

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE CITY: FOR THE NON-CONFINEMENT OF THOUGHT

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**Resumen:** El contexto actual de pandemia ha implementado medidas de restricción en la vida de la población, y el confinamiento espacial de los ciudadanos en su hogar. Esto convoca el pensamiento urbano para reflexiones sobre el presente y, aún más, el futuro de las ciudades. Razón por la cual intentaré trazar líneas de escape que parten del ritmo interrumpido de las calles para exponer una relacionalidad constitutiva de la ciudad, la cual suele ser vista como dualista (en el sentido de oposicional o incluso como dualismo ontológico) al reunir ciudad física, discursividad, humano, no humano, subjetividad, sensibilidad y cuerpo. Tomar en cuenta esta relacionalidad, que brota ahora bruscamente de la invisibilidad (como un virus), puede contribuir a transformar y diversificar las perspectivas teóricas y prácticas sobre las ciudades, donde vive actualmente la mayoría de la población humana.

**Palabras clave:** filosofía de la ciudad, pandemia, pensamiento urbano, relacionalidad, rizoma

**Abstract:** The current pandemic forced restrictive measures upon the population's way of life and spatial confinement of citizens in their homes. This summons urban thought to reflect about the present but also, or mostly, the future of the cities. I will grasp this opportunity to draw a few lines of flight that depart from the streets' silenced rhythm, and to deal with relationality as the city's own constitutive matter.

Cities are usually thought in a dualistic mode (understood as oppositional or even as an ontological dualism), and they actually gather different elements: physical city, discursivity, human, non-human, subjectivity, sensitivity, body. To take into account this relationality and its current outbreak from invisibility (like a virus), can help transform and diversify theoretical and practical perspectives on the cities, where the majority of human population is currently living.

**Keywords:** pandemic, philosophy of the city, rhizome, relationality, urban thought

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“(...) if you do not like complexities  
you couldn’t possibly feel at home in the third  
millennium.”

Rosi Braidotti, in *Transpositions. On Nomadic  
Ethics*.

Not very often are we given the opportunity to witness and/or to participate in a change of era or paradigm in cities’ life. A cautious reflexion will consider that it is yet too soon to attribute such an effect to the most recent pandemic (COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus). But we can risk, taking the data and ramifications already registered and felt around the world,<sup>1</sup> that we are

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<sup>1</sup> Available data at: UNDP (United Nations Developmental Programme): <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/covid-19-pandemic-response.html> ; WHO (World Health Organization): <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>; UN-Habitat: <https://unhabitat.org/update-from-un-habitat-on-covid-19>; Council of the European Union: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pt/press/press-releases/2020/04/09/report-on-the-comprehensive-economic-policy-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

standing now before the instantiation of an event.<sup>2</sup> Twenty years after the turn of the century, marked by a post-9/11 thought, a “transposition” is now being drawn on the world’s main concerns.<sup>3</sup> In fact, where terrorism ranked first among citizens’ preoccupations, there are now environmental and migratory crises (Rhodes 2020), the universal access to health care and the alternatives to the capitalist economic model. Let’s take that transposition as a “creative force (...) in the framework of new power relations”, a qualitative leap that “takes the form of a change of culture: a transformation not only of our schemes of thought, but also of our ways of inhabiting the world” (Braidotti 2006, 8).

From the solicitations and relations to which a society is sensitive, from everything that affects it – and how that society answers it – we can derive either the mark that crystallizes it in the past or, on the contrary, the complexity, the cosmopolitics (quite literally a “political world” which ultimately gives rise to the possibility of a common world)<sup>4</sup> and

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<sup>2</sup> According to Foucault: “Event - this does not mean a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but a reversal of power, a confiscated power, a vocabulary taken up and turned against its users, a domination that weakens, relaxes, poisons itself, another entering, masked” (1971, 161 – author’s translation).

