernity,” Appadurai’s notion of “urban cleansing,” the growing liberalization of the housing and land markets since the riots, and Lele’s argument that the project of Hindutva under Shiv Sena has been to homogenize and proliferate predatory capitalism in spaces that were previously occupied by “others.” With the convergence of capitalism and fascism, experience, as Benjamin predicted, has fallen in value. Lived experience, the raw material necessary for engaging in mimetic arts such as fairy tales, stories, and proverbs to hand down wisdom across generations, has lost its value today—we have been impoverished. It is no surprise, then, that the film begins with Charlie, the film character, reiterating to the audience a saying passed on by his father on his death bed: “Beta Charlie, life badi kuti cheez hai, aur is duniya mein kutton ka sirf ek hi jawab hai—KAMINEY.” “Life here is a bitch. And the only answer to dogs of this world is a Scoundrel.”

8. Situating the Scoundrel

The detour through the turns and twists in the city’s plot as well as other stories and figures was to situate Mehmoodbhai, Nizambhai, and their toilets at the intersection of different movements in the city’s history: movements of finance, spectral real-estate inflation, religious territorialization, state privatization, nation building, and urban alienation. In this world, the aesthetic experience of shiny tiles, glazed windows, music and melodies in lobbies seems to be

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See Benjamin, “Poverty and Experience.”
exclusive. One simply needs to look at the real estate advertisements in public spheres. They speak of the beauty of green nature; of the panoramic view; of leisure and silence, where music can be enjoyed in privacy; of the shiny vitrified tiles and the German-manufactured taps and flushes that require only the slightest movement of a finger. This whole aesthetic experience of technology, beauty, and pleasure, as well as their social meanings, is partitioned here. Such partitioned urban imaginaries are increasingly enmeshed in the territorial urban politics and ideologies of Hindu nationalism. As the work of numerous scholars in the past decade shows, Muslim slums across cities in India are being exiled from both material forms of infrastructure connections and new urban imaginations.289

Another significant aspect of a toilet is its historical relationship to colonialism. Numerous scholars have explored the power relation between hygiene and colonization in India.290 Toilets, hygiene, and proper control of bodily excesses, as they show, were central to the colonial narrative of development and progress through colonial rule. In Mumbai specifically, toilets can be located at the juncture of three historical phenomena. First, sanitation and public health as the basis for segregating the city between the colonized and colonizer, as well as the justification for carrying out paternalistic and violent urban renewal programs. Second, as Nikhil Rao’s historical account tells us, “private toilets” first entered colonial Bombay with the emergence of “self-contained” apartment units in suburbs and became integral to the creation of class and caste identities by the native urban middle-class.291 The inclusion of the toilet within the home established the “self-contained” flat as the symbol of modernity,

289See: Anand, “Municipal Disconnect,” 487. Anand’s recent work on municipal water connections shows how Muslim slums in Mumbai have become “abject spaces” within the life of city, where not just their classification as slums but as “Muslim Slums” has led to their disconnect from municipal water supply by the lower-level municipal workers.
291Rao, House, but No Garden, 98–107.
middle-classness, and upper-casteness. The third phenomenon is the synthesis of the earlier two in recent years, where the lack of toilets and open defecation in slums becomes an aesthetic justification for their erasure in the world-class city, and the “self-contained” flat became the ideal housing typology for the slum rehabilitation projects.²⁹²

The figure of the kamina stands at this political and historical intersection between urban politics and aesthetic impossibility—the impossibility of creating and experiencing beauty and pleasure in slums and undoing the abjection by making one’s locality beautiful. To draw on the poet Salimbhai’s provocation, how does one then make flowers bloom in the soil without

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²⁹² Rao argues that the aspiration for a “self-contained flat” often leaves residents with less space than they previously had in the slum localities.
othering, without an end or a partition? This impossibility, I argue, breaks down when the kamina makes the choice to go deeper into the plot, to fool the “community” and build a beautiful common toilet. In building the toilet, the figure mimics, on the one hand, the shiny tiles, the music, the beauty, and pleasure, and on the other, the politics of the developmental world, where NGOs and their sister construction companies look for ways to route international and governmental funds through their own toilet projects. Here, mimesis connotes not the bourgeois duplications such as the “Singaporisation” of Indian cities, but a form of invention and transformation guided by the individual’s exact fantasy and the reality of the SSP’s developmental world. Thus the figure mimes not just the aesthetics of the built form, but also the aesthetics of lived experience, that is, of living and learning to navigate one’s way through the city of dogs by being in contact with oneself, one’s locality, and the global world of financial transactions and developmental politics. This navigation involves moving between multiple worlds and identities, playing them against each other, but never belonging to any completely. Further, this movement is manifested into a common space—a toilet—that is not an ideal “community toilet” in the sense intended by the NGOs (based on ideas of inclusion and sense of ownership), nor is it based on the ideals of neoliberal thrift (as seen in the excessiveness of the built form). Yet, it’s neither a toilet based on notions of equality and collectivity. The figure interrupts the hegemonic form of neoliberal development, and at the same time reproduces new forms of power relations. How do we conceptualize this figure and its power?

293 This staying in contact with, and at the same time moving between, different worlds is what I take Adorno to be arguing in his elaboration of the relationship between exact fantasy and mimesis. Buck-Morss, Origin of Negative Dialectic, 186.
In their essay on urban charisma, Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik theorize such figures as a locus of “infra-power”. By “infra-power”, the authors refer to a web of connections and structures that traverse neighborhoods and communities. These connections are neither fully visible to the outside gaze, nor officially codified, but also neither concealed nor secret. Such a form of power, they argue, facilitates connections between antagonistic social and cultural worlds in cities marked by radical discrepancies and disconnections. These connections are unpredictable, often unlikely and improbable connections between disconnected worlds of economic exchange and/or political alliance. The locus of the infra-power can be figures who are mediators, charismatic diviners and competent translators such as hustlers and tricksters as well as historical myths and narratives. Furthermore, Hansen and Verkaaik propose two ways of understanding infra-power: potentiality and emergence. The earlier refers to infra-power as the enactment of one’s potentiality to “read, master and ‘work’ the city to make it yield benefits, magical power and eros if one runs the risks and has the courage to ‘play’—the central trope in urban politics, exchange and pleasure.” The latter, emergence, refers to infra-power as a form of power that is instable and unpredictable, and becomes visible only through performative action and exchange. Despite its lack of formal visibility and predictability, infra-power, the authors suggest, is based on a specific historical and spatial relationship between the figure and the city.

To my mind, the notion of infra-power leaves a lot unexplained by characterizing it as a charismatic form that draws its power from magic and myth. Contradistinctively, I posit, that the concept of mimesis might be a more productive way of exploring the doubleness of infra-power and at the same time retain the aspects of potentiality, performativity, and emergence. As

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295 Ibid, 22.
suggested earlier, mimesis is a double-edged concept that implies the reproduction of a
hegemonic form of power as well as transforming the existing world into an altered reality. Both
these sides of mimesis, I argue, have a specific relationship to excess. Let me elaborate.

In this chapter, I have attempted to locate the two SSP toilets in Toba Tek Nagar as
concrete manifestations of the kamina’s mimetic movement between the subjective self and the
objective world.296 There are at least three significant aspects of this mimetic movement and
these are related to the doubleness of mimesis as representation (sameness) and transformation
(alterity). First, the mimetic movement between the different world, and the subject-positions
they entail produce, what Taussig calls, a “mimetic excess”.297 This excess creates a mimetic
awareness, where the subject becomes conscious of the representational and transformative
powers of mimesis.298 This mimetic awareness of the representational power is related to my
second point. The figure of the kamina uses the representational power of the toilet in two ways.
On the one hand, the representational power of the toilet as a “best practice” is used to reverse
the power relations between the self as a slum resident and the NGOs and the municipality
through negotiations and demands. On the other hand, the representational power imbued in him
by the SSP as the head of a CBO is deployed over the other slum-residents that are below the
poverty line. In this latter instance, the power relations are reproduced to keep the reality intact
(same). The third aspect refers to the transformative side of mimesis, which is manifested in the

296 The latter includes the slum locality, the developmental world of SSP, as well as the city’s ongoing
transformation towards a world-class city.
a Hindi word, means ‘make do and mend’, and denotes the capacity of the poor to improvise shrewdly with
available resources in a hyper-entrepreneurial field of competition. In recent years, the Indian state has been arguing
for scaling-up this frugal form of innovation. In his critical evaluation of the term, Craig Jeffrey argues that such
forms of planning reproduce the neoliberal ethos as the social norm, whereby the state creates an environment for
entrepreneurialism rather than providing public goods and infrastructures. If thought through the conceptual lens of
mimesis, jugaad connotes a mimetic adaptability—make do and mend, while the form of mimesis that I am trying to
bring forth is based on the awareness of this aspect.
298 These two aspects also the double meaning of the figure kamina. The term kamina connotes a fraudulent
character (labar) as well as one who vile (tuch).
concrete form of the beautiful toilet. Here, beauty has an excessiveness that is evident in the physical details: the tiles, the music, the ad-hoc pipe, the water channels, the plants, the water cans, and so on. This excess connotes not just an altered reality, but also an altered subjectivity, where both the self and the other (self-residents) are presented as subjects of needs and pleasures.

But yes! One could still read the toilet as an ideological object, a spectacle of shiny things, a fraud against the community, or a realization of a neoliberal regime that transfers state responsibility onto the community and creates state subjects. But to read the toilet project and the figure of a scoundrel as having such an end, or as a failure, is to fall, on the one hand, into the undialectical teleology of enlightenment, where things and beings are essentialized and homogenized into abstract categories, and on the other, into the space of the sovereign, where the city idealized as a “community,” rather than as an “intersection,” is always founded on an alien outsider—the migrant, the Muslim, the slum dweller. Sovereignty, Simone suggests, drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, is “a means of completion, of finishing the identity of territories and subjects . . . and converting them into an immutable reference.” But the city is not the sovereign, and by now we know that there is no just city, just a city with myriad intersections for politics. “Intersection,” following Simone, refers to a continual doubling, an incessant process of acting without a model, and an environment in the making. Instead of consolidating clearly discernible and bounded territories as platforms of action and interaction, in intersections there is a process of “spacing out,” of generating, enfolding, and extending space.

301 I draw these notes from AbdouMaliq Simone’s talk delivered at the RC21 Conference, 2011, at University of Amsterdam.
In my observations, never did it seem that the residents refused to seek Mehmoodbhai’s assistance despite knowing his fraudulent nature. Similarly, the resident Siraj’s identification of Mehmood’s toilet as “our toilet” points to a continual claim that leaves the toilet’s ownership open-ended. This act of knowing the fraud yet keeping the identity of the other open for future collaborations is an important political position for navigating the city of dogs. It opens up the intersectional space where of the dialectical contradictions of evil and good, positivity and negativity, tragedy and humor are kept in play in order to draw on their transformative powers. On the other hand, figures like Mehmoodbhai and Nizambhai continue to play their parts as the spider-spirits who spin webs, circulate stories, pass on intelligence, create objects, and redefine the boundaries of the community by making something more out of a given object. For Nizambhai and Mehmoodbhai, the toilet was the object through which they could insert themselves, and through themselves others, into a political play. Similarly, the other residents spend a lot of time waiting, observing, and paying attention to things to find their object of play and acting through it in the city. To end this chapter let me recount one last story about toilets.

9. Deals, Standoffs, and Violence
Seeing Mehmoodbhai’s SSP toilet, Kasim, a youth group leader from the adjacent neighborhood, decided to initiate a similar toilet project in his own neighborhood. With the help of Abdulbhai, previously a tout and now Kasim’s mentor in reclaiming land, a piece of land was identified. Over the next few months all the required paperwork for the land and the project was acquired from the municipality. The process of excavating land began a few days later. But the older residents of the neighborhood stopped the excavation and opposed the project the very next day. They claimed the land was theirs. The matter was taken to the community hall. To make the
discussion peaceful, the Quran was placed at the head of the community hall and maulvis (Muslim religious scholars) were invited to give their blessings. The local politician, municipal officials, and NGOs were all kept out of the meeting to avoid external interests influencing the discussion and to conceal the internal dynamics between the inside and outside actors. The discussion at the meeting was peaceful, but the participants never arrived at an agreement. That night, a set of anonymous people attacked Kasim at his house. As violence ensued, tensions rose in the community.

The next day, an ad hoc discussion began in a neighborhood street where all the men involved had assembled. Both sides had already called upon their henchmen in the political party offices, who in turn contacted their acquaintances in the police, to stay alert. No one took responsibility for the attack openly. The discussion on the street was a way of figuring that out. Abdulbhai had arrived to support Kasim and make sure the argument didn’t turn violent. The discussion went on for a few hours, and individuals began leaving the scene intermittently. With the departure of each individual the discussion would change to evaluate the stakes of the person who had just left. The sides somehow dissolved into a series of individual actors, each trying to read the scenario and speak accordingly. This went on until Kasim and Abdulbhai were the only ones left. Their conversation turned into a dialogue about the ownership of land in Toba Tek Nagar. As per the municipal records, the land belonged to the district collector from whom the municipality has leased it on a fifteen-year basis to rehabilitate the pre-1995 slum residents. But locally, the older migrants were claiming a stake in the land. To recap, Toba Tek Nagar was built on marsh. There was no land until the touts and politicians reclaimed the marsh with debris and sold the reclaimed land as small parcels to existing residents. During this reclamation process, the touts had also reclaimed a bridge that connected the neighborhood to the main road across a nallah (small stream). The toilet project was located at one end of this reclaimed bridge. The
older residents and the kin of those who were involved in reclaiming that piece of land were now claiming a stake in it. They wanted half the land to build housing units and sell them. The matter couldn’t go to the local politician in power because he had struck a deal with the older residents for a share in those houses. The Maulvis couldn’t be called upon to intervene because they had a deal with the politician for building a new mosque in the area, a part of which would be converted into housing units and sold off by the politician. Religion, land, and money, Abdulbhai and his friends argued that evening at the Human Rights Commission Office, have become so intertwined in the city that it’s difficult to differentiate touts from religious leaders, Hindus and Muslims alike. They were referring not just to the toilet dispute but also to the land behind Abdulbhai’s home, which was being physically fought over by the Naga Sadhus from Uttar Pradesh and disciples of a demi-god (Asaram Bapu). A few weeks later, gossip began circulating in Toba Tek Nagar that news of the violence over the toilet land had reached the municipal office. The ward officer would soon send a team to verify everyone’s paperwork so as to distinguish legal from illegal occupations. The fetish of land and money, Abdulbhai and his friends argued, has taken over everyone and may lead to demolitions.

