

City Planning Poetics 9: Feeling the City
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Introduction

In her 2011 monograph, *Cruel Optimism*, affect theorist Lauren Berlant argues that:

the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. But . . . optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or people risks striving. (2, emphasis in original)

In Berlant's framing, optimism entails the belief that desirable change is possible. Optimism, as Berlant describes it, is implicitly a relation *not* to whether the circumstances of the present will change, but to *how* they will change. What distinguishes a cruel optimism is that a desirable and sustaining idea of change itself ensures that the change you long for will never arrive. If we're thinking about optimism, then we're thinking in terms of affect, what the Oxford English Dictionary describes as "[a] feeling or subjective experience accompanying a thought or action or occurring in response to a stimulus; an emotion, a mood." Following Berlant, the reason we would think in terms of affect is because, as Berlant suggests, "the present is perceived, first, affectively" (4). To describe the conditions of the present is to describe how the present feels and the systems, procedures, and conditions that produce those feelings.

The subject of this ninth iteration of City Planning Poetics is "feeling the city." If we follow Berlant, then how the present feels shapes how we might describe or analyze it. If our capacity for description is shaped by how we feel as we describe, then how do the present conditions of the built, social, and environmental context of urban space in which many of us live determine and guide our

descriptions? What kinds of optimism characterize the acts of perception, documentation, and planning that make up the present and future conditions of urban space? What do we learn about what cities are by describing the affects that shape their present? How is the way that urban spaces feel to various urban residents conditioned by legacies and ongoing practices of racialized and uneven social and political disinvestment and devaluation? How can affective orientations to urban space themselves be catalysts for urban change?

Both planning historian Akira Drake Rodriguez and poet Jill Magi are concerned with the relationship between the forms of change possible in cities and the relation between how cities feel and how they have felt in the past. In Rodriguez's forthcoming monograph, *Diverging Space for Deviants: The Politics of Atlanta's Public Housing*, she offers an analysis of 20th century tenant activism in Atlanta's public housing system. Rodriguez pays particular attention the role of Black women in advocacy for public housing tenants' rights as a politically divergent form of urban participation. Rodriguez describes how the members of the tenant association of the oldest public housing development in the U.S. framed their affective experience of where they lived as an element of their demand for its modernization.

As Atlanta's Techwood and Clark Howell Homes tenant association identified in a 1980 statement issued to Atlanta's Public Housing Authority: "modernization and improvement should aim to inspire pride and satisfaction in the living environment and a feeling that someone cares, rather than to reinforce and perpetuate hostilities and antagonism" (19). In the statement, how the housing development feels to its residents is a direct result of racialized disinvestment perpetuated by Atlanta's Public Housing Authority. As Rodriguez notes: "The modernization statement explicitly addresses what residents considered to be the problem: an un(der)developed community planned by everyone but its residents" (21). She goes on to argue that:

While politicians were increasing police budgets and using the logics of defensible space to transform cities into bifurcated spaces of privatized affluent leisure and

marginalized public surveillance, public housing residents were advocating for improved infrastructure, economic development, and a built environment that was both safe and welcoming to outsiders. (21)

Evident in Rodriguez's analysis is that how the city felt to the members of the Techwood and Clark Howell Homes tenant association was shaped by legacies of racialized disinvestment in Atlanta. How the city feels is, as Rodriguez explains, a guide to racialized histories of power and policy in Atlanta's public housing system, as well as to motivation for its transformation. In Rodriguez's framing, it becomes clear that optimistic attachments to urban spaces in the form of the desire for them to be "safe" or "welcoming" are themselves affective relations. They are motivated by ideas of urban change dictated by how the city feels, and how it might come to feel as it is transformed. They are motivated, too, by implicit and explicit arguments about who has a right to feel safe or welcomed by their city, and what would facilitate those feelings for different individuals and communities. The members of the tenants association argue not only that they have a right to certain material resources, but also that they have a right to "a feeling that someone cares." Their advocacy for change is an effort to curate how the city feels to their fellow residents, and to identify positive affective relationships to urban space as themselves a right mediated by political forces.