<sup>3</sup> According to Rosi Braidotti: “‘transpositions’ (...) indicates an intertextual, cross-boundary or transversal transfer, in the sense of a leap from one code, field or axis into another, not merely in the quantitative mode of plural multiplications, but rather in the qualitative sense of complex multiplicities. (...) It is thus created as an in-between space of zigzagging and of crossing: nonlinear, but not chaotic; nomadic, yet accountable and committed; creative but also cognitively valid; discursive and also materially embedded - it is coherent without falling into instrumental rationality”. Also, “‘transposition’ refers to processes of genetic mutation, or the transferral of genetic information, which occur in a nonlinear manner, which is nonetheless neither random nor arbitrary. (...) Transposable moves appear to proceed by leaps and bounds, but are not deprived of their logic, or coherence” (2006, 5).

<sup>4</sup> The notion of “cosmopolitics” interests me more than “cosmopolitanism” because, as Michel Agier states, (resuming reflections by Etienne Tassin and Hannah Arendt): “We can say that cosmopolitics is nothing but the permanent conflict between, on the one hand, the accursed globalism (in the name of technoscientific governance that segments, fragments, creates confined identities, and thus destroys all space of the common), and, on the other, the search for a common world (that is, politics in the Arendtian sense). It is this that makes international mobility, and along with it the evolution of the status of foreigner, into a contemporary political and

heterogeneities with which it perseveres and resists through time.

Other pandemics (such as the cholera of 1832 in Europe and the Americas, and the Spanish flu of 1918-19) had irreversible effects on the habits of cities around the world, and entailed, for example, public health measures, spatial reorganization and regulation of activities that until then had not been addressed.<sup>5</sup> But each of them is more or less unique and inescapable, both for its immediate surprise effect and mortality, and for the social, economic, and political frame that, to a lesser or greater extent, was then permanently transformed. In such moments, the frailty of the society, city, country and world is revealed, and it is also the case with the layers of hegemonic powers that remained unchallenged throughout human history.

The current pandemic is already different by the mark of globalization it wears, referring not only to the economic exchange and the free market, but essentially to the conflation of spatio-temporal shrinkage (in the sense that distance is shredded, and most things happen in the time of a “click”), with “‘sharing’ of experience, of its sense(s) and the world that we build in common (because it is the opening to the common)” (Messina 2020).<sup>6</sup> Because it is “porosity of borders, inevitable contagion, a vulnerability that is not only systemic, but of life and of what is necessary”, globalization itself “is coextensive with life”. For all these reasons, “to recognize the already political dimension of the disease in the context of an inevitably globalized world, is to consider the problem of the political world that we can build with (and not

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premonitory question about the possibility of the world, since it raises the question of equality, on a world scale” (2014, 59-60 - author’s translation).

<sup>5</sup> For more detail see, for example, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/basics/past-pandemics.html>; LiveScience: <https://www.livescience.com/worst-epidemics-and-pandemics-in-history.html>; Reason Magazine: <https://reason.com/2020/03/20/what-economic-analyses-of-past-pandemics-can-tell-us-about-the-covid-19-aftermath/>.

<sup>6</sup> Author’s translation.

only against) the disease” (Messina 2020). Inherently, the political role of global cities (where privatizations are sharpened) takes a stance in the pursuit of a common future: “For the city to become once again a space for genuine political organization requires a model of social participation, which implies an attitude of nonconformity and of resistance that surpasses the liberal economic rationale. Thus, greater openness to shared powers may be achieved, breaking with the hegemonic power. In other words, we can aspire to rebuilding an urban culture, through the renewal of political projects as experiences of the common, which should highlight dwelling as a demand for freedom. This means there is a need to understand the common as an attitude, as a position that supports the re-appropriation of the public against privatizations.” (Pereira 2019, 259) In a way, we can’t help feeling that “all is as if technical inventions had been faster than social and political invention. As if there was a ‘delay’ of one globalization with respect to the other” (Agier 2014, 59).<sup>7</sup> Globalization mobilizes differences, and proceeds to deterritorialize not only people, but identities and ways of life too.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the hegemony of nation-states and their demands for citizenship, territory, cultural identity and social control are challenged (cf. Braidotti 2011). In this context, “a new spatial order has emerged, manifested essentially in the fragmentation of cities, a consequence of economic and social heterogeneities.” (Pereira 2019, 254)

These considerations about the present health crisis (developing into economic, social, humanitarian, and even human rights crises) dovetails with urban thought because “the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what

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<sup>7</sup> Author’s translation.

