Guest Editors' Introduction: The Urban In-Between

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Introduction

This special issue highlights a range of cross-disciplinary approaches to the study of China's *chengzhongcun* 城中村 (urban villages). We take urban villages, or "villages surrounded by the city," as a method in thinking about the contradictions, contestations, and transformations that underlie the processes of postsocialist transformation in China. While a number of interdisciplinary scholars have conducted studies on urban villages in China, particularly in Shenzhen and Guangzhou (Siu 2007; He and Wu 2009; Bach 2010; Al 2014; O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017; Buckingham and Chen 2018), fewer works have taken a historical and cross-regional perspective of urban villages across multiple Chinese cities. To this end, we take a broader, critical look at several urban villages across Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Zhengzhou, and Guangzhou. Through ethnographic, archival, and visual

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analyses, we examine changing relations of land, labor, and governance in the context of rapid urbanization. As spaces of constant renewal and unprecedented accumulation, urban villages demonstrate how China's insertion into the global capitalist economy relies on the tenuous and contested relationships among land, labor, and capital, which are often overshadowed by narratives of rural-to-urban development in postsocialist contexts. More specifically, urban villages allow us to examine how the capitalist drive for profit and the continuing institutional legacy of the Maoist regime work as two "mutually imbricated" sets of protocols shaping China's postsocialist development (Rojas and Litzinger 2016).

A central concern of this special issue is to situate the study of urban villages in relation to new anthropological and interdisciplinary thinking on the study of global capitalism. How does China's socialist era, especially the legacy of the *hukou*, the household registration system, inform postsocialist and capitalist imaginaries in urban villages? The study of urban villages, we argue, offers new ways to map the politics of governance, labor extraction, demolition, dispossession, and accumulation that has characterized so much of China's development over the last three decades. Urban villages do not reveal a singular logic of state and capital projects of urbanization and marketization, but multiple logics, multiple contestations. How do the mobile migrants, peasant landlords, and others who move in and out of these in-between spaces make sense of the contradictions of everyday life? How do state officials regulate these migratory flows? How do migrant laborers imagine alternative futures and forge new forms of agency beyond the frequent stereotype of the disenfranchised *diduan* 低端 (low-end) population, the always already oppressed subject of eviction, demolition, and state violence? The articles collected here take inspiration from recent work that questions the utility of totalizing frames of global capitalism, which tend to reproduce capitalist and, in our context, postsocialist dreams of endless accumulation. Our case studies do not deny that the structural formations of capital affect people's everyday lives and powerfully determine the spaces and temporalities in which they live and struggle. Our aim is to draw attention to the multiple and often contradictory ways urban villagers struggle, survive, live, aspire, and dream. In pushing beyond what J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996) has called "capitalocentrism," we want to emphasize the

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instabilities, contingencies, the "messiness and hard work" (Bear, Ho, Tsing and Yanagisako 2015) involved in the making of divergent life projects in China's heterogeneous urban villages.

Urban villages in China are parcels of formerly agricultural land that were once held by rural collectives during the Maoist era. Today, they function as semiautonomous entities that are governed by village leaders and are subject to only limited state controls (Mason 2016). Under Mao's leadership, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) prioritized the countryside as the base for large-scale collectivization. Peasants, as Mao declared, served as the vanguard of the Chinese Revolution (Day 2013). Since Deng Xiaoping's market reforms in 1978, however, we see the complete reversal of this revolutionary vision. *Nongmin* 农民 (peasants) and small-scale farmers, as well as the rural land on which they subsist, have been emptied out of their political significance (Schneider 2014). Indeed, they are commonly seen by urbanites and by the state as ignorant and backward. As the peasantry has been displaced and the rural eviscerated (Yan 2008), China's urban cores are now celebrated as sites of future-led advancement and development. This reversal of political ideologies and economic investments has left millions of migrants flooding to cities designated as Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along the coastal regions, in search of employment and financial security (Zhang 2002).