In her 2019 collection, *SPEECH*, Jill Magi similarly traces the contours of racial capitalism as the context through which the subject of her long poem "Outpost / _____" moves. In the poem, Magi writes:

as the American Medical Association fatally weakened the drive for socialized medicine by 1949, she locked the second lock of her door

as the attempt to revive the Fair Employment Practices Commission was defeated, she went downstairs and crossed the street

as Citi-Bank lobbied for legislation to end Depression-era banking reforms and won, she stepped up over the curb. (31)

As in the case of the residents of Atlanta's public housing system in the early 1980s, the subject's movement through the city is structured by the weight and behavior of the major engines of global capitalism, which Magi sutures to her subject's quotidian activities. In her afterword to *SPEECH*, entitled "Post-Script / A Third Space," Magi additionally reflects on daily life in urban space, as she writes:

Two cities of middles overlapped inside my notebook. This was confusing though I was not unhappy. Until heat rose up in me and I went from asking, 'where should I live?' to thinking, 'here I have something to learn' which was to believe in poetry's making despite the misrecognition, "poet equals citizen," as if a poet could only be real through official belonging. In fact it had always been the opposite. (159)

As is the case for the subject of "Outpost / _____," Magi works in the post-script to disaggregate the invitation to a cruel optimism about positive transformation in the context of global racial capitalism to make another observation entirely, to note that "here I have something to learn." She pivots from speculating about the future of individual cities to speculating about a present formed over previous and current experiences of urban space that overlap. In a February 2020 essay on the collection, Magi notes that "*SPEECH* is set in lines that mimic the pace of walking and the repeated movement of a weaver's shuttle. The composite voice, in an attempt to make place, explores ideological middles: between citizen and migrant, history and the present, here and there, freedom and constraint, speaking and silence." The composite city of the poems—part Abu Dhabi, where Magi lives, and part Chicago—and how it feels is inextricable from the situated experience of moving through it. We, all of us, share and can meet on the plane in which the built environment of urban and non-urban spaces is inextricable from our affective responses to those spaces that make up the present. We can meet here even as we diverge from one another in our experience of what those affects and spaces are, and our perceptions and misperceptions of which ones we share and which we don't. On its surface, this is a simple idea: that cities are in part how we feel about them. Within it is another

simple idea: that inequitable urban change is directly related to biased valuations of whose feelings matter to the present and future of a given urban space. As the precise and expansive toolkit of both Rodriguez's and Magi's work indicates, the implications of these facially straightforward ideas are both tremendously difficult and essential to map and to describe.

If the aim of an optimistic attachment to a given urban space is to understand what it means to be attached to a city, to love a city, to feel that you know a city, is that a cruel optimism? Is the complexity of urban spaces, which escape from us and exceed our perception even as we live in them and move through them a barrier to an optimism about how they might change to be more equitable? If cities occur at the intersection of the built environment and the affect that Berlant argues is the texture of the present, then what tools do we need to adequately represent any urban space and our experience of it? Should how cities feel be external to questions about urban policy and planning? If the feeling of cities should be a part of those questions, what language to describe the feeling of cities would make its importance clear to people unaccustomed to thinking about cities in terms of affect? Reading, and imminently, hearing from Rodriguez and Magi in conversation, perhaps those tools exist in the diffusion and overlap between the strategies of poetry and those of planning history to be precise about what cities are by being precise about how they feel. In that precision there is, perhaps, a strategy for guiding small and large forms of urban transformation.

Based in the UAE and Vermont, USA, JILL MAGI works in text, image, and textile. The author of six books of poetry and numerous handmade books housed in the University at Buffalo Poetry Collection, Jill ran Sona Books for ten years, publishing chapbooks of experimental works that she described as "risky, quiet, and community-based." Her most recent book, *SPEECH* (Nightboat 2019), is set in a city of middles: something like the Middle East and something like the Midwest and the fictional wanderer who navigates these places resides in a female body of middle age. Jill has had residencies with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the Brooklyn Textile Arts Center, and has taught for more than twenty years at research universities, liberal arts colleges,

in MFA and BFA programs, and in community-based adult literacy programs. Jill has had solo exhibitions of visual work at the NYU Abu Dhabi Project Space Gallery, Tashkeel, and Grey Noise, and is a co-founder of JARA Collective.

AKIRA DRAKE RODRIGUEZ is an Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Weitzman School in the Department of City & Regional Planning. Her research examines the politics of urban planning, or the ways that disenfranchised groups re-appropriate their marginalized spaces in the city to gain access to and sustain urban political power. Dr. Rodriguez's forthcoming manuscript, *Diverging Space for Deviants: The Politics of Atlanta's Public Housing* (University of Georgia Press 2021), explores how the politics of public housing planning and race in Atlanta created a politics of resistance within its public housing developments. This research offers the alternative benefits of public housing, outside of shelter provision, to challenge the overwhelming narrative of public housing as a dysfunctional relic of the welfare state. Dr. Rodriguez was recently awarded a Spencer Foundation grant to study how parent and educational advocates mobilize around school facility planning processes in Philadelphia.

It is my great pleasure to welcome Jill and Akira to the virtual Kelly Writers House.