<sup>8</sup> As Guattari notes, “[c]ontemporary human beings have been fundamentally deterritorialized. By this I mean that their original ethological territories - body, clan, village, cult, corporation ... are no longer disposed in a precise point on the earth, but are embedded, essentially, in corporeal universes. Subjectivity entered the realm of generalized nomadism” (2006 [1992], 169 - author’s translation).

kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of life we desire, what aesthetic values we hold” (Harvey 2012, 4). Philosophical reflection - accustomed being late at events - must allow itself to be contaminated by actuality, as a global city “is composed not only of flows of money, skills, knowledge, security, machinery, and technology, but also of ideas, people, images, and imaginaries” (Mbembe 2008, 3). Those are tightly interconnected dimensions that, directly or indirectly, philosophy summons.

My paper suggests a few lines of flight<sup>9</sup> that go from the interrupted rhythm of streets, due to the pandemic, to the relationality inherent to the city.<sup>10</sup> Usually the city is considered dualistic (understood as oppositional or even as ontological dualism) and gathers physical city, discursivity, human, non-human, subjectivity, sensitivity, body. But out of the urban structure and out of invisibility, a relationality bursts like a virus, forcing us to question those dualisms. From this we can diversify and enrich the perspectives on the city and open new ways of thinking.

### Invisibility and conceptual creativity

Staying at home to minimize the risk of exposure to the virus and break the chains of

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<sup>9</sup> “A line of flight (French: *ligne de fuite*) is a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and used extensively in his work with Félix Guattari. (...) [I]n French, ‘*Fuite*’ covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance (the vanishing point in a painting is a *point de fuite*). It has no relation to flying” (Mbembe 2008, 405).

<sup>10</sup> This “matter” comes, for my purposes, from Spinozian inspiration - the monistic universe. Rosi Braidotti clarifies: “A ‘monistic universe’ refers to Spinoza’s central concept that matter, the world and humans are not dualistic entities structured according to principles of internal or external opposition. (...) Monism results in relocating difference outside the dialectical scheme, as a complex process of differing which is framed by both internal and external forces and is based on the centrality of the relation to multiple others. (...) [T]he unity of all matter, which is central to Spinoza, is reinforced by an updated scientific understanding of the self-organizing or ‘smart’ structure of living matter. These ideas are supported by new advances in contemporary biosciences, neural and cognitive sciences and by the informatics sector” (Braidotti 2013, 56-7).

contagion supposes, at first glance, equality (the right to housing is a fundamental human right), but some differences immediately arise: the absence of a home for many people (the homeless, the refugees, the displaced),<sup>11</sup> the diverse living conditions among those who have a home, and the possibility to work from home (and thus ensure, if not all, at least part of the income) vs. those who, due to the nature of their work, cannot earn money by staying at home. Given that 55% of the world's population now reside in urban areas,<sup>12</sup> that about hundred million people are homeless, and that one in four lives in homes with inadequate conditions for their health, safety and prosperity,<sup>13</sup> a broader understanding of what or who counts as “homeless” is essential. From the comprehension and satisfaction of the needs observed at a global level, one can (resourcing multidisciplinary theories and practices) try to implement local or regional solutions, especially to those kinds of problems, which are masked, or turned invisible, by a narrow concept of homelessness (cf. Jobe 2019). Governments' approaches (for example: “who should benefit, in degree or mode, from affordable housing and social protection policies?”) have repercussions on the life and death of people already at risk. Kevin Jobe presents us a key remark:

when we take into consideration all those who fall under the UN-Habitat definition of ‘houseless’ or at risk of houselessness due to inadequate shelter, it is plain to see that the overwhelming problem is not the specific problems or failings of the various subpopulations of the houseless, but rather the