The attack that night had shaken Kasim, but the visible support from Abdulbhai had put the older residents on a back seat. As tensions rose, the toilet project was stalled. It was a moment where the conditions of development had been rearranged, but not necessarily for the better. The situation had reached a standoff, where any move from any of the participants would turn the situation violent. But violence is to be avoided at all cost; if not, the scene turns nihilistic, just like in the climax of Kaminey, the film with which we started this chapter. The film unfolds in a slum, the den of the politician Bhopebhau. As the scene unfolds, all the characters, now connected to the others through the common object of drugs, show up in the slum. As each character enters, a new deal is struck and the loot keeps getting distributed into
smaller shares. But just before the deal is fixed, Charlie—to avenge the death of his friend, the third Bengali gangster—makes a move. He throws the guitar filled with drugs into fire. Once the object of negotiation, or the locus of politics, it disappears; the scene turns apocalyptic and everyone dies, except for the *kamina*. To pass on an experience here, such forms of politics reminds me of a Nigerian Yoruba saying: *Forgive the trickster and the tribe will be happy, but kill the trickster and the tribe will be ruined.*

Chapter 5

*Cocktail Mix: The In-Between Space*

The work of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sudipta Kaviraj in 1990s opened up a new avenue for studying the relationship between filth and modernity in the Indian context. Historically, filth or dirt, they argued, marked a conceptual boundary between the inside—the ordered home—and the outside—the ambiguous, unknown world. The inside space of the house was ordered, clean, bounded, and safe. In contrast, the outside space of the bazaar, the streets, or the city was thought to be ambiguous, strange, dangerous, and filthy. But the colonial gaze, characterized by modern notions of hygiene, civility, propriety, and enlightenment, they suggest, negated this conceptual distinction. Thus, during the colonial encounter these inside/outside conceptions, rather than being erased, overlapped onto colonial notions of private/public. The English-educated middle-class, Kaviraj points out, played a significant role in negotiating the two forms to create their own idea of public and private, which was more attuned to their own interests in creating a specific form of modern publicity, civility, order, propriety, and cleanliness. For Kaviraj, this transformation complicated the question of “public” space, too. In his story of the serial transformations in the uses of a “public park” in Calcutta from the colonial to the postcolonial period, he shows that the “public” was fraught with contradictory notions of modern public and a different, vernacular, yet modern, understanding of public as *pablik*. The story shows how the park, earlier territorialized by the bourgeois notion of “public” got reoccupied over years by the poorer classes through filth and dirt. For the poorer classes, *pablik* space meant something that

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was outside, unoccupied, and hence open for occupation and appropriation by anyone. The authors make a strong case for understanding filth and garbage as embedded within a contextual difference defined by history, religion, culture, and their relation to the body politic. Their work gives the relationship between public and garbage a new dimension. In particular, Kaviraj’s account of the public park shows the process of territorialization and de-territorialization of the public through filth.

To my mind, however, the accounts by the two scholars tie class and caste with garbage in such a way that the modern concept of cleanliness or hygiene becomes the trope of the higher-ups in the hierarchy, and filth that of the lower ones. Their contributions, although important, do not provide clues to transcend this knot; neither do they question the boundaries of inside/outside or public/private. Furthermore, they also abandon garbage to the realm of the dead. But garbage, as Joshua Reno points out, is not dead but live matter in at least two senses. First, as we see in the recycling economies across the globe, waste is a material that can be sorted, cleaned, broken down, recycled, decomposed, reused, or simply eaten by animals other than human animals; and second, as a sign or a trace of life left behind to be interpreted and played with by other animals. Reno theorizes waste, particularly scat (animal shit), as semi-biotic—a trace left behind by an animal in which other animals interpret a new life and use it in different ways.

306 For Kaviraj, this form of pablik acted out by the poorer classes brings to the forefront a new form of politics of part taking, one of insubordination rather than revolution. Kaviraj, “Filth,” 108–110.
307 One could read the little history of garbage in Mumbai sketched above through this lens, and read the present juncture in its history as a reterritorialization, or what Jürgen Habermas would have referred to as the “re feudalization” of the public.
310 This, as Reno suggests too, brings Garbology as the study of waste (and now increasingly of waste management) into close contact with the study of archeology, by using objects to interpret and evoke life in the past as history through discarded materials. The word garbage, too, has now come to mean refuse; in its French version it draws on the word garber: to refine, make anew.
Reno reimagines waste as semi-biotic material, a matter with living signs, so as to foreground new animal to animal relations rather than human to non-human relations. One reason that waste is not seen as a sign of life in action, he argues, is its more common association with death and environmental disruption—a legacy of modernizing waste management that renders waste as mass waste and dead matter. In doing so, waste is externalized as being anonymous and hence loses all traces of life; it loses the indexical connection between the animal that generated it and becomes anonymous and acquires an abstract character. Reno’s (re)imagination of waste as semi-biotic opens up a way of thinking about waste not as dead matter but as live signs—a life-world where new meanings and values are created. In this chapter, I am interested in the life-world of waste as this “in-between space,” or what I have named here, adopting a term used in the recycling trade, a Cocktail Mix, where contradictory regimes of values, organizational forms, and rhythms collide and create frictions. These contradictory regimes of value are related to waste’s characteristic as a material entity at the end of its commodity life well as its embeddedness of waste in relationships of caste, labor, state, and capitalism. Thus, this space is always under the danger of being enclosed and divided through hegemonic discourses and processes in order to keep the power relationships intact.\footnote{In one sense this chapter is somewhat of a repetition of Kaviraj’s account of territorialization and deterriorization of “public,” but with a difference.}

In the previous chapter I explored the figure of a scoundrel as an in-between figure that plays with boundaries of morality, community, and scale (body, the locality, the city, the global) through an oscillating movement while never allowing anyone to take over. This chapter extends the theme of in-betweeness in spatial terms. In doing so my aim is to first, rescue waste from the binary value regimes of economy (value or waste), environment (hazard or manure), ownership (private or commons) that are central to debates on waste in planning; and second, to relocate the
object of waste in the space of in-betweeness, where the object is held in common so that it is always open for other uses, values (non-values), and meanings. It is in this space of indeterminacy and incompleteness that the older meanings get destabilized and begin to unravel.

I make this argument with specific reference to the ongoing modernization of waste-management in Mumbai. These processes, as I show, erase these in-between spaces in order to manage waste efficiently and inclusively. The word inclusive always entails a boundary drawing exercise. Incompleteness, to my mind, resists defining a determinate community. In terms of the location of writing, this chapter follows the theme of movement from the previous chapter. We move across different spaces: bodies, machines, households, neighborhoods, wards, and the city; and across times: everyday, history, and moments to trace circuits of waste, shifts in the meanings of waste, and its effects on the lives of people. To do all of these things, let me begin with a small history of garbage in Bombay, now Mumbai.

1. A Short History of Garbage in Bombay/Mumbai
The Mumbai municipality subcontracted the disposal of garbage to private contractors for the first time in the early 1980s. The decision was a response to a strike by the Safai Kamgars Union (Conservancy Workers Union) against low wages. While the strike did result in increased wages for the existing municipal workers, the municipality complemented this raise with a subcontracting and a “no more hiring” policy. It displaced the risk of workers’ resistance onto

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312 The workers’ strikes have been important events around which the city municipality often reorganizes its structure and sets up new acts and policy. Jim Masselos shows how, since the 1880s, the recurring municipal workers strikes particularly in the sanitation sector became important events to set up more stringent rules around criminalizing strikes, changing organizational structures of the municipal departments, and also how the relationship between communal organizations to which workers belonged were instrumental in strike organizations. Jim Masselos, “Jobs and Jobbery: The Sweeper in Bombay under the Raj,” in Indian Economic and Social History Review 19, no. 2 (1982): 101–139.
private contractors through subcontracting and reduced its own expenditures on workers’ wages and pensions.\textsuperscript{313} As a result, the municipal garbage disposal system was comprised of municipal workers: \textit{muccadams} (supervisors), waste collectors, and garbage-truck drivers, as well as private contractors and private workers. The task of these actors, both municipal and private, is to collect garbage from the municipal bins\textsuperscript{314} and dispose of it at either the transfer stations or dumping grounds (landfills). The division between municipal and private is based on the ward-wise\textsuperscript{315} division of the city; the municipal garbage trucks and workers serve the older (southern) parts of the city, while private contractors serve wards in the newer suburban areas. Both are supervised by municipal \textit{muccadams}. Subcontractors are selected for each ward through a bidding process, and the contract payments are based on the tonnage of garbage collected and disposed by them. The aim of connecting money to weight was to incentivize a maximum collection of garbage. Thus to earn more money, contractors have to be aggressive and maximize the collection and disposal of waste. But the workers\textsuperscript{316} in these private companies do not have similar interests, as their wages are not tied to tonnage, so to earn extra income, both private and municipal workers collect and sell recyclables from bins. However, the city’s garbage world has never been restricted to the municipal disposal system. It constitutes a larger general assemblage that includes many non-state actors. This assemblage involves two economies—recycling and disposing—and can be understood at three spatial levels: the household, neighborhood, and city.

\textsuperscript{313}This form of privatization wasn’t new. Garbage trucks (the vehicles, drivers, and cleaners) that carry waste across the city have been partly contracted out since the colonial time.

\textsuperscript{314} The numbers of municipal bins to be provided in each ward were determined on the basis of population densities. However, new municipal bins got installed frequently based on repetitive complaints by city residents to local politicians about a de facto garbage site in their proximities.

\textsuperscript{315} The word \textit{ward} itself designates a city administrative division that came up under colonial rule when the city was hit by the Bubonic plague of 1896. Ward, a medical term used in hospitals, was set up as a geographical unit to carry out a large city sanitary improvement scheme based on locations of hospitals, sanitary officers, health officers, and municipal bodies.

\textsuperscript{316} The contracting companies still are under the minimum wage ordinance of 3USD / day, but the contractors have been known to breach the ordinance by paying merely 2USD per day.
At the household level, each residential society or commercial complex hires a private sweeper who collects garbage from doorsteps each morning and disposes of it in the municipal bins. These private sweepers, mostly from the Mehtar and Patel castes, have been a part of the city sanitation system for many decades. Private sweepers have monopoly rights over customary territories, buildings, or neighborhoods, which are passed on to the next generation as an inheritance (jagirdari). Private sweepers collect recyclables from the household garbage and sell them to the neighborhood kabadiwallas—one who deals in junk, also referred to as katewalla—one with the weighing scale. The kabadiwallas (mostly male) deal in buying and selling recyclables such as plastic bottles, glass bottles, magazines, metal cans, newspapers, plastic containers, and wooden furniture. They travel door to door on weekends to buy sorted dry recyclable materials from households—focusing on those that are in good condition and do not require any processing, just a bit of cleaning. Recently, kabadiwallas can be reached on their mobile phones listed on their visiting cards that are dropped into letter boxes. The recyclables are bought on a per/kg basis and then sold to either the second-level recyclers or as secondhand objects for household use. The private sweepers are involved in daily transactions with kabadiwallas. After the recyclables from household garbage are removed and sold, the rest is disposed of into municipal bins.

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317 The residential waste accounts for 60 percent of the city waste. It’s also the one that is more accessible to different actors. Other waste such as debris and biomedical waste get collected and disposed separately.
318 The case of low income neighborhoods, usually slums, is a little different. For residents who do not have the capacity to hire a private sweeper, they dispose of their garbage themselves, directly into the municipal bins or in de facto garbage sites at public and even private open spaces.
319 It’s impossible to trace out an exact date for it, but different articles point out the presence of private sweepers even before the colonial conservancy department was set up in Bombay Presidency. The municipal sweepers, although from the same caste, are differentiated from private sweepers. Masselos, 1982.
320 In the Northern parts of India, particularly Punjab, Hariyana, and Delhi, such customary rights and territories are part of the Jagirdari system.
321 The kabadiwallas in Bombay largely belong to the Marwari community and are located in all residential neighborhoods, along house gullies, in small informal units in slums, along footpaths, etc. But these communal lines are beginning to blur as people from other communities have started entering the business.
The municipal bins located in public spaces, such as street corners and along public parks and residential boundary walls, are municipally assigned locations for municipal and private workers to collect neighborhood waste. These neighborhood bins are also the primary source of recyclables for waste pickers. In addition to municipal bins, waste pickers also collect waste at railway stations, parks, streets, bus stands, de facto garbage dumps, and public squares. Each waste picker follows a particular daily collection route within a demarcated territory. They work in rhythm with the municipal and on-contract garbage trucks. If a garbage collection truck is scheduled to pick up waste from a bin at 9.30 a.m., waste pickers begin sorting at the bins at 8:00 a.m. If a new waste picker wants to collect garbage within a territory, the primacy over recyclables is given to the older waste pickers. Waste pickers work in groups of two or three so as to cover a larger area, collect more recyclables, and reduce individual workloads. The collected material is then pooled together during sorting, which is done along footpaths, park boundaries, or at any small, available public space. Waste is sorted according to the recycling process. Paper is sorted into newsprint, glossy magazine, and wet paper; plastic into wet or dry plastic bags and plastic articles; bottles into glass bottles, plastic bottles, and bottle caps; and then there is the “cocktail mix”—an industry term meaning unsorted paper and plastic materials. Sorting complete, waste pickers hand the goods over to first-level recyclers at a location specified by the waste picker (and mobile phones have made this coordination easier). This kind

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322 Under colonial rule the Bhangis, Mehtars, and Halalkhores were often employed under the sanitary staff or by the municipal corporation. They belonged to the lowest castes, the Mehtar and the Bhangi castes, which ate meat and dealt with dead bodies and night soil. The Mahars and the Patels, the city sweepers, were from the lower castes but regarded scavenging as work done only by the lowest of castes. In rural and urban contexts of Maharashtra, the job of the scavengers was to collect night soil from dry latrines and carry it to the city drain or into the sea, and to dig graves, remove carcasses, etc. (Masselos, 1982). Recently there has been a huge increase in the number of Muslims entering waste picking.