Despite their mobility, the *hukou* household registration system continues to administratively fix this *liudong renkou* 流动人口 (floating population) as rural people, denying them almost all forms of social welfare, including adequate housing, employment, education, and medical care in the cities. The *hukou* is a Maoist-era policy of population control that continues to tie citizens to their land of birth by labeling people and land as either rural or urban (K. W. Chan and Buckingham 2008; K. W. Chan 2010). As members of the "floating population," migrant laborers live and work in the urban villages, where the working-class buildings and neighborhoods they inhabit are equally disparaged in mainstream media as places of criminality, disease, and *buwenming* 不文明 (uncivility) (Zhang 2002; Xiang 2005; Florence 2007). Their administrative status as the rural "Other" renders migrants vulnerable to poor housing conditions, subpar schools, and exploitative working conditions. Because migrants cannot claim any entitlement to the land upon which the urban villages are built, they are left to rely on their

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own capacity to build, secure, and constantly recreate support networks through kinship, as well as grassroots labor and social organizations. This is urban apartheid with Chinese characteristics.

Amid these widening inequalities, urban villages remain scattered across major cities in China, in which communities of migrant laborers reside, often under precarious conditions. Dense, low-lying concrete buildings awkwardly situated in the central business district stand in stark contrast to the glitzy high-rises and skyscrapers that surround them. They may also be found at the fringe of the urban core, marking rather haphazardly the ambiguous boundaries of what constitutes urban land. While each urban village has its distinctive history and management system, there are a number of structural features across urban villages in China that lend themselves to comparison.

After the introduction of the household responsibility system in 1982, which gradually dismantled Maoist collectives in the countryside, urban villages emerged when land formerly held by rural or village collectives was divided and redistributed to individual households. Members of these village collectives, in turn, built makeshift housing for the purpose of renting informal living and commercial spaces to migrant laborers. Over time, as privatization and urbanization intensified, these villagers moved away from the urban villages, and migrants became the primary residents. These migrants remain most vulnerable to the violence of the privatization of labor and land.

Many urban villages retain the administrative status of collectively owned agricultural land according to the *hukou* household registration system before they are gradually incorporated into the urban core. Because urban villages are still held under the control of rural village collectives, urban villages feature property regimes, housing complexes, compensation schemes, and land ownership that are legacies of both Maoist- and reform-era land tenure policies and practices. Such administrative ambiguity has provided fertile ground for the assertion of claims by various agents and class groups over land-based property rights, the valuation of the land itself, the conditions upon which migrants in the urban villages live and work, the future development of what land signifies, and how land is governed and used.

Overlapping class groups appropriate disparate meanings of the rural and

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the urban to secure their profit-seeking interests or to claim rightful inclusion in state-led projects of economic development. Real estate developers, architects, urban planners, and policy makers, for instance, speculate on the market value of the land. As third-party entities that mediate between the municipal governments and village members, these parties envision urban villages as state-endorsed projects of future-oriented renewal and urban development. In their attempts to scrub urban villages from their perceived criminality and disorder, state and corporate entities see these spaces of the in-between as places that lack a present, which has been emptied and hollowed out to make way for capitalist expropriation. In contrast, village landlords, who are current or former members of Maoist-era collectives, retain much of the administrative oversight and day-to-day management of the urban villages. As rightful holders of the use rights to which the land is tied, they have reappropriated the rural past in the form of lineage-based identities, infrastructures, discourses, and accumulation schemes that date back to pre-Maoist times. In doing so, they have amassed immense wealth and influence in local politics through various rent-seeking practices. Although villagers of the Maoist-era collectives and migrant laborers are considered rural citizens, the *hukou* system inadvertently leaves widening divisions between urban villagers and migrant laborers. The political and economic statuses of villagers, along with their land holdings and local clout, contrast sharply with those of migrant laborers, who have no claim to land or state-sponsored welfare in the cities. They remain vulnerable to exploitation, unemployment, and eviction in the urban villages.