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on this issue we suggest reading UN-Habitat: [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/03/covid19\\_key\\_messages\\_eng\\_1.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/03/covid19_key_messages_eng_1.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Data from year 2018, the most recent UN report, urbanization department, <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/theme/urbanization/index.asp> and <https://population.un.org/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2018-Highlights.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Data estimated by UN-Habitat: <https://unhabitat.org/topic/housing>

structural causes of houselessness themselves: social, political, economic, and ecological factors which increasingly deprive and dispossess people of their livelihoods, their labour, their land, their homes, their security, and their dignity. (...) For all these reasons, it has been observed that housing and the management of housing, particularly in the context of the city, is a technology of life and death (...). When we drill down to the real life and death issues, in other words, it is housing insecurity and housing deprivation that 'make people sick and make people die' (...). (2019, 204)

Even though it intertwines different domains, the analysis must take into consideration the global fabric of the problems. In fact, "the task of finding local solutions to global contradictions" reveals that

the line that separates the abstract space from the global operators - 'somewhere in the non-existent' - from that tangible physical space, 'here and now' (...) of 'local people' can only be drawn in the ethereal domain of theory, in which the entangled contents of human life worlds are initially 'put in order' and then classified and archived: each in its own compartment, for reasons of clarity. (...) The elegant models of urban life, built with the help of clear contrasts, can provide many theories builders with satisfactions, but in practice they are of little use to urban planners, and even less to the inhabitants who face the challenges of life in the city. (Bauman 2009, 15)<sup>14</sup>

People or social groups that make the "outside" their homes and daily experience are perhaps the closest and more visible side of other exclusions, new *expulsions* that globalization engenders. Let's take the term

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<sup>14</sup> Author's translation.



“expulsions”, as Saskia Sassen (2018) does, in the sense of expulsions from labour life, from daily life, from citizenship, from the biosphere itself, expulsions that result from extreme modes of inequality, where concepts such as injustice and poverty reveal to be insufficient to understand them. To take care of populations’ growth, the displaced and prisoners, the destruction of land and natural resources (those are just a few examples), cities nowadays urgently need a global thought.<sup>15</sup> A thought that should resist theoretical segregations and parochial mentalities. In addition, a *conceptual invisibility* underlies several domains and lets us glimpse “an apparatus enforcing the - somehow invisible - violence of expulsions” (Sassen 2018, 19). This device also benefits from *systemic help*, that is, from local and global interactions that reinforce each other:

by themselves, neither the rich nor global firms could have produced such extreme outcomes [expulsions]. They need what we might think of as ‘systemic help’: a complex interaction of these actors with systems that have been re-engineered toward enabling extreme concentration. Such systemic capacities are a variable mix of technical, market, and financial innovations plus government enablement. They constitute a partly global condition, though one that often functions through the specifics of countries, their political economies, their laws, and their governments. (Sassen 2018, 18)

Unexpected events like the COVID-19 pandemic provide greater attention to the systemic folds and edges that fuel conceptual blindness. Geopolitics, gender, ethnicity, religion, citizenship, age, economic

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<sup>15</sup> As Achille Mbembe recalls in *Politiques de l'inimitié*, what is often considered today global thinking does not take into account a truly comprehensive and integrating reading from all the world - despite the name, it continues to fuel, for example, the separation between North and South, here and there, interior and exterior (cf. Mbembe 2017 - author’s translation).

flows, etc., are matters that densify problems and claim to an alternative conceptual apparatus able to deconstruct and mitigate precarity.

Stepping out of home space to other spaces in the city reveals more differences and discriminations, such as: the surveillance of patients and their families and contacts, the suspicious look towards the other (as a potential carrier of the virus), the political organization of social and economic priorities, and the differential distribution of means of protection and human resources. These few examples related to present days illustrate the proximity and connection between ways of thinking and acting where polarities, ambiguities and exclusions end up unveiled, or rather accentuated. Likewise, the urban may remain invisible if, as Henri Lefebvre explains, we limit ourselves to see it as an “industrial daily life”, manufactured according to the dictates of industrial production and consumption, tending to homogenization. The same holds true if we interpret the rural space as gardens, green open spaces and “cyclic and juxtaposing local particularities”. These limited views about the urban soon promote “a reduction that is both social and mental, toward trivialization and toward specialization” (2003, 30). However, it is possible to abandon these old points of view and “rediscover the community and the city, but at a higher level, on a different scale, and after their fragmentation (negation)”:

the urban is a highly complex field of tensions, a virtuality, a possible-impossible that attracts the accomplished, an ever-renewed and always demanding presence-absence. Blindness consists in the fact that we cannot see the shape of the urban, the vectors and tensions inherent in this field, its logic and dialectic movement, its immanent demands. We see only things, operations, objects (functional and/or signifying in a fully accomplished way). (Lefebvre 2003 [1970], 40)

