# Title: Infinite Topograph(ies): Forays into Plurality, Play and Resistance in the Chawls of Bombay

Bombay (now, Mumbai) in the 1980s. Mills are closing down, slums are razed to the ground, thousands are evicted from their homes, and century-old workers’ housing estates are turned into flashy high-rise apartment buildings for the wealthy. A whole new spatialisation of the city is set underway. These processes of reorganization form the focus of two films by prominent Indian documentary film-maker Anand Patwardhan. Films that I take as my point of departure here. I want to begin by drawing our attention to his 1985 film, <*Bombay, Our City*>, which captures a certain (political) ordering of space. Under a program of beautification and urban reorganisation, led by then Municipal Commissioner of Bombay, M. L. Sukhtankar and Police chief Julio Ribeiro, the city administration persecuted a war on slum dwellers, hawkers, rough sleepers and others living in informal housing arrangements (cf. Patwardhan, <*Bombay, Our* *City*>). The antagonistic metaphor is crucial and the message it conveyed (as Sukhtankar makes clear in the film) was unequivocal: You will not be tolerated. Throughout, Patwardhan introduces us to Bombay’s urban elite and middle classes articulating a singular refrain – how can we tolerate them? The smell of filth? The shit? Paranoically, they exclaim: soon enough they will be on our roads! And alongside these remonstrations, bulldozers and police baton-charges demolish slums and brutally attack those living on footpaths and in public spaces. A project of beautification that at once distributes and allocates parts and places, expunging mill workers, daily-wage labourers, construction workers, domestic workers, and the urban poor in general.

Equally, it is a process that orders bodies. A program of eradication that serves to get rid of those polluted bodies – lazy, filthy, good-for-nothing – that are living out of place. In the midst of and all around the arduous and pure bodies of the urban rich. »Why do they continue to live here? «, we hear the urban elite ask in the film – why do they not just work and then leave the city for good. Indeed, why don’t we get them to work and then get rid of them?! These impure and unruly bodies are quite literally out of place. Theirs is the place of no place – neither to be seen or heard – and this non-place is precisely that vast >hinterland< beyond the city boundaries.

Two movements are thus closely intertwined here: spatial and corporeal orders. To beautify the city is at once to institute an order of its proper subject. Following Foucault, we can think this as a certain rationalisation (cf. Dean, <*Governmentality*>, p. 99, Foucault, <*Society Must be Defended*>). One oriented towards the optimisation of life, its schematisation in ways that control and master the movement of bodies, of illnesses and epidemics, of crime and disorder, and of goods and trade (cf. Aslam, <*Architecture as Government*>, p. 166). An architectural biopolitics that seeks to foster and enable movement (that needs this movement), but always only in linear, segmented and tightly-controlled flows. Each movement traverses a border or limit, but any such traverse must be closely choreographed and orchestrated, as one precise part in the whole apparatus. Because free circulation is a threat. Anyone can show up anywhere. Anyone can build a house anywhere (‘they will soon start to build their homes on the road!’, we hear people complain in Patwardhan’s film). An unacceptable messiness that must be ordered and policed. So that people move into the metropolis from the periphery, live in labour camps, work in insecure and precarious jobs, are evicted from labour camps, move to the streets, are evicted from the streets and harassed by a police apparatus until they leave the city. And equally, as they work, these bodies must move in particular ways. File into overcrowded trains and buses, moving one way in the mornings, another in the evenings. No one is supposed to show up out of place – a worker in the factory or mill outside of work hours is anathema.

Yet, this process that seeks to institute that »puritan moral of separation, exclusion and control« (cf. Cruz, <*Two-Way journeys*>, p. 75) is constantly resisted – faces »petty malices« (cf. Foucault, <*Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, p. 159-160 >) – as the mill-workers, slum-dwellers, domestic workers and thousands of others transgress zonal boundaries and act in disorderly and unruly ways. In occupying the Great Eastern textile mill, this is what the workers in another of Patwardhan’s films, <*Occupation: Mill Worker> (1993)*  enact. What are the spaces that energise and make possible such resistances?

The enactment of a dissensual moment where those that are without place – those who are to be only peripheral – seize precisely the sites foreclosed to them (cf. Ranciere, <*The Thinking of Dissensus>*). Against a spatio-corporeal order in which these bodies (mill workers, slum dwellers, hawkers and so on) are interpellated as the impure and out-of-place excess, the performance of resistance in <*Occupation*> enacts a radical reimagination of the body and its emplacement. My discussion here is an attempt – a foray – into exploring the contours and rhythms of these practices of »indocility«. I am after the restless and restive resistance of recalcitrant bodies. Refusing to simply work and leave – »you can keep razing our homes; we will rebuild them, we will not leave« (cf. Patwardhan, <*Bombay, Our City*>). And the rhythms of these offbeat, improper performances resound most clearly in the <*chawl>*.