323 Interviews, 2008.
of mobility and flexibility works especially well for female waste pickers who have to return home in the afternoon to take care of children returning from school.\textsuperscript{324}

The limited amount of recyclables has made municipal bins spaces of negotiation over the share of recyclables. Due to low wages, which are tied to time rather than garbage collected, both municipal and private workers collect recyclables to earn an extra income. But most times waste pickers pay municipal workers a small sum of money (INR. 30 a day or 1.5 USD) in exchange for letting them access all the recyclables in the bins. It is assumed that the municipal workers have rights over garbage as they represent the municipality. This hierarchy of access to garbage in municipal bins is a trope carried on from the caste system in urban contexts—an intermingling of the old and the new. In his discussion of sweepers and scavengers in colonial Bombay, Jim Masselos observes that folk stories often reveal that the tasks delegated under caste hierarchy became duties or a charter of rights.\textsuperscript{325} Tasks were hereditary and were guaranteed as rights of particular castes, which could not be taken over by other castes. This hierarchy of tasks also defined the hierarchy of rights over garbage in the municipal bins. Thus waste pickers from the lowest caste give municipal workers from the Mahar caste priority over common garbage. The small sum is a compensation for their rights to collect recyclables. This arrangement saves municipal workers the time and effort of going through the garbage, and it provides waste-pickers access to more recyclables. In case of disputes between waste pickers and workers, the municipal-area supervisors, or muccadams, are called upon to mediate. Most waste pickers have networks with muccadams across the city. Whenever a new municipal bin is installed, which means newer waste pickers can be put to work, the muccadams contact the waste pickers, who, in turn, arrange for one of their family members or friends to collect recyclables at that bin. This

\textsuperscript{324}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{325}Masselos, “Jobs and Jobbery,” 1982.
negotiated form of sharing city resources is based not on formal redistribution, privatization, or enclosures, but on small negotiations that allow different individuals to partake in the economy and make a living.

The recyclables collected by waste pickers from municipal bins is sold to first-level recyclers located in slum localities across the city. The unsorted garbage is disposed of by municipal and private workers in the dumping grounds, like the one next to Toba Tek Nagar. Waste pickers from Toba Tek Nagar and nearby slum clusters collect recyclables from the dumping ground and sell them to *katewallas* in Toba Tek Nagar itself. Waste pickers are not employed by the recyclers; in some cases, however, they become bound to a recycler if they borrow an advance payment. Such advance payments might range between Rs. 1,000–1,500 (20–25 USD) and are used by waste pickers to pay rent, for family or medical emergencies, or to send home to sustain farming activities. The amount of waste collected by waste pickers plays a significant role in shaping their relationships to recyclers. The more waste collected, the more leverage they have in their informal contract with the recyclers. Thus waste pickers prefer to pay a small compensation to the municipal and on-contract workers in order to get complete access to recyclables in bins. But these informal contracts can lead to violence as well: in cases where a waste picker is unable to collect waste for some reason, or diverges into other jobs, recyclers have beaten waste pickers over fear and insecurities that the waste picker may be selling recyclables to a different recycler. Hence a number of waste pickers avoid taking advances or selling waste to just one recycler; they branch out to avoid such instances. This also helps them negotiate a better rate, as they are not dependent on just one recycler. Despite precarity, waste pickers prefer working as waste pickers, rather than as private workers, since their work provides
a temporal flexibility in terms of daily working hours and rhythms of salaries.\textsuperscript{326} It provides them certain securities not found in permanent jobs with private companies or by doing domestic work. Such flexibilities are often preferred by women waste pickers whose everyday time is far more restricted by family and household affairs. There are times when certain waste pickers move up the ladder to become recyclers. They save money over months and pool it with a few other waste pickers so as to have enough resources to rent out a storage unit and buy recyclables from waste pickers. Entering the next level, however, requires a large sum of capital.

The recycling economy is organized according to a three-tier hierarchy based on infrastructural capacities such as the size of storage units, waste collection and handling capacity, transport facilities, and established networks.\textsuperscript{327} These networks exist along communitarian lines, age of businesses, familial relations, personal favors, trust, and sometimes demand for waste at a particular time. First-level recyclers handle between five and ten tons of garbage daily. They run their businesses in units as small as thirty-two-foot-square and employ three to five workers. They don’t own any machinery as they are engaged in the initial level of waste processing, that is, cleaning and sorting recyclables by quality and fixing up small damages. They transport the sorted material to second-level recyclers in self-owned or hired \textit{tempos}. Second-level recyclers are located primarily in slum localities—and in proximity to the third-level recyclers. They are involved in a higher level of sorting and cleaning, handling thirty to forty tons of recyclables every day. These units employ around eight to twelve employees and are housed in sixty-five-foot-square units, which also serve as living spaces for the employees. Sorting at this level is

\textsuperscript{326}Interviews, 2008.

\textsuperscript{327}Recycling, like waste collection and sweeping, is based along communitarian lines. In Mumbai, members of particular communities, such as Muslim migrants from Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, have been involved in the recycling business for past thirty to forty years. The arrangement of the different levels recyclers is based on the amount (in tons) of waste each of them is able to provide to the next level up and the rate at which it is bought. In the recycling system, infrastructure facilities such as size of the storage area, access of the recyclers to lower level actors along the waste trade, transportation facilities, and machinery are all important.
based on color, size, shape, and potential use or re-use of the materials. The quality specifications are based on the grain of the material as specified by the third-level recyclers. Recycling at this level involves pre-processing, including washing and repairing broken materials. Sorted recyclables are cleaned, dried, and then sent to third-level recyclers. However, small portions of the processed recyclables are also bought by household enterprises within slum localities for use in manufacturing plastic articles, toys, and other household accessories. Third-level recyclers are engaged in a much more rigorous and mechanized processing of waste that involves granulating, compacting, and baling. The waste is broken down into smaller particles, packed into bags, and sent to wholesale merchants. The third-level recyclers do not function out of a single unit, but have specialized smaller units for separating, processing, and packaging. Each of the smaller units employ five to six workers who process around eighty to one hundred tons of waste daily. While the two lower levels of recyclers are involved in pre-processing material, the third-level recycler is involved in the actual breaking down of the material into smaller parts for reuse. Third-level recyclers also receive waste directly from large commercial enterprises, medical facilities, and industrial clusters, where they often have informal arrangements with the heads of housekeeping companies. The waste from industrial and medical facilities requires minimal processing as it is not mixed with the city waste. The waste is then sent to wholesalers when a minimum amount (agreed upon beforehand) has been processed, usually around five hundred tons. Wholesalers own large storage units and transportation facilities at the peripheries of the city. They work as the middlemen—traders or vyaparis—between large manufacturing companies and third-level recyclers. All processed waste from various recyclers is stored in large warehouses and then transported to manufacturing units located outside the city. Ownership of facilities such as large storage units and transportation trucks allows wholesalers to work as traders without getting involved in the day-to-day recycling
Figure 5.1: General Economy of Waste in Bombay/Mumbai
process itself. They simply arrange for large amounts of recyclables by buying them in bulk from smaller recycling enterprises. Manufacturing companies prefer to deal with merchants directly rather than dealing with individual recyclers. At every level of this hierarchy, the rate of the recycled material increases by 25 percent. The merchants fix the purchasing rate for the recyclables depending on the demand. The rate is then subtracted down all the way to the waste pickers.

2. Modernization through Waste Management

In the 1990s this general economy of garbage began undergoing a change. For a long time, in the process of writing this short history, I was caught up in researching how different organizations defined waste in general. But it appears that in the present times, waste gets defined only in relationship to how it is to be managed and hence in its connection to policy. Thus one finds definitions for “types of waste,” rather than waste in general. If, in the present, the consciousness of waste has matured into matter to be managed, it is not surprising that questions asked within the realm of planning are often: How much waste is being produced? What different types of waste are being produced? And how is waste to be managed? These questions led to the answer—public-private partnership in collaboration with CBOs as stakeholders. This discourse entered the general waste management system during the 1990s. This shift was also connected to the ongoing decentralization of state responsibilities in India. While the dream of a decentralized municipal Indian state was part of Nehru’s vision since the 1940s, the dream didn’t get actualized until the 74th Amendment to the Indian Constitution. The amendment was made in response to the ineffectiveness of Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) to perform as “vibrant democratic units of self-government,” and its aim was “restoring power back to the people by legally
encouraging local self-governance.”\textsuperscript{328} The amendment provided ULBs with the power to make decisions and set up laws pertaining to urban planning, such as regulation of land-use, planning for economic and social development, and the provision of urban amenities and facilities. At the ward level, ward committees were formed, which included elected councilors, the ward officer, and three nominated NGO/CBO members. This decentralization process aimed to shift governance from a centrally run municipal government, wherein citizenship was built on ideas of demanding rights and dependency, to a more participatory governance mechanism, wherein citizenship was to be performed through active participation. The issue of waste management came to forefront in the mid-1990s and resulted in a huge mobilization among civil society groups and the municipality to collect, sort, and recycle waste to achieve a “Zero Garbage City.”

\textit{Mumbai Chakachack}\textsuperscript{329} (Spic and Span Mumbai), \textit{Saaf Aangan Programs} (Clean Courtyards), Zero Tolerance Garbage Zones, Cleanliness Task forces, Area Local Management Groups, Local Area Citizen Groups (LACG), Recyclers Co-operatives, Environmental NGOs, Slum Adoption Schemes, hiring of squads of Litter Cops, and Clean-Up Marshals, were some of the many programs initiated by the municipality to achieve a “Zero Garbage City.” The logic of recycling, which was earlier absent in the municipal policy and the basis of its transformation into a general economy, now got appropriated under a new slogan: “Reduce-Reuse-Recycle.”

One of the primary and more significant initiatives was the Advanced Local Management program (ALMs, 1996). The ALM program was initiated to complement the municipal services with participation of citizen-based groups. The goal of this partnership was to achieve a “Zero Garbage City” by paying special attention to the “legitimate” demands made by ALMs in regular

\textsuperscript{328} Article 243 W, Twelfth Schedule, 74th–75th Amendments to the Indian Constitution.

meetings with ward councilors. The process of forming an ALM was simple—“gathering at least three civic-minded citizens and holding a meeting of concerned residents of the area.”

As an official of the municipality stated in a newspaper, the citizen-oriented process was initiated because “we (municipality) want the citizens to participate in the administrative process more actively. We will provide manpower and equipment, while the citizens will identify issues and priorities, and come up with plans for beautification.” The new Solid Waste Management Rules for the city (2004) further encouraged ward councilors to help organize a larger number of ALMs against promises of budgetary incentives for their constituencies. In addition to the solid waste rules, the municipality formed ALMs, Citizens’ Cleanliness Teams (CCTs), and Citizens’ Task Forces (CTFs) so that citizens would have a greater say in the cleanliness of their areas. These teams and task forces were to provide regular reports, monitor cleanliness, and participate in organizing mop-up drives in their areas. The CCTs could also suggest spots for litter bins, recommend areas for clean-up, devise beautification plans, and demand nuisance detectors called Clean-Up Marshals in their neighborhoods.

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333 CCTs, formed in wards, are to file reports online in a “simple standard format,” which then get delivered to the relevant BMC officials, displayed publicly online, and handed to ALMs. The MCGM allocated a monthly budget of INR 10,000 (USD 2000) for proper monitoring of garbage sites by CCTs. A fast-track method to get immediate attention was set up through “Use Pen to Clean Garbage” program. The program was set up under the mayor to send complaint letters regarding matters of waste to the MCGM; action regarding the same was promised within twenty-four hours. These letters usually include complaints from citizens about cattle nuisance, waste pickers, or unclean municipal bins. A brief review of these letters suggests that they are usually articulated around two issues: first, “waste is a cause of epidemic outbreaks in the city” and second, reminding the MCGM of its legal responsibilities by pointing towards or quoting from written documents such as news articles, SWM rules, and/or quotes from mayors.
334 In order to implement the MSW by-laws, the MCGM decided to deploy clean-up marshals in different wards. The “clean-up marshals” are installed to look for violations like open defecation, dumping of garbage and debris, and non-segregation of garbage by citizens or municipal and subcontract workers. In 2007, MCGM began contracting out the role of nuisance detectors to private agencies. They would collect fines and share it on a fifty-fifty basis with the MCGM. Their performance was judged on the basis of deliverables like no litter in the area of operation after sweeping, all spots of open urinals have been eliminated, no litter bins are overflowing or been stolen, and so on.
The issue of garbage opened up another significant question at the intersection of environment and poverty: Who are the people who are most susceptible to the ecological crisis? The critical question soon got followed up with a response: How do “we” include “them” to produce an inclusive form of planning and politics? How do “we” include waste pickers who have been involved in informal collection and the recycling of waste for decades? How can “we” achieve the economic upliftment of the urban poor alongside efficient waste management? These questions brought the Waste Picker’s Organizations (WPO) to the forefront in the policy realm. WPOs had been working on issues related to waste pickers in Mumbai for more than two decades by then. These organizations had emerged as a response to the appalling working conditions of lower caste waste pickers, particularly women, and the absence of any social security or provisions to waste pickers by the state. The initial work of these WPOs was in areas of providing resource assistance such as health services, micro-credit programs, training programs, and the organization of self-help groups among women waste pickers. But in recent years, a large part of their effort has been directed towards the state and involves demanding collective rights through policy changes. The WPOs recognize that one of the biggest problems waste pickers have is that their work is in the “informal sector.” This, they argue, does not allow waste pickers to share or demand any government benefits. Given this lack of recognition, the WPOs laid out a few solutions in the interest of waste pickers. These included a formal recognition of rag pickers through registration and ID cards issued by the WPO’s, and the third party auditors to oversee these private squads were organizations like ALMs and/or NGOs. A statement by a municipal officer suggests that marshals are to use a digital video camera for recording evidence before fining. Furthermore, surprise checks were to be organized in wards at any time, day or night, to encourage compliance.