Lefebvre has grounded on concepts such as isotopy, heterotopia and utopia. This conceptual creativity is able to direct our eyes towards something that, being in an invisible or unknown place, is “an elsewhere, the non-place that has no place and seeks a place of its own”. This is the case, for example, for verticality: it is “a place characterized by the presence-absence: of the divine, of power, of the half-fictional half-real, of sublime thought. Similarly, subterranean depth is a reversed verticality” (2003 [1970], 38).<sup>16</sup> In the urban, what has no place is, after all, everywhere and nowhere - a paradoxical space opposed to everyday life, a space that has existed for as long as cities do. But Lefebvre recalls us that “the u-topic in this sense has nothing in common with an abstract imaginary. It is real. It is at the very heart of the real, the urban reality that can’t exist without this ferment” (2003 [1970], 38). This ferment of urban reality transforms and exceeds the tangible, the visible, the open and the closed, the outside and the inside, the near and the far. And it makes the urban a “pure form” because it has no specific content, but at the same time it brings everything together: “[l]iving creatures, the products of industry, technology and wealth, works of culture, ways of living, situations, the modulations and ruptures of the everyday”. However, unlike metaphysical entities, “the urban is a concrete abstraction, associated with practice”, where the mutual exclusion of its components (because they are diverse) and their inclusion (because being together implies a mutual presence) are played altogether (Lefebvre 2003 [1970], 119). Thought should,

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<sup>16</sup> This inversion of verticality in underground depths suggests me what Achille Mbembe articulated which, I think, adds meaning to this subject: “Just as the metropolis is closely linked to monuments, artifacts, technological novelty, an architecture of light and advertising, the phantasmagoria of selling, and a cornucopia of commodities, so is it produced by what lies below the surface. (...) [The] underground of the metropolis is the repository of possibilities for invention and utopian dreams. (...) The underground is not to be understood simply in terms of an infrastructure and various subterranean spaces (sewers and drainage systems, underground railways, utility tunnels, storage vaults and so on). The world below (the underworld) is also made up of lower classes, the trash heap of the world above, and subterranean utopias” (2008, 21-22).

therefore, stop fixating on a reality from which the possible is excluded, and finally accept that “the possible is also part of the real and gives it a sense of direction, an orientation, a clear path to the horizon” (Lefebvre 2003 [1970], 45).

As such, cities are privileged means of testing the induced and/or arbitrary separations of spaces and concepts. In the urban “[a]nything can become a home, a place of convergence, a privileged site, to the extent that every urban space bears within it this possible-impossible, its own negation” (2003 [1970], 39).

### **Sensitive and subjective city<sup>17</sup>**

While I am writing these lines, European cities remain mostly under the focus of an obligatory physical distancing; the squares and streets are stripped away and the buildings rendered inoperative, thus exposing the sensitivity that pertains to the formwork of the city. This confinement of bodies and senses illuminates other links, woven and non-dialectic ones,<sup>18</sup> underscoring the city’s relational substance. As much as we need immediate solutions to this crisis, we must engage a multidisciplinary and plural thinking, which will integrate and comprehend the variables added along the course of the pandemic. This means granting sustainable and effective measures to reduce inequality, as well as a shift in mentalities that grasps new ways in which economy, society and politics can be carried out. Note, however, the circularity here implied, because, as Guattari puts it, “mentalities can only truly evolve if global society follows a movement of transformation” (2006 [1992], 175).<sup>19</sup> Who knows if in this steep panorama of COVID-19, we are not facing the opportunity of a “successful experience of a new individual and

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<sup>17</sup> Based on the expression “subjective city” by Félix Guattari (2015 [1992]), which will be explained later in this section.