<*Chawls*> began to built in the city of Bombay from the early 20th Century. In the aftermath of a plague epidemic that saw an efflux of working class communities, successive governments incentivised the construction of chawls as a way to house (and keep tied to the city) the large number of migrant workers working in Bombay’s industries (cf. Pendse et al., <*Overview*>; Adarkar and Menon, <*One hundred years*>). <*Chawls*> are large multi-storey buildings made up of hundreds of tiny one-room apartment blocks. Each room traditionally houses an entire family, and there are no distinctions between kitchen, living room, and bedrooms (bathrooms and toilets are communal, and are usually at one end of every floor). As architect and urban designer Prasad Shetty notes of the chawl:

The [houses] were typically of similar sizes – each one a small room, 8 to 12 feet wide and 10 to 15 feet deep. These were strung along a corridor […] The corridor was the spine of these buildings – popularly called a *chal*. It was a combination of public and private space, connecting the street to the house. (cf. Shetty, <*Ganga Building Chronicles*>).

The <*chawl>* as a site, or as a certain assemblage of spaces is antithetical to a segmented and zonal spatial order. It is constitutively messy, houses overflow into each other, corridors become extensions of the home precisely as they infiltrate into each home. Rigid zones and borders are softened by an ethos of hybridity, juxtaposition and improvisation (cf. Cruz, *Two-Way Journeys*>, p. 75, Cruz, <*Border translations>*, p. 95). The <*chawl>* becomes a porous site, constituted by thresholds across which bodies, things, sounds and gestures move freely. A space of flux and processuality that resists any functional or formal segmentarity in favour of an open-endedness, always open to another addition, another improvisation (cf. Ingold, <*Making*>, p. 25). Of juxtaposition; where several other spaces collapse onto each other (cf. Foucault and Miskowiec, <*Of Other Spaces*>, p. 25-26). Not into a void, but as a sort of unsettling of what (in the order of distribution) is distinct, a disruption and disorderliness (cf. Foucault, <*The Order of Things*>, p. xviii). Home and outdoors, family and neighbour, get blurred in this space that is all at once the storage room, the breezy bedroom on a warm summer night, the communal meeting room, the laundry, the party venue, and everything else.

This messy porosity of the chawl makes possible the performance of radical visions of kinship, care and sociality. In the disordering of the boundaries of the home – indeed, the dissolution of rigid boundaries tout court – we find an extension within which bodies begin to move freely. As Rupali Gupte identifies, »The doors of the houses were always left open through the daytime and the evenings […]. People would move freely through these doors. An ailing couple, which would leave their doors open, would get multiple visitors through the day« (cf. Gupte, <*Chawl as Home*>, ). When strikes at the textile mills were ongoing, Shetty discusses us how, those out of work would receive a steady stream of visitors throughout the day – to keep up spirits, or simply to talk and spend time in the company of each other (cf. Shetty and Gandhi, <*Interview*>). The <*chawl>* here becomes a site of sustenance, holding precisely by holding open. Out of work and out of place bodies – neither to be seen nor heard – begin to speak. To laugh and cry and everything else in the dense sociality made possible in/by the <*chawl*>.

Performances of sociality and care that disrupt, or interject the order of bodies instituted in the programs for urban reorganisation and beautification. Against their imbrication into such an order as the liminal excess, which is to say as only those hands and arms and legs that must work and be discarded, the <*chawl>* makes possible the performance of reimagined modes of subjectivity. Gestures and rhythms which enact an interruption precisely from the messy and porous interstice that is in the breaks and crevices of that subjective order.

Bonnie Honig’s work on the centrality of democratic infrastructures to our thinking about the enactment of democratic politics is particularly relevant here. Building on Honig we can think the <*chawl>* as precisely such a public thing (cf. Honig, <*Public Things>,* ). As architectural object it both shapes and schematises those that live in and walk along it, but precisely through such moulding it becomes that »holding environment« that is the occasion for a pluralising reimagination of subjectivity (cf. Honig, <*Public Things*>, p. 5). The messy spatiality of the <*chawl>* instances and engenders a messy and intertwined corporeality where boundaries of subject/object are disordered by way of that very heterotopia. Becoming, in this way, both the enactment and the spring-board for practices that problematise the Orderly body-schema of the city, by way of opening out onto an infinite (open-ended) topography.

Patwardhan’s <*Occupation: Mill Worker>* brings the kind of reimagination this practice of subjectification entails in sharpest contrast. Confronted by the police, the mill workers say they do not seek to occupy the mill compound. Instead, they want merely to enter the buildings in order to take care of the machines – clean them, spray some oil at the joints. These bodies that were to be nothing other than hand and arms, moving robotically, mechanically, that were nothing other than machines themselves – to be worked and then not tolerated – suddenly interject with a whole other thing. Care – we want to clean the machines. And I want to suggest there is a performance of political resistance here. One that responds to an order of the subject and an order of the city, with an unruly enactment – to be and do and speak out of place. And from this out-of-place, or precisely as being in this out-of-place, a whole different vision of subjectivity to the side, in the surround, is made possible. Yet, such a plural and pluralising gesture is itself made possible, I suggest, by the particular spatiality – more accurately, spatio-corporeality – of the <*chawl>*. In the way the <*chawl>*as space folds together a multiplicity which on the one hand, disrupt the neat lines and boundaries of an order(ing) of the city, and on the other, in such messy interlacings makes possible performances of care and sociality enabling radical visions of subjectivity.

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