336 Some of the WPOs, like NGOs, get formed as a result of internal conflicts within larger NGOs. Members from these larger organizations split and start their own organization. A lineage history of NGOs will probably point towards possible organizational kinship relations among these various groups.
caveat that only waste pickers with ID cards should have the right to pick the city’s waste; a proposal to organize training sessions for waste pickers, with money for the training to be given by the municipality; free provision of transportation facilities and kiosks for storage and segregation; an agreement that waste cannot be sold in the market by waste pickers, but that the MCGM makes it compulsory that manufacturers buy it from the WPO. These demands were made on the basis that by collecting, sorting, and recycling waste, waste pickers perform and contribute to city services and, in the process, provide environmental benefits. These demands got tied to issues of environment and good citizenship identified by civil society and environmental groups. In response to the pressures and demands from the WPOs, the 2001 Solid Waste Management Report officially recognized that “waste-pickers do the task of collecting waste in small and big cities, which helps lessen the burden of expenses on the civic authorities.” The report went on to make recommendations for the rules and regulations regarding registering waste pickers, organizing them, putting them into right networks of ALMs and NGOs, and providing requisite channels of training, infrastructure provision, and organizational support so as to harness their entrepreneurial capacities. Civic authorities and NGOs were given the responsibility of issuing ID cards to registered waste pickers so as to differentiate registered waste pickers from non-registered ones.

In 2006, the Supreme Court introduced a committee report that demanded that all urban local bodies in all major cities in India look into the matter of waste. According to the report the ULBs had to “modernize” solid waste management. Modernization here meant strengthening and building capacities of institutions by hiring experts such as environmental engineers and sanitation inspectors; building partnerships with public and private organizations, and training

337 MCGM, “MSW Rules, 2001.”
338 MCGM, “MSW Rules, 2001.”
them to impart expertise; modernizing technical aspects, such as, improving machinery, waste management systems, eliminating municipal bins, setting up roles and rules for all actors, and documenting best practices; setting up management information systems that would consist of daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly reports on monitoring, workings, and budgeting from all actors; and lastly, fiscal disciplining by linking financial incentives to efficiency. These changes brought garbage as well as the lives, machines, and associated spaces under the modernizing gaze of state and its fiscal and organizational disciplining practices. New municipal by-laws were passed; civil society groups were organized; and monitoring and surveillance systems were set up. Soon after, new coalitions were formed among the new groups to organize the life of garbage around specific interests and values.

At the household level today, the ALMs are closely involved in collecting, segregating, and recycling waste at the source. As per the 2005 report on ALMs, there were 832 ALMs across the twenty-four wards in Mumbai. A map locating these ALMs highlights that their emergence coincides with high real estate property values. The upper-middle-class residents in these areas, now organized under ALMs, CCFs, CTFs, and/or LACGs, have started monitoring activities of private sweepers, municipal and private waste workers, and waste pickers to take control of governance in their neighborhoods. These citizen groups follow particular practices and procedures, such as writing daily reports in specified formats, sending written complaints, videotaping or photographing littering activities, and monitoring the daily operations of waste pickers, garbage truck workers, private sweepers, and municipal officials. Over the years, a number of ALMs have gone beyond their mandate of garbage. Some have hired architects, academic research groups, planners, and social-science students to draw up redevelopment plans for their neighborhoods. These plans involve formalizing markets, beautification of public parks, beautification of sidewalks and property walls, relocating hawkers—in short, all the public
spaces where garbage gets dumped de facto. To exercise further control over neighborhoods and to make them Zero Garbage Zones, some ALMs have demanded, in letters and petitions, the removal of municipal bins from their neighborhoods. Municipal bins—which were a common resource of garbage and recyclables for municipal and private workers, waste pickers, dogs, and cattle (to which we add micro-organisms too)—are now being identified as a source of nuisance. In response, the MCGM has begun eliminating municipal bins from these neighborhoods and replacing them with ghanta gadin (garbage trucks with a bell), which are now being used to pick up waste. When the bell is rung, the private sweeper or the security guard is to hand garbage to the workers directly at the housing society gates. These garbage trucks have a certain spatial ideology—compacting. With increased complaints about waste spilling into the city space and the lack of space to accommodate new dumping grounds, the municipality replaced open garbage trucks or dumpers with compactors. These compactors, hired from multinational groups such as Tata, who in turn buy them from multinational companies in Portugal, now compress city waste in an enclosed compartment before disposing it onto the dumping grounds. Thus the circuits and spaces through which a general waste management assemblage was forming are now being reclaimed. These changes have begun to reform\(^{339}\) not just the general assemblage but also the everyday lives of its actors. The ethnographic instances from Toba Tek Nagar are illuminative of these transformations.

\(^{339}\)The use of the word *reform* is not to indicate an improvement but rather to indicate coming into being of a concrete form.
Figure 5.2: Circuits and Short-Circuits
3. The City Was Built on Garbage!

a. Dumping Ground
I arrived a bit early one day and decided to stop by my usual spot for chai and cigarettes before going to the dumping ground. The spot was a familiar one to me; it was the intersection of the city highway and the Kachra Depot Road (Garbage Depot Road), where I spent my breaks from interviewing those at the second-hand metal and wood shops nearby. As I stood there a continuous stream of garbage trucks—dumpers, compactors, tempos, and dumper placers made their way into the dumping ground. These trucks were like ants carrying their daily collection from the city into the garbage hills, except, rather than drive in smoothly, they bounced their way into the dumping grounds. The street had an uneven surface. In some places, it was due to the overuse of the road by garbage trucks, and in other places, the spilled-over garbage, left unpicked for years, had now become one with the street, resulting in the unevenness. This garbage becoming one with street, to my mind, was how not just Toba Tek Nagar but the entire city was built—reclaiming the flat lands, the marsh, the salt pans, the mangroves, and the sea with urban debris and garbage, which have now become one with the city. Today, the plastic bags and plastic packets in which everyday things get wrapped are mixed with cement as adhesives to build concrete roads. The city is built on garbage! As these garbage trucks bounced their way into the dumping ground, they threw some of the garbage—usually the lighter materials, like plastic bottles—onto the street. Children from Toba Tek Nagar are well aware of this. They stand along the street waiting. As soon as a waste object jumps out, they run to pick it up. They pick recyclables to earn some small bit of cash for the day, or just enough cash to spend it on buying drugs. They aren’t allowed into the dumping ground to collect recyclables as they are underage. The WPOs, too, are formally bound by child labor laws, thus their formalization hasn’t meant much for children waste pickers.
b. Weight

The dumping ground near Toba Tek Nagar was established as a landfill in 1927. There was no
Toba Tek Nagar then, just marsh, half land and half water, hidden below mangroves where the
creek met the sea. The marsh closer to the land was fertile and would be used for small farming
activities such as growing vegetables, eggplants mostly. The farming activities continued as late
as the 1970s, which is when everyone began reclaiming the marsh. Everyone—the municipality,
the politicians, the residents, the touts. No exceptions there! Two things facilitated the decision
on where to locate the dumping ground. First, the extension of the eastern railway line, which
could now travel as far as Toba Tek Nagar; and second, the decision to displace garbage from the
flat lands in the heart of the city to a place away from human habitation. A garbage train would
carry the city’s waste from the nearby train station into the dumping ground once every day. This
garbage train continued to pass through Toba Tek Nagar up until the 1980s. The landfill was
established after much debate among the municipal councilors, the sanitary engineers, the
medical officers, and the propertied class, who were then part of the municipality. They weighed
costs: the costs of carrying waste over a large distance against the costs to human life and death
due to the location of garbage in the city. But while these aspects governed their decision, the
challenge of garbage to visual and olfactory senses played an important role too, particularly, the
stench carried by the winds from the sea into the city, and the sight of flies, mosquitoes, cows,
cesspools, decaying carcasses, mice, silt, night-soil all mixing in with each other. Such
descriptions of garbage in their editorial columns spoke of garbage’s semantic strength to not be
submitted to the realm of values and language. This excess, this challenge to the senses, could
not be weighed but simply sensed, and hence was assigned an ambiguous and arbitrary name
“miasma,” which was then used to reorder lives through colonial discourses and violence.
Unlike the lightness with which children play with discarded things, weight and value has come to carry much of the heaviness of garbage in modern life. Nothing can simply be wasted; everything has to have a value, use, or exchange, which is calculated through weight. It is no wonder that the local recyclers, the kabadiwallas (one who deals in junk), who buy daily collections from the waste pickers are referred to as katewala—the man with a weighing machine. The municipality, too, is a katewala in this sense. It weighs garbage before paying its contractors. Municipal workers are paid by the weight of their time, their labor time. In this era of weighing values, the entrance to the dumping ground at Toba Tek Nagar can be identified not by a security gate or a fence but by a weighing machine—a small booth constructed of galvanized iron sheets and an iron ramp on which the trucks halt to get weighed before they enter the dumping ground. One can find such booths even at the city’s Octroi Tolls where incoming goods from other municipal territories get taxed after weighing. The weight of the garbage trucks, the ID number of the truck, the name of the truck owner, and the name of the contractor in charge of collecting the waste, all are fed into a computer. The truck is weighed again on its way out. The difference in weight helps calculate the amount of garbage collected every day, to keep a tally of the whole, and to pay the private contractors.

The dumping ground is soon going to be shut down. It has reached its maximum capacity (in weight and height) for the amount of waste it can store safely. The fees of the private consortium in charge of managing the dumping ground and ensuring its proper closure are based on a tipping fee or gate fee. The fee is calculated by fixing a rate per tonnage of waste dumped into the landfill. Often, private contractors ask their waste workers to mix a bit of sand, silt, dust, and/or debris in with the garbage to increase its weight. The job of the muddadams, the local municipal supervisors overseeing everyday garbage collection, is to keep such attempts of over-
weighing in check. The everyday life of garbage collection at the municipal bins involves this quarrel between the *muccadams* and the private waste workers.

**c. Contracts**

Most work carried out by the municipality at the dumping ground involves a series of contracts and subcontracts. On the left side of the weighing booth, the municipal office is housed in a small shed built with bricks and asbestos sheets. Three municipal officers, in charge of supervising the work of the private consortium and overseeing the dumping ground, sit here.

Next to the shed is a small brick room for the municipal clerk. He lives there too. A few steps away from this municipal office, towards the entrance of the dumping ground, is another enclosed office space made of shipping containers. It’s the office of the private consortium.

Three well-built, muscular men, dressed in tight black T-shirts, black jeans, and black shoes were sitting outside its gate. They all wore a checkered scarf around their necks and sun-glasses. They
are referred to as bouncers, in charge of providing security for the dumping ground as well as the officials. These bouncers work for a security agency and are hired on contract by Sheikh, who acquired the contract for securitizing the dumping ground from the municipality. At night these security men work as bouncers in five-star hotels and pubs, or at high profile events, or provide security for high-profile personnel. Those who work as bouncers in hotels and pubs also work as male prostitutes. While I waited for the private company engineer to show up, one of the bouncers said to me, “What one requires to be a bouncer is discipline and physique . . . like in the military. Our job is to control excess”—excessive drunkenness, violence, waste, and sex.

Opposite this container office was a small shed built entirely of galvanized iron sheets. That was Sheikh’s office. He walked towards me dressed in a white kurta and pajama, with a checkered scarf around his neck. I figured that the municipal officials had called him to ask one of the bouncers to escort me into the dumping ground. He was short, stout, and had an aura of confidence. I figured that my visit was an added liability in his otherwise stressful day. He rudely asked me wait for the engineer from the private company, wishing I wasn’t there, but couldn’t get rid of me, since I had a letter from the chief engineer. As I later came to know from the caretaker at the municipal office, he was the brother-in-law of a municipal councilor, a fact which had played a huge part in his acquiring the security contract at the dumping ground; kin networks typically play an important role in getting contracts. The kinsman of another municipal councilor was awarded a contract to provide garbage trucks to the municipality. After Sheikh walked away, the bouncer asked me curiously, “Why are you being so polite to that asshole? He is just a contractor. Don’t let him bully you.” But Sheikh was distressed that day for a different reason. The police van was standing by his office, its occupants waiting to collect their monthly dues from him. The dumping ground, as waste pickers and newspapers suggest, is a violent space. Here bouncers get beaten up by unknown people in the night, and more frequently the
bouncers beat up and abuse waste pickers. Sheikh requires the police to be on his good side to bring such situations under control.