<sup>18</sup> I write “non-dialectical” because I’m thinking of processes and transformations instead of opposing essences with a possibility of synthesis.

<sup>19</sup> Author’s translation.

collective habitat” that “would have immense consequences to stimulate a general desire for change” (Guattari 2006 [1992], 175)?

We need new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the Self in relation to the other, to the foreign, the strange – a whole programme that seems far removed from current concerns. And yet, ultimately, we will only escape from the major crises of our era through the articulation of:

- a nascent subjectivity
- a constantly mutating socius
- an environment in the process of being reinvented. (Guattari 2000 [1989], 68)

Involuntarily, the confinement of bodies and of what affects us may provide a (re)signification of place. I follow Sarah Robertson’s suggestion to take a different path in urban reflections: “thinking through post-phenomenological and more-than-human modes of inquiry” (2018, 7-8). Therefore, an emphasis on bodies and affects (“[a]ffects are the ‘properties, competencies, modalities, energies, attunements, arrangements and intensities ... that act on bodies, are produced through bodies and transmitted by bodies” (2018, 7)) leads to the evasion from the usual representational and essentialist theoretical systems:

Non-representational theories (NRT) are helpful here as their focus on affect reiterates the possibilities of place as performative, an event, a doing, or something always in the making (...). Affect, very broadly, is the movement of entities towards each other or ‘the force of intensive relationality - intensities that are felt but not personal; visceral but not confined to an individuated body’ (...). NRT’s emphasis on affect is helpful for thinking through and about place because it encourages explorations that emphasise embodiment and practice - the social, material, temporal, and discursive doings that help make place. A

number of scholars have begun to explore the particularities of material and temporal intra-relations between humans and nonhumans in the home (...) and within urban environments (...). They illustrate that to pay attention to affect, to bodily practices, and to the vitality of material entanglements is to pay attention to the minutiae of place experience. (Robertson 2018, 7-8)

We know how “human” and polis were interchangeable notions in classical Athens. Personal fulfilment was unthinkable apart from cities’ life and spaces where human skills could be developed and the shortcomings were addressed. It was then already acknowledged that the individual is not self-sufficient. “It is a modern habit to think of social instability and personal insufficiency as pure negatives. (...) However, without significant experiences of self-displacement, social differences gradually harden because interest in the Other withers.” (Sennett 1994, 371)

The conflict between a person’s goals and desires and between that person’s and others’, manifests the impossibility of a completeness, although western cities try to exploit that completeness in terms of power (“wholeness, oneness, coherence: these are key words in the vocabulary of power”) and pleasure (Sennett 1994, 25-26). However, it is also in cities’ ambiance that the driving force of incompleteness may be at use. In contemporary urban living (multicultural and cosmopolitical), asking for what makes us answer solicitations from the unknown and the stranger, implies to be aware of our incompleteness, vulnerability and interdependence. It may even be argued that “[c]ivic compassion issues from that physical awareness of lack in ourselves, not from sheer goodwill or political rectitude.” (Sennett 1994, 370)

These remarks are even more pressing when we face deterritorialization as one of our most present challenges. “Being homeless, a migrant (...), a refugee

(...), a rape-in-war victim (...), an illegal immigrant (...), a foreign caretaker of the young or the elderly in an economically developed world (...), a humanitarian relief worker in the UN global system”, are narratives and modes of belonging in the contemporary world (Braidotti 2011, 11). We may ask, as Guattari did, “what can these people expect”? From his point of view, they can expect to “rebuild a particular relationship with the cosmos and with life, and ‘reconstruct’ themselves from their individual and collective uniqueness” (2006 [1992], 169); they can expect the rehabilitation of the “subjective city”:

Birth, death, desire, love, the relationship to time, to bodies, to both animate and inanimate forms, demand a fresh look, unsullied, and receptive. It is incumbent upon us to reproduce continuously this subjectivity (...). Here it is not a question of opposing the utopia of a new ‘Celestial Jerusalem,’ like that of the Apocalypse, to the harsh realities of our era, but of establishing a ‘subjective City’ at the very heart of these realities, by reorienting technological, scientific, economic, and international ends (...). (Guattari 2015 [1992], 98-99)

Without losing the political point inherent to human interactions, the redefinitions of the relationships between “the built space, the existential territories of humanity (but also of animality, plant species, incorporeal values and machinery systems)”<sup>20</sup> (Guattari 2006 [1992], 164) will deliver, not only new political and ethical debates, but also other legitimate ways of resistance and politics making.