China's urban villages are thus contested spaces situated in the interstices between the rural and the urban, between histories of socialism and its afterlives in a globalizing present (Franceschini, Loubere, and Sorace 2019). Competing claims to wealth, as well as opposing visions for an urban future, defy a singular, linear, and future-oriented logic of rural-to-urban capitalist development, as well as socialist to postsocialist transformation. The articles in this issue illustrate the multiplicity of life projects that policy makers, urban planners, state agents, village landlords, and migrant tenants pursue. Drawing from the fields of anthropology, history, cultural theory, the visual arts, and social science, our articles tease out the myriad ways in which urban villages are situated—materially, ideologically, and affectively—and

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undergoing unprecedented transformation as China pushes to accelerate urbanization (Oakes 2019a, 2019b). At the same time, these frameworks both build on and offer new perspectives on the rich literature on urbanization, displacement, dispossession, class, and uneven development in China and beyond (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Chen 2005; Ong 2010; Mezzadra and Nielson 2012; Kipnis 2013; Harms 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Friedman 2017).

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Critical Trajectories: Accumulation, Dispossession, and Life-Making

In their contribution to this special issue, Jane Hayward and Małgorzata Jakimów study how local officials, urban planners, scholars, policy makers, and migrant activists assert opposing ideological claims and competing interests over Beijing's urban villages. Urban villages, as Hayward and Jakimów argue, constitute a key site of ideological contestation over what the city should be, and whom urban life is for. Their analysis lays out how technocrats and other state officials seek to transform the city into a strategic site of global capital accumulation by denigrating urban villages and downplaying the role of cheap labor in China's economy. Some Chinese urban planners and academics, in contrast, counter the state's claims to monopolize the production of urban space by asserting urban villages as free-market havens. They advocate a form of urban development arising from the spontaneous entrepreneurialism of peasants. Meanwhile, migrant activists who have formed nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) attempt to subvert statist ideologies of developmentalism and urban life through visual performances and artistic media that demand their inclusion in the aesthetic of the city. Each of these three groups promotes their own visions of urban modernity by claiming a right to urban life based on their class identification.

Policy debates about urban inclusion and development trace their roots to early modern China's projects of state-making, class antagonism, and the governance of citizenship. Qian Zhu grounds our analyses of today's urban villages historically by examining the New Village Movement in China from 1919 to 1936, as it was imagined and materialized by intellectuals, social reformers, and the Nationalist state. Zhu's analysis shows how the Nationalist government, prior to the Mao era, sought to curb the social contradictions and inequalities brought about by the migratory flows of rural

laborers into Shanghai by imagining new regimes of living and citizenship. This movement combined an eminently modern critique of capitalism with attempts by conservative thinkers to recover the ideals of rural community, thereby creating a new politics of belonging and inclusion.

Today, contested claims and widening divisions leave urban villages in an ambiguous condition. As villagers, migrants, developers, and state agents scramble over land, bodies, and capital accumulation, they are also continuously subjected to processes of development and displacement. Their novel and sometimes surprising practices of accumulation and dispossession challenge the conventional bifurcated approach to urban villages as sites of either resistance or complicity vis-à-vis the state. Mengqi Wang insightfully examines the emergence of such spaces of contestation and ambiguity through an ethnographic analysis of demolition and relocation projects, known as *chaiqian* 拆迁, at Nanjing's urban fringes. In *chaiqian*, planners and government officials design technologies and protocols of value translation and calculation so as to convert rural land into urban real estate properties and villagers into capital-holding participants of the urban real estate market. She shows that *chaiqian* is far from a government-imposed procedure without friction. Villagers challenge methods of value calibration and force the government to constantly update policies of compensation. The governance of the rural-to-urban transformation through *chaiqian* must be read as an unstable, continuously negotiated process among local officials, villagers, geographers, and urban planners.

In their respective essays, Nellie Chu and Tong Lam similarly approach the urban village as a site of diverse accumulative practices, unequal economic opportunities, and uneven outcomes. While the interdisciplinary scholarship has cogently described a wide range of projects of urban development by state and urban developers (O'Donnell, Wong, and Bach 2017; Bach 2010; Hsing 2010), these studies often reinforce a widely held narrative that portrays villagers as either complicit or resistant to pressures of large-scale privatization. Chu and Lam, in contrast, illustrate a spectrum of ambivalent outcomes that come about as rural and urban spaces are subjected to differing logics and modes of both dispossession and governance, primarily enabled by the *hukou* system of population control.