After a couple more cigarettes and a bottle of water, the private engineer showed up and invited me to sit in his office. It was a hot day, and I decided to forgo my chance to observe the happenings outside the dumping ground and to wait in the engineer’s air-conditioned office instead. The walls of his container office were covered with charts, boards, and maps. As I sat, various men kept entering the office to figure out their time and location of duty. The engineer would look up from his register to figure out where waste needed to be moved and organized and would instruct these men accordingly. Some of them worked on forklifts, others on bulldozers. These forklifts and bulldozers, machines working with waste, are hired on contract by the private company. The men who work these machines are also hired on contract. The job of the bulldozers is to push the waste once it’s dumped by the garbage trucks, and the work of the forklifts is to pick it up and order it into hills so as to maintain the correct height of these hills as per the rules of the airport authority. The dumping ground, 185 hectares in area, is divided into loops, all of which (120 hectares) are said to have reached their capacity, except for the last one (65 hectares). The private consortium (of national and international companies) has been awarded the contract to oversee the construction of a methane gas plant and the process of covering the garbage with geo-textile and geo-membrane to avoid the generation of leachate and its entrance into the nearby creek. Over the years the garbage dump will be turned into a source for methane gas to earn carbon credits, and a few years later, once the garbage has settled, the ground will be turned into a park, as was done in another part of the city. The city is built, I thought, not just on waste but also on contracts.
d. **Every Day**

Most waste pickers in Toba Tek Nagar start their day at six in the morning. They make their way to the dumping ground with a sickle in one hand and a collection bag in the other. The waste pickers registered with different WPOs in Toba Tek Nagar, of which there are three, enter the dumping ground by showing their ID cards to the security guards at the gate. Those without ID cards enter through the holes made in the boundary wall that divides the dumping ground from the locality. The garbage dumped by garbage trucks the previous night lies unsorted in the morning. It remains unsorted at the source, too, and hence tends to contain more recyclables. Another next set of garbage trucks comes in at around eleven in the morning and starts covering up the unsorted waste. Thus the waste pickers try to make the most of their mornings. They work till five at night at the dumping ground and after rechecking the collected material, they make their way to the nearby *katewalla* to sell it, and return home by seven in the evening.

Different waste pickers pick different objects. Some pick up plastic bags, some *german* (aluminum), some *phugga* plastic (ballooned plastic or plastic containers), some pick up wood, some metal, and some pick a mixture of all possible recyclables. Bottles are a rare find as they tend to get sorted out at the source. The sickle is used to unearth the mounds of garbage dumped by the trucks. Its pointed edge forcibly pierces the mound to loosen it up, then with light force, plastic bags and paper are pierced and picked up. The act of collecting depends not just on the material that arrives on garbage trucks but also on the physical abilities and the economic needs of the waste pickers. Those who depend on waste picking as their primary source of income tend to collect more, and more specific, recyclables. The prices for *german* and *phugga* plastic are higher and hence preferred. Those with more body strength, usually the male waste pickers, push their way through a crowd of waste pickers and walk faster through the mounds of garbage and marsh to reach the garbage being dumped. As soon as the garbage is dumped by the truck, the
waste pickers begin unearthing it with sickles to find recyclables. They often get pricked by needles, glass, or metal. Unearthed garbage also releases heat from the gases produced by degradation and the compaction in the garbage compactors. Hence they end up working four days a week and healing their wounds the other three days. Thus collection is based on the body’s abilities—how much the body can sustain; how much waste can it carry; how much does it walk, bend, and push. Those who are aren’t able to expend much energy tend to collect a mixture of things, which earns one less money. Since waste picking depends a lot on body strength, the WPOs trying to make profits tend to register more male waste-pickers.

The dumping ground, as mentioned above, is divided into different loops. And since most loops have reached their holding capacity, the garbage gets dumped in just one loop. The trucks usually dump garbage in a common space. However, there are times when one can get access to an entire load being dumped from one truck. For that, one has to pay the driver or get access to it through the use of force. The thugs at the dumping ground are in charge of this; they tend to secure access to garbage and garbage trucks from certain parts of the city, usually the areas with higher-income residents, where the amount of recyclables are more and the chance of finding valuable material is higher. Most waste pickers tend to contribute some money to pay the garbage truck drivers to dump garbage a little bit away from the bulldozers so as to buy themselves time to collect recyclables. This payment, as some waste pickers pointed out, is not to secure access or get rights over garbage in that truck, but as compensation for the driver’s empathy and support.

A few years ago, I was told, working on the dumping grounds was easier. The dozers would work from 9 to 11 a.m. This would give waste-pickers time to collect and sort recyclables from the waste dumped the previous night. The garbage trucks would arrive by eleven in the morning and continue dumping till five in the evening. The bulldozers would start their work
only at five in the evening and work till seven in the evenings. The garbage trucks would then resume dumping waste from seven to eleven in the night. But these days, the work of dumping and organizing waste is now carried out simultaneously. So while the trucks dump garbage, bulldozers push it, and forklifts organize it in mounds. Amidst these machines and their heavily mechanized movements, waste pickers have to find their way to recyclables while making sure they do not get crushed under the garbage being dumped. Thus collecting waste requires a heightened sense of awareness of both bodies and the surrounding machines.

e. **Compactors**
The notion of weight, as in measuring time, tonnage, and capacity, also brings to mind the new garbage compactors. The compactors were introduced in the city in early 2000. They were preceded by carts that were hand-drawn by lower-caste workers: bullock carts, horse carts, horse scammells, open jeeps, open dumpers, and today, compactors. This history of garbage carriers illuminates a movement of progress towards compacting both time and space: compacting time with horse power and space with compactors. Once poured into the main containers of the compactors, the garbage is compressed at the pull of a lever. The excess liquid gets squeezed out of things and flows into the residue tank below this main compartment of the compactor. This movement, however, produces an immense amount of heat inside the compactor, which gets released when the compartments are opened up in the dumping ground to pour out all the garbage. It’s as if the waste is not only to be hidden, but also compacted and compressed, so that it occupies the least amount of space in the city.

Compactors might look like insensitive machines from the outside, but from the inside they are all well decorated. The compactor I traveled on during one of my visits had windows that were decorated with yellow and orange garlands of plastic flowers. A wall hanging made of cloth consisting of many pouches was hung right in the center to keep mobile phones, papers,
matches, and *beedis* (hand-rolled cigarettes). The private waste collectors, mostly males in their twenties, sat behind the driver on a long seat. Their day starts at six in the morning after *chai* and *poha* (tea and puffed rice) at the food stall outside the local municipal office. They began their day in the compactors making jokes, mostly about sex, or rather the lack of it, in the life of one of the workers. The compactor travels through Toba Tek Nagar from six to ten-thirty in the morning. It makes stops at three municipal bins, then heads back to the local municipal office and then into the dumping ground. The rakes, spades, and plastic *ghamelas* (wide and shallow spherical buckets) are fixed with ropes and hooks above the petrol tank. The recyclables collected by the waste workers are placed in a plastic bag next to the tank and sold at the end of the shift. Most of the waste workers were Buddhists and lived nearby the dumping ground. Some were from Toba Tek Nagar itself, while others hailed from slum localities across the city highway. They all worked two jobs. Santosh, who lived in Toba Tek Nagar and was in charge of selling the recyclables to the *katewala* after the shift, sleeps after his morning shift, then works an evening shift at a morgue in the nearby hospital. Deepak, similarly, works as a body-building gym instructor at the local gymnasium in Toba Tek Nagar in the evenings. Some private waste workers earn money from cricket. Most private contractors, I was told, own cricket teams that enter into city-wide competitions organized by political parties or private organizers. The private waste workers play for their employers and are sometimes traded to another employer’s team for a small amount. The *muccadam* Dilip, on the other hand, although from a lower caste, worked his way up from being a municipal waste worker to a supervisor. That day, coincidentally, all the *muccadams* had received their paychecks. They began their day in the tea stall having breakfast and discussing their pensions, their provident funds, and savings for their children’s education. They were permanent employees and more secure than the others. Their job on these daily routes is not just to supervise the private waste workers but also to maintain a cordial relationship with
the residents. Most infrastructures in Toba Tek Nagar are interwoven into its narrow streets. Thus there are times when compactors run over water pipes that run across the streets, or unknowingly tear into plastic pipes and electric wires, or crush doorsteps as they make sharp turns. Such situations often turn confrontational and violent. Another reason for employing enclosed compactors is to avoid the leakage of smell, the silt, and the sight of garbage while traveling through the city. But this neutralizing or anesthetizing of the senses by enclosing garbage is only for others, outsiders, not for those who do the work of collecting and depositing garbage in these compactors. Most municipal waste workers, as their wives who live in Toba Tek Nagar told me during an afternoon conversation, consume a lot of alcohol to anaesthetize themselves. The alcohol helps disconnect their body from their senses: their noses are anaesthetized while their eyes and hands continue to work as alienated parts.

Figure 5.4: Morning Shift
f. NGO-didi

I had passed by this kiosk on my motorbike many a times before, but I always ignored it, for it looked like one of the many recycling units in Toba Tek Nagar. But during one of my interviews, a municipal official asked me specifically to visit this kiosk as it represented one of their best practices in participatory solid waste management. Similar to four other wards in Mumbai, the municipality had granted SOURCE, a Waste Pickers’ Organization (WPO), the authority to collect recyclables from households and municipal bins in the ward. In addition to providing rights to recyclables, the municipality had also provided the WPO trucks for transporting materials, a kiosk to sort and store recyclables, and had mediated between the WPO and different Area Locality Management Groups (ALMs) to help familiarize residents with the WPO and its registered waste pickers.

“The whole world,” Sonal said to me in an explanatory manner, “can be viewed as waste, some man-made and some nature-made. The man-made waste can be recycled and reused, while the nature-made can go back into the nature through soil. The first is called dry-waste and the second wet-waste.” Sonal was in charge of the WPO’s operations at the kiosk as well as at the ward level. In their collaborations with the municipality, the WPO had replicated the municipal administrative boundaries within their own structure. Sonal was assigned the role of a WPO officer at the ward level. “Everyone in the area is scared of me. The security guards, society sweepers, municipal workers, even the residents. They get scared when they see me. If I

340Didi is an elder sister.
341Being a slum, Toba Tek Nagar wasn’t included under this program. The municipality had a separate program for slums, the Slum Adoption Program, but that’s a story for another day.
342The ALM program was initiated to supplement the Municipal Corporation services of solid waste management with participation of citizen based groups.
343I had heard a similar worldview among the Muslim recyclers in Bholakpur, Hyderabad, one of the oldest recycling clusters in India. But their worldview was more related to the notion of sacrifice. As one of the recyclers suggested, if a goat is sacrificed, that is, slaughtered, then the sacrifice is not complete if any of its parts are wasted. He never used the word used but rather argued that there can be no waste. If something gets wasted then it shouldn’t be sacrificed at all.
see that they aren’t sorting waste properly, I first shout at them, then instruct them, and if it still doesn’t work, I threaten them that they can be fined under the new municipal rule. You need to use fear and dhos (authority) to get things done properly, to get people to do what you want them to do. But I also teach them properly.” Everyone at the kiosk, including the registered waste pickers, referred to Sonal as an elder sister—“Sonal didi.” Sonal, in turn, referred to everyone at the kiosk as “bachaa” (child), regardless of their age and gender. At that moment, a young man walked in with a mobile phone and handed it over to Sonal. She switched her demeanor and began shouting assertively. A waste picker, I figured, was on the other end of the call. Sonal had been inquiring about his whereabouts since the time I had arrived that morning. It seemed that the young waste picker had disappeared with an advance payment from the WPO. To add to that, he had refused to hand over recyclables to the WPO workers on the collection trip that morning. Sonal threatened him to either show up at the kiosk by 5 p.m. that very day or never show up in the area again to collect recyclables. After hanging up she handed over the phone to the worker saying, “Thanks Bacha,” and instructing Javedbhai about how to deal with the waste picker if he showed up. I stepped outside the office to document the activities in the kiosk.

The municipality had provided the WPO with a large plot, measuring around twenty by forty meters, right at the junction of the city highway and the kachra depot road. The built structure at the kiosk occupied merely one-third of the entire plot. At the entrance of the plot was a large open space; two trucks and a tempo were being loaded up with huge white sacks filled with recyclables to be sent to Dharavi for the next stage of recycling. The built structure was L-shaped and was divided into four parts. At the center, right opposite the main gate, was the WPO office, built entirely of wooden panels. It was covered, waist-height, with brown sunmica and the rest with dark tinted glass. One couldn’t see inside the office from outside, except through a small window, which could be opened only from the inside. The office itself was fairly small,
just large enough to fit three people at a time. In one corner of this small office space was a tall cupboard. Here, different types of recyclables, mostly plastic, were catalogued and labeled based on their form just before being converted into the final products (thin strips, grains, soft cotton) along with the final products (jars, pipettes, toys, shirts, buttons, beads). The fate of these materials seemed predetermined in the cupboard. The space behind the office was divided into two halves: an enclosed bedroom for Javedbhai and a common room with a cupboard and the bedding of the other WPO workers. Adjacent to the WPO office, to its left, was a brick shed. Two young men in their twenties were sitting with knives making their way through a crowd of used glass and plastic bottles. They first separated the caps from the bottles, throwing the metal caps on one side and plastic ones on the other. Then, as if peeling a vegetable, they made one cut in the plastic wrappers around the bottles to peel them off the bottle, and a second cut to detach the colored rims around the mouths of the bottles. These different parts were sorted and stored in huge white sacks.