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<sup>20</sup> “Machinery systems” requires clarification: “The great historian and sociologist Lewis Mumford (...) described the cities as mega machines. In fact, but with the condition of expanding the concept of the machine beyond its technical aspects and taking into account its economic, ecological, abstract dimensions and even the ‘desiring machines’ that populate our unconscious drives. These are the parts of the urban and architectural gears, even in their smallest subsets, that must be treated as mechanical components” (Guattari 2006, 160 – author’s translation).

In this domain, “it is no longer possible to reserve the cosmopolitan ‘conscience’ to a privileged, self-centered ‘global’ minority that thinks of itself that way – and usually referring to cosmopolitanism” (Agier 2014, 71).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, “to elaborate strategies to get out of a camp or to cross a wall, to imagine oneself as an ‘adventurer’, to understand that one faces the challenge of a cultural labyrinth (...), are these not clear manifestations of a cosmopolitan ‘conscience?’”. This cosmopolitan “conscience” is different from that other discourse: being a “citizen of the world” and personally accomplished by travelling. The latter is commonly used by people moving for leisure, business, political or educational purposes. Most of these groups or social classes limit themselves to the same privileged and identical places around the globe, repeating sameness and keeping away from being affected by otherness. So, it’s worth noticing that

globalist discourse is no longer the necessary proof of the reality of the cosmopolitan experience. All people on the move thus anticipate a reflection that is valid for their contemporaries. Frequenting borders – administrative and cultural, spatial and temporal – becomes the most ordinary situation possible in today’s world, as it constantly tests identities and alterities. What happens in border situations is what allows us to be in the world and from the world, cosmopolitan in fact, without even having wanted or thought about it. (Agier 2014, 72)

### **Like a rhizome**

Qualities like fluidity (which resonates with repeated and unexpected change) and continuity (where total separation between different parts is inexistent but where, unlike linearity, one event does not follow from another directly) can hinder the

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<sup>21</sup> Author’s translation.



habitual tendency to systematize the city and give it coherence. The strata that move and conflict in invisibility, the centrality issue that is ultimately elusive or simply not so much paramount, the multiplicities and heterogeneities in dwelling and space making represent, more than a fragility, the strength and resilience of cities. The same strength that the rhizomic model of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari has:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be,’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and... and... and...’ This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb ‘to be’. (Deleuze & Guattari 2005 [1980], 25)

Far from being a predetermined and composed structure, the rhizomic city is a fragile variety of its constituents “which nonetheless can regenerate into new and independent rhizomes (...). It is a city that is filled with many breakable and reconstitutive dimensions of itself; it has an infinitely regenerative structural capacity such that it, as Gian Carlo Ferretti puts, ‘decompose[s] the totality in multiplicities’” (Panigrahi 2017, 181). Also, as a metaphor for the postmodern world, the rhizome illustrates the flowable and, at times, erratic dimension of cities. It has a certain subversive character because the “[r]hizome is basically a model that escapes a rigid and non-modifiable structural principle thereby remaining perennially open to unremitting changes and modifications.” (Panigrahi 2017, 173)

The defining principles described by Deleuze and Guattari (2005 [1980]) make the analogy even more rigorous and summarize the characteristics of the relationality that I am considering. The principles of connection and heterogeneity stress out that “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other

(...). A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles". The principle of multiplicity reiterates that "[t]here is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject", because "multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature (the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows)". The principle of a-signifying rupture is "against the oversignifying breaks separating structures or cutting across a single structure". In fact, "[e]very rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees". Finally, the principles of decalcomania and cartography emphasize that, unlike "a logic of tracing and reproduction", the rhizome "does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious", and like a map, the rhizome "is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification", and "can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation". Importantly "[i]t can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation". For this reason, the city, like the rhizome, "has to do with performance." (Deleuze & Guattari 2005 [1980], 7-12)