Specifically, their articles show how urban villages challenge the categori-

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cal fixity of the rural and the urban, as well as trouble processes of inclusion and exclusion, which the *hukou* system of population control strives to administratively define. The marketization and commodification of everyday life in urban villages have compelled village members to give up their use rights over their collective land in exchange for whatever compensation package individual households have managed to negotiate with real estate corporations and other state-backed entities. In the course of these negotiations, villagers often realize the very real material effects of uneven development. On the one hand, members of former lineage or village collectives desire the social and material gains of urbanization schemes. On the other hand, many continue to struggle for a fair distribution of rights and rewards that are entangled in the processes of rapid urbanization and privatization. The cropping up of so-called *dingzihu* 钉子户 (nail households)—that is, individual homes left standing in the middle of large-scale demolition projects—bears witness to the struggles and uncertainties that villagers undergo as they work through the paradoxes of rapid and uneven development.

Essays by Chu and Lam also point to the roles played by local and transnational factors that both facilitate and, depending on circumstances, limit rural-urban migrants' upward social mobility. This is evident in Chu's essay, where she traces the emergence of the *tu er dai* 土二代 (peasant landlords) in Guangzhou's urban villages, who target migrant laborers engaging in the transnational supply chains of fast fashion to extract rents and other fees. Tong Lam's photo-essay engages the politics of urban renewal, uneven development, speculation, dispossession, and widening class hierarchies amid postsocialism's high-speed growth. Whereas the government and real estate developers see urban villages as opportunities for slum eradication and profit-making, respectively, urban villagers, who have long profited from renting out their apartments to migrant laborers, regard the prospect of redevelopment as their ultimate chance to extract the greatest possible compensation; this is speculative accumulation in its almost purest form.

As spaces of the in-between, urban villages highlight two dynamics central to China's push toward development. On the one hand, they reveal the class antagonisms and techniques of governance that underlie the nation's experiments in rapid and uneven urbanization; while, on the other, they yield gaps or openings for migrant groups and other people displaced by the dictates

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of the market economy to pursue life projects or means of livelihood other than those formalized by the state. Minhua Ling, Tzu-Chi Ou, Yang Zhan, and Megan Steffen attempt to push the study of migrants in urban villages in new directions, especially in terms of how we understand class and class politics in urban villages. Specifically, they show how new class subjectivities emerge as responses to urban governance through rich ethnographic studies of China's urban villages. In turn, they reveal alternative imaginaries of the urban future that contrast with state-endorsed plans for development.

Minhua Ling's article describes migrants in Shanghai's "snail households," which use removable cargo containers and prefabricated metal shelters as makeshift forms of housing. Local landlords and entrepreneurial migrants turn cargo containers into rental units to reduce costs and maximize mobility amid the ever-present specter of demolition and eviction. These temporary, informal settlements, or "snail houses," accommodate migrants who are forced by rising costs in Shanghai to continuously seek cheap accommodation, which, in turn, emplaces them on the urban fringe. She invokes the notion of "containerization" to describe the subaltern position in which migrants find themselves, who have become disempowered, even subdued through accumulation by *containerization*. Their necessity of finding ways to simply survive in face of the constant specter of forced eviction, she asserts, precludes resistance and collective action.

Tzu-Chi Ou reveals a slightly different logic, yet one that also produces extreme forms of vulnerability. In her analysis of *gongyu* 公寓 (apartment housing) in Beijing, she differentiates between, on the one hand, "low-end" accumulation, whereby rural families and village governments produce low-budget rental units, and, on the other, "high-end" accumulation by big property developers who create luxury housing for the new rich. Ou argues that this "low-end" form of accumulation underscores the essential feature of "accumulation by dispossession," whereby land has been commodified (Harvey 2003, 2005: 159–65), though it has not been fully dispossessed. In this case, villagers become the "active agents in the commodification of rural space" (Qian, He, and Liu 2013: 332) and in forms of accumulation that are directly linked to their future displacement. In other words, this form of accumulation allows for the "appropriation and co-optation" (Harvey 2003: 146) of preexisting social structures and land ownership systems.