To the right of the WPO office was another shed. Manoharbhai was sitting at its entrance, with two men packing heaps of newspapers and cardboard cartons behind him. To the right of Manohar’s shed was a make-shift shed made of tarpaulin, where Rasulmiya lived and worked. Dressed in three-fourths (a kind of shorts), a yellow T-shirt, and bright-red sports shoes, he was sorting all different kinds of recyclables: milk bags, yogurt boxes, oil cans, electronics, tin cans (big and small), footwear, and plastic bags and storing them in cut plastic cans and garbage bags. After lingering for a while, I made my way to talk to him. Rasulmiya had been working as a waste picker in Mumbai for forty years. Earlier, he said, waste picking was easier and recyclables were easily available. Then, the only people interested in garbage were a few waste pickers and some drug addicts who sold recyclables for their daily dose. Today, he said, everyone wants to collect and sell garbage. Rasulmiya had no family in the city and hadn’t
spoken to his family in the village for past thirty years. He lived in this makeshift shed in the WPO kiosk and took care of it at night. When I asked him who owned the kiosk, he said there are three *seths* (owners): “the NGO *didi*, Manoharbhai, and Javedbhai.” The WPO, as I found out later through other waste pickers, had rented out parts of this shed to two *katewalas* (recyclers) for INR. 30,000/month (USD 500). Manoharbhai dealt in paper and cartons, and Javedbhai in plastic and glass bottles. The WPO had been buying recyclables from registered waste pickers and selling it to the two of them. They made sure that the two of them bought material at a higher market rate, which in turn would provide waste pickers a good rate too. The rest of the kiosk, including the terraces of the asbestos roof, was covered with soft drink and mineral water bottles. Two workers (both men) were sorting them by color, green and transparent, and a third worker was using a compressor to flatten them and pack them into square blocks. Sonal later told me that they had been approached by COKE, India to collect, sort, and supply used COKE PET (Polyethylene Terephthalate) bottles. The deal began with an advance payment, an agreement to collect and supply a fixed amount of PET bottles every month, and the installation of the compressor. The COKE bottles get sent right to the factory and bypass all the channels of recycling through which they had traveled earlier. This saves the company a fair bit of money and provides the WPO and its registered waste pickers a higher-than-market selling rate. However, the WPO can hire only a certain number of waste pickers as the amount of recyclables available in wards isn’t enough to involve all waste pickers.

After walking around the kiosk for a while, I made my way back into the WPO office to speak to Sonal. She explained how the kiosk works and then told me about herself and her work. Sonal was a student of social work and had been working “in the social field” for the past fifteen

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344 The unregistered waste pickers now have to travel to the city’s peripheries to collect recyclables since the recycling economies aren’t as competitive there yet.
years. She had worked with three other NGOs before joining the WPO. The moments she recollected from her past experience were meant to reflect her character as a social worker:

At our NGO gathering once, one of our social workers had brought her daughter along. We were all happy and celebrating the success of an event. But my colleague’s daughter sat in one corner all by herself. She had no expression on her face and wouldn’t speak to anyone. I asked her mother why was she so quite. Her mother said, “She never speaks.” She hadn’t spoken a word since the age of two, and she was eight years old then. After an hour or so I could not see her sitting alone and decided to go sit next to her. The daughter simply saw my face and hugged me. She began crying and started talking about her problems. Her mother was surprised as if a miracle had occurred. She finished her metric exams recently and both the daughter and her mother came to thank me. Her mother is still very grateful to me.

Sonal’s story about how she got recruited by the WPO was another such instance:

I live with my mother and two sisters in a chawl. My sisters work in the social field too. But back then it was just me and my old mother. I was very sick that day and had an interview with SOURCE that very day. We didn’t have a phone at home, and neither did I have the number of the SOURCE office to inform them about my illness. But since I didn’t show up for the interview, Sir (the head of SOURCE) called at my neighbors to check on me. I told Sir that I can’t make it, but you should give the job to someone who is in more need of it than me. They were very impressed with my nature of sacrificing for the needful, and they decided to hire me the very next day. This is what you need in the social field, the ability to sacrifice for the less fortunate.

Over the next hour she went on to tell me how she had set up the waste recycling kiosk all on her own, without any donor support, and yet, the kiosk had turned out to be more successful than any of the others in the city. There appeared to be a sense of competition not just between different WPOs but also between different local heads within the WPO. Her role as the local head of the WPO was to spread awareness about recycling among households, and to mediate between Advanced Locality Management groups (ALMs), municipal officials, and the WPO. Four workers assist her at the kiosk. One of them worked as a driver who would go around with a municipal truck collecting recyclables from society sweepers and buying recyclables from registered waste pickers at bins and streets. The payments to the waste pickers
are made at the end of the week, unless they require an advance payment. The other two workers sort PET bottles and a third one on compresses and packs them. “The WPO,” said Sonal, repeatedly drawing my attention to her hard work, “was not funded by donors,” which meant they earned salaries through the recycling economy. The place of Rasulmiya in this schema wasn’t clear to me; he seemed like a WPO worker and a waste picker at the same time, and maybe there is no difference between the two anymore.

Besides recycling, Sonal is also in charge of making sure the registered waste pickers had ID cards, proper residential addresses, savings accounts in banks, and life insurance policies. Most WPO workers and waste pickers working under her were young Muslim boys who had run away from their villages in UP, Bengal, or Bihar to come to the city. “They imagine that the city takes care of everyone, since others from their villages had never returned. But once they arrive, they realize that the city is not an easy place. They start working as waste pickers since it’s the most accessible work and requires the least prerequisites.” The parents of these young waste pickers were unaware of their whereabouts, and the waste pickers refuse to inform them as they are ashamed of working in the waste sector. Sonal treated the young waste pickers as her kin and took care of them in familial and business terms. She tried to convince them to get in touch with their parents and let them know where they were. “There should be someone to take care of everyone. There are times when elder waste pickers—who, like these young boys, have been living in the city alone for years—get sick alone and die alone. No one comes to see them in the hospital or even claim their bodies. I and others pool money for their medical expenses, and in case of death for their cremation or burial. But this world is cruel. A few days after their death the relatives show up to claim their insurance money.” They are forced to come to Sonal to get death certificates. She gives it to them, but these instances make here realize that this world is becoming cruel and hence “everyone should have an insurance policy”: 
We are all thieves. I say this to you honestly. Waste pickers, the municipality, NGOs, all of us. We all want to increase our own profits, our productivity, and our values. Earlier, the waste pickers collected recyclables and sold them to the katewallas. The katewallas controlled it, they pressured the waste pickers, exploited them. We avoid that by buying the recyclables from the waste pickers and providing them a good rate in return.

The image of the WPO kiosk, its form of operations, its blurring between workers and waste-pickers (Rasulmiya), as well as the figure of the “NGO-didi”—one who is fiscally disciplined and affective, is a business as well as familial authority, is public-spirited as well as a thief, demands respect through social work as well as through threats, and has a view of the world as having a developmental value (waste that can be constantly put back to use), are everyday images and figures emerging at the present conjuncture in the small history of waste in Mumbai I traced earlier.

4. A General View of the Waste Economy

I want to go back now to the “Introduction,” specifically the section on excess, where I draw on Bataille’s notion of unemployed negativity as the excess that exceeds and resists its dialectical sublation and draw it back into the discussion to think about waste. In this regard, Vinay Gidwani’s two pieces on waste are telling. In his essay “Waste/Value,” Gidwani puts forth the thesis that “waste” is the antithesis of capitalist “value” repeated with difference. Waste poses jeopardy to capital, he argues, as it is disinterested in capital’s dialectic, it evades or exceeds it, and in doing confounds capital’s attempts to discipline and contain life within the domain of utility and accumulation. The process through which waste, as aborted or retrograde material, comes to acquires a particular value, an exchange value, and becomes a commodity, he argues, is

central to capital’s spatial histories of surplus accumulation. The story of how the commons were translated into waste lands and then into private land through land reforms and material violence forms the central narrative of Gidwani’s thesis. Thus by tracing the dialectic of value and waste, or the “positive” that acquires its valence against the “abortive” or “retrograde” (waste), he posits, we can gain insight into how capital always draws its economic vitality and moral sanction to domesticate and eradicate waste. In Gidwani’s narrative, common resources such as waste existed as society’s external margin, as that other brought into the capitalistic dialectic to create property with value $W - (M - C - M')$. However in present times, he suggests, this external margin marks as much an internal margin of society. Thus the question of dominating external nature—nature as waste, which needs to be improved upon in order to exploit its potentialities—has now turned into a question of internal nature, the societal excreta in a hyper consumerist world that needs to be tamed and managed. In the essay on the commons, Gidwani emphasizes how waste gets recuperated into the dialectics to create value; yet in another essay he draws our attention to waste’s capacity to evade dialectics:

Waste exceeds the commons. That is to say, on the one hand, “waste” is an untapped potential for capital: a boundary object; value-in-the-making; and a historical, technical, and political artifact. But it is also an excess or exudation that is prior to and product of capitalist accumulation that capital, try as it might, can never fully capture and which therefore is an ever-present threat to it. To follow Bataille’s broadside against Hegel, waste follows the logic of general economy whereas capital is governed by the logic of speculative or restricted economy. Because waste resists sublation, it jeopardizes the capitalist dialectic, $M – C – M’$.

But what is this excess? And what does it feel like? Here, Gidwani’s account does not take us too far. I want to extend his notion of excess and suggest that we can read such excess in two ways:


first, in its materiality, the form of its smell and stink that produces a certain nausea in the stomach that repulses us, which, under the colonialism, acquired the name *miasma* and provided the impulse to eradicate waste and its contagion; and second, excess in terms of its ability to disturb the capitalist dialectics of waste and value by “laying waste” or expending. In regards to the latter, the anomalous collection of discarded objects in a waste picker’s home, where objects collected from the dumping ground “lay waste,” is illuminative.

**a. A Collection of Discarded Objects**

I was interviewing Rafiq, a waste picker in Toba Tek Nagar. After an hour-long conversation, which involved my ten questions about work, family, migration history, garbage business, dumping grounds, his waste picker’s organization, and so on, I decided to end the interview with “the eleventh question.”

“Do you ever find things in the dumping ground that are special or priceless?” Rafiq, a waste picker in Toba Tek Nagar, replied, there are times when some waste pickers find a small piece of jewelry, a particle of gold, or even silver, but nothing substantial enough to change their life. These pieces of precious metal travel to the dumping ground on garbage trucks from Zaveri Bazaar (the Jewelers’ Market in South Mumbai). The merchants are known to carefully sift through the shop garbage themselves before allowing sweepers to even touch it; hence it’s rare for these fragments to reach the dumping ground. Most waste pickers collect and store these small pieces of metal until there is enough to sell to the nearby jewelers. In the case of a piece of jewelry, usually silver, they just use it. Besides precious metal, waste pickers find a number of objects of everyday use such as dishes, bowls, spoons, forks, shoes, and so on. But I was looking

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348 Cybermohalla Ensemble, “The Eleventh Question,” in *Cybermohalla Hub*, 35. The first ten questions, the Cybermohalla Ensemble tells us, come easily. With them, we create a traffic of experience with the other, form a story in our minds, but the eleventh is the “after question” that can lead us into the unknown realm.
for something more and hence repeated my question awkwardly, as if the question wasn’t making sense or was just plain stupid: “Not things of value that you would sell, but things that you would want to keep for yourself.” Rafiq just smiled and pointed.

There on the bright blue wall behind him were framed photos of mosques, religious calendars, quotes from the Quran. Among these different divine artifacts were a number of other smaller objects such as clocks, sculptures, and wall-hangings that were nailed to the wall. At the rightmost corner was a bright red fridge with the television above it. Above the television, two shelves nailed to the wall held another set of artifacts. Next to the fridge, on the left side, was a sewing machine that Rafiq’s wife used for her stitching business. But on the right side were two shelves with beautifully arranged plates, glasses, cups, vases, and a series of small artifacts. These were carefully arranged on the wall but in no particular order or hierarchy, simply as

Figure 5.5: Collection of Discarded Objects
objects to be showcased. The shelves were laced with a triangular green toran (door hanging) that had yellow prints of sun and moon on them. There were many vases among these artifacts, both small and big. Some were made of glass, others ceramic; some were glossy with baroque designs resembling natural forms of plants, fruits, and flowers; while others were unfinished but decorated with glittering beads, colors, and fake jewels. The bigger vases were being used to hold plastic flowers, which were also found in the dumping yard. The smaller ones held personal possessions: money, beads, and food items like salt and sugar. On the television was a non-working small lamp with a ceramic base decorated with leaf prints. Next to it were a few miniature houses: a small, glossy ceramic villa with a chimney and pine trees around it, and a small apartment building. Such a careful display of artifacts intermingling with divine objects and imprints of nature wasn’t peculiar to Rafiq’s house. I had seen similar beautifully crafted arrangements of objects in many a house in Toba Tek Nagar. Some of them were complemented with dimly lit fish tanks, some with paintings of countryside settings, still others with Photoshopped posters of scenes from nature (waterfalls, spring flowers, a European villa with doves, a path through trees, and so on). While Rafiq finds these objects in the dumping ground, others buy them from local kabadiwallas or second-hand stores. I smiled and insisted on seeing them. He emptied the shelves and brought them down to where we were sitting. He began parading them in the space between us while narrating memories of how he found the objects. He could see through them the path they had traveled in the city. A number of them, he said, travel to Toba Tek Nagar through garbage compactors from South Mumbai, which is where most of the five-star hotels are located. These objects are washed with cold water, then warm water, dried in sun, and then placed onto the shelves. After Rafiq finished his stories of how he found these objects, I asked him curiously if he gifts these to his relatives or friends. He refused plainly, as if both he and the objects were disinterested in exchange.
5. **From Waste/Value to Waste and Value: Cocktail Mix**

Waste, as Gidwani and many other scholars have pointed out, is that limit where value gets created and destroyed. Waste is the antithesis of value, the negative that gets employed in the creation of positive values. But this view of waste through the Hegelian dialectics between value and non-value, Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke suggest, can blind us to the very issues that the general economy of waste recycling and collection reveals to us—the multiplicity of values, the diverse transactions between values, the risks and the precarity, and the resistance to having sovereign control over waste and its value, among other things. Thus it is important, I posit, to think dialectically and paradoxically, to think of waste as a realm where things lay waste (Bataille’s poetics) as well as where multiple and contradictory regimes of value coalesce and collide against each other to create new meanings of waste. Both these realms get erased when hegemonic processes of waste management enclose waste through discourses and practices and redivide them to provide controlled and restricted access. Let me elaborate using the material that I have laid out so far.