Not surprisingly, we can easily envision, like Rosi Braidotti, that "contemporary politics is rhizomic", enabling "creative links and zigzagging interconnections between discursive communities which are too often kept apart from each other". For example, between: "bio-technologies and ethics and political agency; the omnipresence of a state of crisis on the one hand and the possibility of sustainable futures on the other; the practice of nomadic politics

of difference versus technological monoculture”, and also “the creative potential of hybrid subjectivity, in opposition to new and more virulent forms of ethnically fixed identities; cartographic accounts of locations and normative stances” (Braidotti 2006, 7). In contemporary cities (where intercultural figurations, deterritorialized bodies and identities are more recurrent), those creative links and zigzagging interconnections may enable the construction, not only of diverse life meanings, but also of new belongings, a common project, and new relations of existence. This hinges upon practical measures like, for example, the reconfiguration of policies that grant citizenship; new criteria for tax benefits, affordable housing, and social protection; collective ways of addressing the capitalist economy; reformulation of norms, rules and laws that tacitly hide instruments of social death, of racial and sexual discrimination, job loss, or public harassment and violence against “marginalized” people. The effects of such measures concern the freedom, justice and recognition of different ways of living and finally the reduction of inequality. Being rhizomic is therefore a way to feel at home in the third millennium.

### A “strange sun”<sup>22</sup> overshadows the conclusion

My reflections departed from the recognition that the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic stresses out the physical dimension of urban living: having a home or not, with essential health and safety conditions, is a condition that differentially distributes vulnerability to disease and, hence, tacitly allocates life and death in populations. From there, lines of flight were experimented as alternative conceptual frameworks and contributions to urban thought. Those frames challenge essentialist and representational theories, which take the constituents

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<sup>22</sup> Expression by Antonin Artaud: “There is [in the plague] a kind of strange sun, a light of abnormal intensity by which it seems that the difficult and even the impossible suddenly become our normal element” (1994 [1938], 30).

of urban matter as dualistic (in the sense of oppositional) elements, even ontologically diverse. A rhizomic and performative character copes with contemporary cities' perennial transformation, adaptation, and unpredictability by pursuing relationality, instead of hierarchic or filiated conceptions of thought. Hence, the local and the global reflect and mutually transform each other; the "non-existent" and the "invisible" are paramount for a comprehensive and precise reading of the "real"; non-linear, creative concepts are needed to prepare sustainability and reduce inequality; finally, a critique of cultural, political, economic and philosophical hegemonies enables and multiplies ways of resisting and making the city otherwise.

Extraordinary events urge a "deconfinement" of thought by bringing to light multiple relationships, differences and interdependencies that used to remain away from the cities' skylines. As Antonin Artaud stated, referring to the plague (and that can be related to the current pandemic), it "takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures; (...) reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature" (1994 [1938], 27). In the end, these events widen the reckoning of what mobilizes people for action and serve, in a twisted and dramatic way, alternative futures. The circumstances and decisions that set priorities and strategies in addressing the outbreak of a virus may be extreme, but so are the long-term consequences to those who, in the face of indifference and/or a reduced sense of politics and the urban, are excluded from the world of life. Taking into account that we are still in the verge of new attitudes (environmental, social, political, economic) and that human perspectives are contingent, conclusions remain open. But something is already whispering: more than a deconstruction, the very bases of subjectivity, identity, and living, must be relocated (cf. Braidotti 2011), deterritorialized from human history

and conceptual safe-places that prevent or limit the fluidity between discourses.

A rhizomic way of dealing with the unexpected and thinking about ethical and political alternatives of agency may be advantageous for cities' endurance and sustainable future. Recurring to transversal and non-linear alliances is a way of seeing how life might be otherwise than it is. It should also help to destabilize the acritical repetitions (the habits that tend to normalize and naturalize categories, attitudes and codes) found in domains like language, ethics, education, health, politics, and science.

A strange sun projects shadows over what was once considered "normal" but it also shows, intensely, that from pain and uncertainty we can draw and realize new possibilities.

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