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Furthermore, as Yang Zhan argues in an article on venturing, migrants take on entrepreneurial endeavors, as they search for "possibilities for new socio-spatial relations, agencies, materiality, and even structure" (Zhan 2015: 3). Venturing affords a newfound sense of autonomy and mobility beyond the dreams and nightmares of the Foxconn factory model (Pun 2005; Pun and Smith 2007; Pun and Chan 2013; Litzinger 2013; J. Chan and Seldon 2014; J. Chan, Pun, and Seldon 2015). Their entrepreneurial activities, however, leave them subject to intensified surveillance. By revisiting debates about the depeasantization or proletarianization of migrant laborers (Arrighi 2007; Andreas and Zhan 2016; Day 2013), Zhan complicates the rural-to-urban directionality that has come to define so much of the work on migrant mobility. The nomadic culture of venturing may be better understood as a form of cultural politics more akin to what Mike Davis (2007) has called the making of "the global informal working class" (178). Exploitation is surely real, violent, and dehumanizing. Yet nomadic migrants, always on the move, always searching for new and better possibilities, also find ways to make labor exploitation more tolerable, less destructive of everyday life.

Megan Steffen studies the key players in the demolitions of Zhengzhou's urban villages. They include the *chai'erdai* 拆二代 (rich-through-demolition), *zhengfu* 政府 (government), *renmin* 人民 (people), residents, and evicted migrant workers. By looking at who benefits from the literal and metaphorical fruits of demolition, Steffen demonstrates how the uneven temporality of state-endorsed neglect challenges official narratives of constant progress. Neglect, as Steffen shows, is a generative process, which produces alternative imaginings of precarity among the migrant population. These imaginings are different from the structure and experience of precarity examined in postwelfare states like the United States and Japan (Allison 2013; Standing 2011). Upwardly mobile students, small-scale entrepreneurs, and members of criminal organizations all seek, through their different strategies, to take advantage of cheap rents and regulatory neglect. Her work in Zhengzhou reveals the vexed complicity of class subject positioning in urban villages.

The myriad claims that *weirao* 围绕 (lay siege to) the urban villages thus reveal the dynamics of accumulation and dispossession, which animate China's postsocialist transformation (O'Donnell 2013). At the same time, the *hukou* system remains deeply entangled with uneven capitalist development

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in China and globally as well. Diverse governmental practices and their repercussions emerge through unforeseen and contingent encounters, collaborations, and even contestations among various stakeholders, including peasant landlords and other members of former village collectives in the urban villages. These complexities of differential state control and forms of flexible governance remind us that the Chinese state is not a singular agent with a coherent logic of action. Nor do we see it as a well-carved state machine that acts independently from the actions, needs, protestation, and complicities of its target of population of governance.

Our essays also show how urban villages yield a spectrum of class-based positionings and subjectivities that are fractured, provisional, and uncertain. While policy makers conjure opposing visions or spatial imaginaries of Beijing's urban villages, peasant landlords, migrant laborers, developers, and state agents maneuver and create spaces of mobility, wealth creation, and sometimes hope within the narrow fissures opened up between the rural and the urban. As we indicated at the outset, we call these *spaces of the in-between*. We argue that urban villages both craft and direct ways in which urban governance and their responses occur on the ground.

Specifically, our articles show how migrants and peasant landlords have created new pathways for social mobility, while their very practices of accumulation have led to expulsions, dispossession, and new kinds of social and economic inequality. Some migrants are becoming subcontracted managers, developers, and even landlords who gamble their speculative timing and luck on the haphazard development of the urban villages. For the majority of others, life and livelihood in the urban villages serve as a place of ongoing displacement and exclusion. While village landlords erect nail houses in open defiance of unfair compensation schemes, migrant laborers continue to live in squalid conditions in the urban villages before they are violently evicted (on the 2018 Beijing evictions, see Morris 2020 and Li, Song, and Zhang 2018). Meanwhile, village collectives continue to fracture as the distribution of wealth through rent-seeking practices in the urban villages causes socioeconomic and intergenerational inequalities to widen.