Historically, garbage in India has been integral to the hierarchical understanding of city politics under the *jajmani* system as well as to the oppression of the lower castes who were (and are) relegated within that world. The work of cleaning city refuse, night soil, dealing with dead bodies, digging graveyards, and guarding the boundaries of villages was the task of hereditary village servants from the lowest castes—those deemed impure by birth. But if in the caste system, the object of garbage was tied to the body of the lower castes so as to demarcate and guard the boundaries of purity and impurity, and to relegate the lower castes to their proper tasks in order of work, the general waste system that I trace in the earlier part of this chapter had begun

to show some signs of the contradictory interactions between caste system and the municipal system, where the former was trying to transcend its hierarchies, and in doing so, deform the latter too. The political economy of garbage had expanded beyond the boundaries of the municipality to include many more non-state actors. The logic of recycling, rather than collecting and disposing, was the basis of this assemblage. As the municipal workers, subcontract laborers, waste pickers, and recyclers collect, recycle, and dispose of garbage to earn and survive in the city, the different forms of waste economies—municipal, jajmani, privatized, and that of recycling and the disposing—began to intersect with each other, while not allowing any particular logic or actor to enclose the object of waste completely. This co-presence of different forms involved a reorganization of the proprietary order of garbage as much as of the city space. This general economy of waste worked not as a total system but rather as a set of smaller spatial fragments organized from within the municipal administrative boundaries, and yet not completely enclosed by it. It worked its way into the gaps of time and space left open by the municipal and privatized economy of waste. Footpaths, public squares, parks, and street corners, idealized as public spaces, were being used as spaces of work, albeit temporarily, and were hence transient. The general economy of waste was governed by logics of age, gender, location, spatial territories, castes, personal preferences, and even by the places from which workers migrated. The arrangements between actors are not legal but formal and are shaped by personal loans, flexibility in payments, proximity to recyclers, as well as violence and risks. The muccadams, municipal actors, continued to play the role of supervisor but over a larger number of actors, thereby becoming one of the intersections between different economies of waste. In this regard, municipal bins, public spaces, and dumping ground are spatial intersections that are expansive in nature, allowing different actors to partake in the waste economy through incremental negotiations.
My aim is not to claim that this system ideal, nor do I suggest that it does not revolve around a commodity, as the recycling process is geared towards garbage, where the object re-enters the production process of new commodities. But to call this economy “capitalist” would negate the other logics at work in this system, and to call it “informal” would negate the formal nature of the informal arrangements and affirm the centrality of the state as the realm of the formal and the zone of inclusion, whereby the informal lies at its margin in a waiting zone. Also, to argue that waste pickers are disinterested in becoming a part of the state system would undermine the efforts of waste-picker-run organizations to hold the municipalities accountable and demand forms of security. But it would not be an exaggeration to claim that most efforts made by specific municipal officials to organize recycling economies in the past have proved unsuccessful, since the actors refuse to work within the organizational logics of municipalities. They are more interested in flexibilities. As one municipal official said in her account of organizing recycling industries, “The owners of the industrial clusters just could not agree upon any of our suggestions, since it would mean a radical reorganization of their form both physical and organizational, which cannot work under municipal systems.”

Thus flexibility here (as evoked by recyclers as well as women waste pickers) is not so much a matter of informality as it is a matter of having a sovereign control over time, space, exchange, and meanings, among other things. It is this sovereign control that gets subsumed under the “modernization” of waste, whereby the general techniques, agreements, and modes of action get mimetically reproduced through compacting, contracting, and drawing boundaries around the space of waste. In this bounded community, only those registered and included get access to the thing in common. This drawing of boundaries is also a way of bounding the meaning of waste, since the relationship

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350 Interview, 2008.
between garbage and caste, labor, and religion, among other things, finds no place in the modernized management of waste.

Since the 1990s, a number of scholars and activists have attempted to evaluate this modernization of the system and governance of Mumbai’s waste management. This evaluation is based on measuring the effectiveness of the modernizing policies, which in turn is based on measuring the increase in waste collected or recycled, and the increase in the use of “invited spaces” of governances as a result of decentralization. Its problems are identified by measuring the failures and using the same regimes of values provided by the state. This back and forth between the positives and negatives, to my mind, never allows one to enter into the non-sublative space where waste and value are brought together (commoned) in a heteronomous relationship. Thinking dialectically and paradoxically involves conjoining the contradictory elements in order to heighten the dialectical tension, which manifests in the creation of a new autonomous form that transcends the existing formations. In this chapter, I have tried to explore the life-world of waste as a heteronomy consisting of contradictory regimes of value. What I have also tried to show in this chapter—through a short historical account, the circuits of waste, the changes in public policies, and some ethnographic instances—is how waste disrupts the boundaries of public/private and inside/outside, and cuts across the geographies of the body, machines, households, neighborhoods, and the city. In doing so I have tried to complicate the clear relationship that Kaviraj and Charkabarty draw between garbage, public, and the outside. This complexity comes to fore by tracing the geographies of waste and paying attention to questions

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I.S.A. Baud, and Joop de Wit Eds. New forms of urban governance in India: Shifts, models, networks and contestations (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2008); I.S.A Baud and Navtej Nainan. ““Negotiated spaces” for representation in Mumbai: ward committees, advanced locality management and the politics of middle-class activism” Environment and urbanization 20, no. 2 (2008), 484.
of caste, labor, state policies, and the overlap between their regimes of value in the realm of waste collection and recycling.

6. Commons: What Is In-Between

To conclude, I want to briefly think about the relationship between commons, waste, and in-between space, and provide a segue to the concluding chapter. I want to propose a diversion from reading commons as a binary—private vs commons—which understands commons only as an antithesis of private property. To rethink this relationship let me go back to the recycling economy and the category of cocktail mix. The term cocktail mix falls within the realm of sorting categories, but also exceeds it; it consists of objects that do not fall in the other categories due to their state (damaged) or type (material quality), or because they belong to an unknown category. What is common to them is that there is nothing in common between them, or what is common is yet unknown. Thus the elements in this category oscillate between this absence of commonality and the presence of this absence, what Taussig, in his writing on the bog, refers to as formless forms, where being and nothingness, life and death, contingent and the normal, coexist together.352 For Taussig the concept of indeterminacy is not remedial—requiring that we push one of these terms in the direction of the other: inclusion—but aims to highlight the powerful and paradoxical interconnections between the terms, which are always in-complete, in-between, and in-flux. In the process both the positive and the negative aspects of each term are destabilized due to their coexistence and a continual oscillation between the two. In this process, economies of meanings start to unravel and things are opened up so that they are always up for grabs by

others. I have tried to describe the world of waste here in order to relocate waste in this in-between space.
Conclusion

1. Planning as Commoning

In this concluding chapter, I draw on insights from the preceding ethnographic chapters to conceptualize planning as commoning. By commoning, I mean a practice of creating openings between existing divisions through a dialectical play between the contradictions (oppositions) that emerge from the double characteristics of specific phenomena, concepts, spaces, and actions. These openings are based not on ideal choices (siding with one or the other), or negations (erasing conflicts), or synthetic resolutions (consensus), but on a paradoxical union of contradictory elements. A union based on contradictions disrupts the logic of division into binaries and at the same time refuses a synthesis. In this dissertation, I have tried to bring forth a few of these openings using dialectical concepts such as mimesis, aesthetics, and excess. These openings, as the chapters show, are spaces, temporalities, objects, actions, as well as subjectivities. In this conclusion, I want to use the three concepts to further the idea of “planning as commoning” and position it within ongoing debates on planning. I plan to do this by proposing three principles for planning praxis: a non-representational mimetic mode of exchange; creation of interstitial spaces, temporalities, and subjectivities; and lastly, production of collectivities based on non-identities. But before proceeding to these propositions, I want to clarify that I am aware of the presence of the extensive set of literature on commons, property, and resource management in urban and rural contexts. However, I arrived at this idea of

commons though a route that is separate from this set of literature. I plan to undertake an extensive exploration of this literature and contribute to it in my future research.

2. **Mimetic-Planning**

*Proposition 1:* As commoning, planning is a non-alienating form of praxis based on a mimetic mode of exchange. It is neither a disciplinary expertise that can used to produce specific ends, nor is it a representational act of producing reconciliation between different interest groups. On the contrary, mimetic planning is a dialectical play performed by individual and/or collective subjects at any given moment to create an altered (transformed) time, space, and/or subjectivity.

While writing this dissertation, I had few opportunities to present different parts of this dissertation at different venues. Often, the questions I received were variations of one question: “What are the implications of these stories for planning praxis?” This question raises another, related question, which I have tried to explore in this dissertation: How do we rethink the relationship between mimetic forms of exchange (stories and films) and planning? In the current planning literature, there exist three ways of thinking about the relationship between planning praxis and mimetic forms of exchange such as storytelling and even films. These ways of thinking have been advanced by several prominent planning theorists, namely Peter Marris, James Throgmorton, John Forester, and Leonie Sandercock. These theorists have been widely influential in both academic and practice settings.

The first view can be expressed as such: planning shapes a specific environment that affects different groups with conflicting norms and interests. Thus the role of a planner is to

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mediate between these groups in order to reach an agreement about what is the best way to shape the common environment. In this schema, the role of a planner is to design deliberative spaces, facilitate and encourage interested-groups to tell their stories, provide an equal hearing to stories of all interest groups, and arrive at a best possible normative judgement. Here, stories are understood as value judgements shaped by peoples’ lived experiences and emotional attachments to their environment. The emphasis is on stories as expressions of subjective norms, which are argued over through an intersubjective dialogue in order to achieve a higher level of rational agreement that departs from objective science (positivism of modern planning).

The second way of thinking argues for planning as a persuasive form of storytelling about a future. Planners, it is argued, produce texts: maps, plans, policies, and articles. These texts emplot characters, settings, points of views, and languages to express conflicts and propose resolutions that persuade people and shape their view in a particular way. In this schema, planning stories are future-oriented stories that shape meaning and tell readers what is important and what is not, what counts and what does not, and what matters and what does not, in order to guide the sense of what is possible and desirable. If there are two stories, both of which seem reasonable and truthful, the one people choose to believe and agree with is the more persuasive one. Thus planners have to become persuasive storytellers. In its initial stages, however, these planning stories are also to be based on other stories, which provide the raw material for a higher story that produces a win-win relationship. These are stories of pain, trauma, memories, and lived experiences tied to individuals as well as spaces and things. Thus stories told by these storytellers must be transformed into planning narratives. This raises the question of representational power: who has the power to give meaning, to name others, to construct

collective identities, and shape politics and its boundaries? The answer seems obvious: ‘we’, a self-addressed community of planners.

The third way of thinking draws on the previous two as well as extends them. Stories, it is argued, are to have specific qualifications: temporal or sequential framework to provide tension, explanation or coherence, potential for generalizability—seeing universal in the particular, a plot structure and protagonists, and moral tension. These characteristics are drawn from Aristotle’s conception of mimesis as a representational act of producing a concordance between community and its image, whereby the latter then becomes a tool for improving the former. In this model, stories are used in a multicultural and settler-colonial context to find common threads and priorities, to resolve conflicts, and represent diversity. In a broader sense, stories are used in this third way of thinking to produce either a higher reconciled, multicultural community, or dispersed multiple publics in the civil society realm.

There are two logics at work in these planning schemas: an ethical logic, where the role and responsibility of planners is to persuade people to choose a particular story as the “right story” for a better future; and second, a representational logic, where the role of the planner is to either resolve conflicts and produce a higher image of a consensual community, or to produce multiple publics based on differences in identity. The stories in the preceding chapters show both these logic at work in Toba Tek Nagar. In specific instances, such as the consultation workshop

358 Ranciere’s rejection of mimesis is based on his reading of mimesis through Aristotle rather than Adorno and Benjamin. As a form of representation, Ranciere claims, mimesis produces a continuum and a concordance between the world and the object of art. This concordance or consensus between two senses, the art and the world, locates mimesis within a representational logic. I also want to note here that Ranciere’s reading of mimesis as producing of similarities and a consensus through representative models ignores the paradox of similarity and difference, which is central to Benjamin’s idea of mimesis as a non-representational form, and Adorno and Horkheimer’s historical tracing of shift in mimesis from a heteronomy (similarity and alterity) to a way of reducing the world to homogeneity in The Dialectic of Enlightenment.
and SSP, these logics are put to work by “official planners” and NGOs, and in other instances, by specific slum residents. These actors use stories as persuasive “noble lies” founded on neoliberal logic or produce a consensus between slum residents and neoliberalism. At the same time there are other stories that are circulated while idling in Toba Tek Nagar. These stories are circulated through a non-representational form of mimetic exchange. In these latter cases, the stories (and films) perform three transformative acts: first, they use words, images, and bodily gestures to create a temporal space (an interval) where the doubleness of concepts or phenomena, such as alterity and similarity, translatability and untranslatability, activity and passivity, and past and present, are conjoined to produce dialectical tensions; second, this conjoining disrupts the capitalist logic that otherwise divides and segregates the subjects, temporalities, and spaces (activity/ passivity or work/value) in order to organize the city based on the logic of work and produce surplus value; and third, this mimetic exchange between the contradictory elements, when performed repetitively (video-theater) produces an excess in the form of new stories, films, spaces, temporalities, as well as subjectivities. Based on these three acts I want to propose three ways in which a mimetic form of planning can become a transformative act of commoning in slums: first, break away from the capitalist logic that divides and segregates planning itself into planning/non-planning, official/non-official, legal/illegal. Second, create “idle” times and spaces (intervals) for individuals to come in contact with as well as circulate words, images, and objects without any predetermined end. And third, in order to scale up the intervals and interruptions, it might be productive to think of planning as a loose federation of idle spaces that are connected through mimetic-circuits.
3. Planning In-between Times and Spaces

Proposition 2: As commoning, planning praxis belongs within neither civil society nor political society, and not even within the state; it has no proper place. On the contrary, planning involves creating a gap or an opening in-between these existing divisions in order to break down the boundaries.

The writings of Partha Chatterjee on political formations in colonial and postcolonial Indian sub-continent have troubled our understanding of state-society relationships as a binary of the state and the civil society.\(^{359}\) In its stead, Chatterjee proposes the idea of ‘political society’ as a domain of institutions that mediate between civil society and the state. In Chatterjee’s tripartite schema, civil society refers to those institutions of modern associational life that were set up by the nationalist elite in the era of colonial modernity as a part of the anti-colonial struggle. These institutions, he argues, embody the desires of the elite to replicate in its own society the forms as well as the substance of Western modernity. These forms are based on principles of equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exits, contract, deliberative procedures of decision-making, and recognized rights and duties of members, among others. But in postcolonial countries such as India, he further argues, civil society is used only by a small section of its “citizens.” And yet, the legal apparatus of the state and its welfare policies have been able to reach virtually all of the population. This ability of the state to address the population outside the civil society, in his account, has a historical reference. In the postcolonial context, on the one hand, the associational principles of secular bourgeois civil institutions were being adopted in the new civil society of the nationalist elite; and on the other hand, the possibility of a different mediation between the

population and the state was being imagined through the governmental technologies set up by the colonial state in order to bring large sections of the population within its reach as the targets of its policies. These two acts allowed the nation-state to break away from the confines of the properly constituted civil society and at the same time politically mediate between the population and the nation-state. Political society is the space for this latter form of mediation.

Furthermore, Chatterjee identifies a few characteristics of the political society. First, peoples’ demands on the state in the political society are founded on a violation of the law. For example, the demands made by hawkers, associations of squatters, encroachers on public property, or unauthorized users of public utilities, often imply that they are not proper citizens but population groups who survive by sidestepping the law. Second, despite violating the law, these groups demand governmental welfare as a matter of “right.” This usage of language of rights, Chatterjee suggests, is itself a result of the governmental technologies and the democratization of politics. Third, these rights are demanded as “moral rights” on behalf of a ‘community’ rather than individual citizens. And fourth, the state-agencies as well non-state agencies (NGOs) deal with these people not as citizens belonging to a lawfully constituted civil society, but as population groups deserving welfare. Having laid out these features, Chatterjee suggests that the degree to which these rights will be recognized by the state is contingent upon the pressure these groups are able to exert by making connections with other marginal groups, more dominant groups, and political parties and leaders. In his overall schema, slums and the political processes through which slum residents claim basic necessities from the members of the state is central to Chatterjee’s conception of political society.

In his recent book *Lineages of Political Society*, Chatterjee extends this argument historically and theoretically to think about a possible reformulation of the norms underling
modern political formations. First, drawing on historical resources, Chatterjee shows that the government in colonial and post-colonial India has been based on two kinds of relationships between norms. Under colonial rule, there existed the Western modern norms and the colonized norms. The relationship between the two was construed through empirical knowledge forms. Western norms were held to be “normal,” while variations of norms among the colonized were construed as empirical “deviations,” which could be then improved through colonial policy. This “norm-deviation” model, Chatterjee suggests, was carried over to the postcolonial context, and translated into a “norm-exception” paradigm. In the latter, the basic state laws, which are influenced by the Western universal principles are held to be “the law.” However, these laws are unable to accommodate all the differences in the society and hence these differences are negotiated and accommodated as exceptions. Thus the normal law isn’t changed, but exceptions keep piling up. These exceptions, he argues, are negotiated and created in the realm of political society, where minority groups demand exceptions in their particular cases rather than changes to the normal. In the present context of this “norm-exception” paradigm, Chatterjee suggests that rather than doing away with the notion of normativity, or simply critiquing western norms, or emphasizing the postcolonial cultural difference, a more fruitful task for postcolonial political theory would be to try answer the following questions: How to redefine the normative standards of modern politics in light of the considerable accumulation of new practices, which contain the core of a richer, more diverse, and inclusive set of norms, despite their relegation as exceptions? Can these practices of governing be based on the existing principle of differentiated rather than equal citizenship? And lastly, is it possible to think of modern politics outside the “norm-

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deviation” and “norm-exception” paradigms? Chatterjee concludes this essay in the book by stating that today it has become impossible to think of this last question—the “utopian question”—in realist terms. And since he is realist he forgoes the question.

Rather than point out the incongruences between Chatterjee’s conception of the tripartite model and material processes at work in the politics of urban development and governance, I want to depart from Chatterjee’s model to attend to his last (utopic) question: “Is it possible to think of modern politics outside the “norm-deviation” and “norm-exception” paradigms?” To reframe his questions with a specific reference to slums: How are we to think of the relationship between “official planning” and slums? As exceptions or divergences? Or as two distinct ways of planning—legal / illegal; informal / formal, which, as many have argued, are interlocked? Can we think of the political processes in these exceptions as grounds for new normative concepts and democratic planning? Or can we think of a different paradigm that is not outside but within the paradigm set up by Chatterjee? And if yes, how? To my mind, the answer is in the relationship between the two words “norm” and “exception”. The relationship between the norm and the deviation (or the exception) is one of lag or a distance. Interestingly, Chatterjee expresses this by using a hyphen: “norm-deviation” and “norm-exception.” The hyphen connects the two terms and at the same moment separates them (temporally and spatially). This lag provides the opportunity to use rational forms of knowledge (means) and produce specific ends (“development”). To think of a way outside the two paradigms, and yet normatively, I argue,

362 I do not intend to suggest that the earlier task is not useful. On the contrary, I hope to have showed the incongruences through the ethnography. My aim here is to conceptualize a form of planning that departs from Chatterjee’s model of politics. For excellent productive critique of Chatterjee see: Gillian Hart, “Political Society and Its Discontents,” Economic & Political Weekly 50, no. 43 (2015): 43. Also: Aditya Nigam, “Politics, Political Society and ‘the Everyday’,” https://kafila.org/2012/03/31/politics-political-society-and-the-everyday/, accessed, July 5, 2016.
requires disrupting this hyphen in-between the two terms with a space that short-circuits the temporal lag and the spatial distance: “norm and exception.”

To speak in concrete terms, the ethnographic insights might be helpful. One of the themes running through the latter two ethnographic chapters is of in-between temporalities, spaces, and subjectivities. I use the word “in-between” to connote two things: first, being between identities and worlds; and second, a movement (spatial and temporal) between these identities and worlds without conforming. It is a subjectivity and a political relationship. The figure of the kamina connotes both these meanings of the term “in-between.” In a world where, on the one hand, subjects are being continually reified and alienated through hegemonic forms of power such as religion, state-governmentalities, and capitalism, the movement between identities becomes a resource to identify and dis-identify oneself. This movement, as I have argued, is a mimetic movement that involves moving between the self and the other (identities, spaces, and temporalities), in order to create an alterity—an altered reality. This mimetic movement also disrupts the lag, by bringing together the past and the present, the periphery and the center.

To situate the movement in the context of the SSP and Chatterjee’s schema, the figure moves between its identity as an individual, a slum resident, and a CBO head; between the political society, the civil society, and one’s own world, wanting to partake in all the realms. This mimetic movement of the figure manifests itself in three forms of alterity: a beautiful toilet block, which the figure uses to reverse power relations and negotiate with the NGOs; a

363 Georges Canguilhem differentiates between two ideas of norms—the normative and the normal. Life, he argues, is normative when it calls into question the established norms and creates new ones in its purist of a creative impulse. In doing this the living brings forth new values and norms, and along with it a new milieu. This creative act involves risking the achieved norms and values and putting them on the line repeatedly. If not, one puts life in an artificial equilibrium or a milieu where it loses its capacity to break its norms and create new ones. Normativity, he claims, consists in breaking norms. This notion of normativity, however, is to be distinguished from two other forms of norms: adaptability, where deviations are integrated and compensated to maintain the “normal”, and “social norms”, where creative impulse gets mimetically reproduced as a “social norm.” Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).
subjectivity, where the self and the other slum residents are addressed as subjects of needs and pleasures; and third, an othering of the residents below the poverty-line using the representational power of the CBO. Here, inter-subjectivity is understood not as a model of community participation, nor as a rational dialogue between individuals or interest groups, but as a movement of an individual between different identities to create a collective form (a toilet).

As a collective form, Mehmoodbhai’s toilet is not a commons (an ideal), but neither is it an enclosure. One needs to simply recall the scene in Mehmoodbhai’s office, where residents crowd to facilitate their movement across different worlds or the claim “our toilet.” Thus as a form of praxis a space, and subjectivity, the figures and the spaces presented in this dissertation do offer clues for articulating the idea of planning as commoning, and turning around Chatterjee’s impossibility. In terms of the latter’s schema, I feel that both ideas of “social” are based on forms of power that aim to govern and act upon the in-between relationships. Thus it might be more productive to create new forms (spaces, temporal zones, objects, and subjectivities) in-between the two societies, which allow for individual and collective movement and at the same time short-circuit the lag underlying the hegemonic “norm-exception” paradigm.

4. Planning = Constellating = Commoning

Proposition 3: As commoning, planning is neither the creation of multiple communities, nor the reconciliation of differences between (or within) communities. On the contrary, it is a praxis of constellating collective forms (spaces, temporalities, and subjectivities) based on a non-identity.

In the current planning literature, there exist three logics of community participation: the representational logic of liberal democracy (communicative planning); the mathematical logic of producing a collective will based on counts and sums (elections), and third, the logic of inclusive.
communities, where the terms and language of dispute, and the drawing of boundaries are always predetermined by those inside (participatory forums and consultation workshops). Throughout this dissertation I have tried to highlight the problems with such forms of community planning. Here, I want to argue that a collectivity based on “non-identity” among its individual elements can help us further the idea of “planning as commoning” and at the same time challenge the dominant logics of community formation.

The overall dissertation draws on the work of Bataille, Ranciere, and Benjamin, who are all concerned with the “non” or the negated part: the excess of Hegelian dialectics, the part with no part, and the ruins of modern capitalism, respectively. This affinity point towards a refusal to negate any phenomenal elements in the name of historical progress and at the same time use the elements’ “non-identity” with a specific phenomenon to produce a dialectical tension. Thus these authors propose different methodologies and concepts to bring the negated elements back into the dialectical play—expending excess, aesthetics, politics, remembrance, constellations, dialectical images, and so on. This dialectical play, to my mind, is neither synthesis nor reconciliation, but rather creation of a new form. Using this method, I have tried to construct specific forms of constellations in the ethnographic chapters: stories as a non-coercive relationship between the self and the other; idling as an activity and passivity; the translatability and un-translatability of stories; video-theaters as zones of past and present temporalities, toilets as an object of needs and pleasures; *kamina* as a figure of contradictory subject-positions; and lastly, the life-world of waste as this spatial zone of value and non-value. I have constructed

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364 Such a way of thinking and acting, following Adorno, runs against the logic of representational identity that underlies both capitalism (equivalence of commodities based on exchange value) and liberal democracy (equivalence of citizens based on representational democracy). Buck-Morss, *Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 98.
these constellations with two aims in mind: to bring the negated elements back into the common space, and to show how the dialectical tension they create manifests in new forms.

For example, the constellation of waste objects on display in a waste picker’s house brings two contradictory terms into a common space: waste and value. Here, the objects with no-value (waste) are given a non-capitalist value, and at the same time, the (monetary) value of these objects is wasted for the sake of aesthetic pleasure. Thus one form of excess (pleasure) disrupts the reproduction of another form of excess (surplus value). However, such an act of constellating itself necessitates two prior acts: the individual’s movement into the common world; and an encounter with an-other. To move from the individual home to the urban scale, the ethnographic chapter on waste shows how the heteronomous relationship between the different actors gets erased under the modernization of waste management in Mumbai. The latter distributes the common space of waste by fragmenting it and drawing boundaries of privatization, community participation, policing, and so on. The aim of this distribution of the commons is the maximum collection and disposal of waste in the most efficient. Thus unlike communing, which is based on erasing or resolving conflicts, constellation as a form of creating autonomous forms has a close relationship to being situated in the heteronomous relationship with an-other. In order to keep the two elements—autonomy and heteronomy—in a dialectical play it is important to consellate collectives based on non-identity.

I began the dissertation by identifying three interrelated phenomena: the alienation of slum residents through reification of their land, the utilitarian and teleological form of urban planning, and the relegation of slums to the realm of non-planning. My overall aim was threefold: [1] to document how poorer Muslim slum residents constellate ideas, people, spaces, discourses, and infrastructures to produce slums and plan their urban lives; [2] to foreground some specific practices, figures, and spaces that offer clues for disrupting the three hegemonic
phenomena attempting to dictate the fate of slums and transforming the contemporary cities; and [3] to “see” slums as a source for new political concepts in critical geography and planning praxis. In this concluding chapter I have drawn on the ethnographic insights to propose three principles for reimagining planning as commoning. The idea of commoning, I argue, provides a possibility to disrupt the partitions and ends imposed by the three phenomena. The three principles are: a non-representational mimetic mode of exchange; planning in-between spaces, temporalities, and subjectivities; and lastly, producing collectivities based on conflicts. All three are interrelated and equally significant. Forgoing anyone of them would mean reproducing new partitions and ends.
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