Ranging from Beijing to Zhengzhou, the case studies analyzed in the essays collected here show how the techniques of governance, as well as the divergent life projects that thrive in spite of them, are better thought

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of as ensembles of overlapping informal and institutional practices, a collection of images, representations, and discourses that facilitate strategic and tactic accumulative practices at various levels. The multiple trajectories of livelihood and labor that peasant landlords, real estate developers, migrant tenants, and activists pursue in urban villages show us something of the complex politics of aspiration and hope for some, while we also see the contradictory and precarious conditions of life and livelihood among the migrant underclass, whose futures no longer rest on the promises of stability (Tsing 2015). The proliferation and expansion of forms of labor exploitation and accumulation allow us to consider the shifting, ghostly presence and nonpresence of the state, or what Steffen, in her article for this issue, describes as the "generative neglect" of the Chinese state. This neglect, which is not the same as social abandonment, in turn, continuously allows for new modes of accumulation by dispossession and for new class subjectivities to emerge.

Conclusion

The ethnographic, historical, visual, and discursive analyses in this issue illustrate the new class politics and emergent subjectivities of labor that have proliferated, in all their unruly forms, in China's urban villages, caught in the interstices of the rural and the urban, the spaces of the in-between. The *tu er dai* peasant landlords, the itinerant migrant laborers, real estate agents, and small-scale entrepreneurs bring to life the polyphonic rhythms that animate the everyday pulses of urban villages. From the pathways of venturing across the urban villages of Beijing to the acts of performances and visual representation by NGO migrant workers, we take "notice" (Tsing 2015) of these everyday rhythms and practices, particularly when they shed light on the unexpected moments of refusal, complicity, and ambivalence (McGranahan 2018).

The retreat of the language of class, which once upheld the ethos of egalitarianism and collective belonging by the Chinese state, has compelled us to elucidate the ongoing dynamics of dispossession and inequality as they unfold in spaces that seep beyond or fit awkwardly within the blurred boundaries of the rural and the urban. It is precisely because of their "unruliness"—

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that is, their inability to graft neatly onto the linear and teleological trajectories of state urbanization and economic development—that we have sought to illuminate the unrecognized migrant struggles for survival and human dignity in the face of violent land grabs, ruthless evictions, forced demolitions, and sporadic protests. We have seen, for example, the emergence of new forms of political action among migrant workers as well as new forms of solidarity among workers and Marxist student groups. This political action, however, has also been subjected to—disciplined—by new techniques of surveillance, both in the workplace, in factory towns, and on university campuses, perhaps seen most dramatically in the roundup and arrests that followed the Jasic worker protests in the summer of 2017 (Lin 2019; J. Chan 2019; Yu 2019).

Often overshadowed by events considered more noteworthy in the popular media, the immediate struggles among China's migrant population call attention to unexpected forms of livelihood and possibility, which are always inflected by, yet also lie beyond the grasp of full state and capitalist control. As real estate corporations and state agencies push forward in their grand projects of unbridled urbanization and rapid development, the paradoxes and contradictions of postsocialist transformation are seen most clearly in China's urban villages.

To be sure, the future of the urban villages remains uncertain, as we were all reminded in late 2017, when the Beijing municipal government, in a forty-day campaign against "illegal structures," expelled tens of thousands of migrants from the city fringes in the dead of winter. While the state seems determined to smooth out these contradictions before more land is confiscated and more people are incorporated into or removed from urban cores, the specter of these tensions continues to leave its ghostly presence, reminding us that the "afterlives" of China's own socialist legacy persist to haunt the urban present, with its imaginaries of futures built around glitzy architectural wonders, fancy malls, and more and more gated communities.

Migrants are not passive subjects in these processes, however. Their ongoing struggles to work out these contradictions through negotiations, refusals, and, yes, complicities, remind us that hope for better ways of living—more secure, less precarious and brutal—are increasingly to be found on the edges of the rural and the urban, and in the cracks that open up between

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unrelenting acts of displacement and the seemingly endless fetishization of all things urban.

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