

## Does the City Have Speech?

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Speech is a foundational element in theories about democracy and the political. As a concept it has seen both expansions and contractions of its meaning. But it has not yet been expanded to include the concept that the city might have speech, as far as I can tell and others tell me. Arguing, as I do in this essay, that cities have speech, albeit of a very different sort from that of citizens and corporations, is in many ways a question transversal to both the law and urbanism. It is not present in either one of these bodies of scholarship; this is particularly so since I do not confine the notion of speech to that of urban government, nor do I construct the content of the city's speech in the terms provided by the law. Thus this inquiry requires expanding the analytic terrain for examining the concept of each, speech and the city.

Cities are complex systems. But they are incomplete systems. In this incompleteness lies the possibility of making—making the urban, the political, the civic. The city is not alone in having these characteristics, but these characteristics are a necessary part of the DNA of the urban—cityness. Every city is distinct and so is each discipline that studies it. And yet, if it is to be a study of the urban, it will have to deal with these key features: incompleteness, complexity, and the possibility of making. These take on urbanized formats that can vary enormously across time and place.

Given such diversity, urban research need not recognize the distilled, abstract versions of these three core concepts—complexity, incompleteness, and making. Mostly, researchers and interpreters of the urban use or invoke the concepts of their disciplines or their imaginations and the concrete features of the cities they observe. But those three abstract features are present if it is indeed the urban and not simply dense built-up terrain of a single sort—endless rows of housing, or of offices, or of factories. Thus a vast stretch of suburban housing is not a city; it is built-up terrain and so are office parks. If we want to make the concept of the city work analytically, we will have to be conceptually discriminating.

Here I use these features of cities to engage in an experimental search. I will argue that there are events and conditions that tell us something about the capacity of cities to respond systemically—to talk back. Let me offer an initial sketch of what I mean by way of a simple example: a car, built for speed, exits the highway and enters the city. It hits a traffic jam, composed not just of cars but of people bustling around. Suddenly, this car is crippled. Built for speed, its mobility is arrested. The city has spoken.

A first approximation is to think of such speech as an urban capability. The term *capability* is by now well established. But adding *urban* to this term is unusual. I introduce it to capture an elusive mix of space, people, and particular activities, especially commerce and the civic. This term captures the social and material physics of the city. Understood this way, the notion of urban capability functions as an analytic borderland—neither simply urban space nor simply people (see Sassen 2008, chap. 8). It is their combination under specific conditions, in thick settings, confronting particular potentials and particular assaults that can generate speech. These urban capabilities become visible in a range of situations and forms. In this becoming visible they become a form of speech.

It is impossible to do full justice to all the aspects of this process in such a short essay; here I limit myself to the basic building blocks of the argument. One is the city as a complex and incomplete system that enables making and has given cities their long life; the combination of these two features has allowed cities to outlive systems that are more powerful but also more formal and closed—national states, kingdoms, financial firms. The other is the mix of diverse urban capabilities that can be conceived of as speech acts and in turn signal the larger notion that cities have speech, albeit informal and mostly unrecognized as such.

The substantive rationality underlying this inquiry about the city and speech rests on two matters. One is the fact that the city is still a key space for the material practices of freedom, including its anarchies and contradictions, and a space where the powerless can make speech, presence, a politics. The other is that these features of cities are under threat by a range of acute processes that deurbanize cities, no matter how dense and urban they may look; these threats include extreme forms of inequality and privatization, new types of urban violence, asymmetric war, and massive surveillance systems.

But to see this takes time listening to, and perhaps understanding, the speech of the city, and we may well have forgotten how to listen, let alone understand. In what follows I explore some of the speech acts of the city.<sup>1</sup>

1. I use *speech* in the abstract sense of the law, as in, for instance, the way corporations have speech as articulated by the Supreme Court in 2010 in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*,

### Analytic Tactics

When doing this type of experimental rumination, I find myself needing the freedom to engage in what I think of as analytic tactics. Method is too confining. One of these tactics is to operate in the shadow of powerful explanations. Powerful explanations are to be taken seriously, but they are dangerous. My first move is to ask what such an explanation obscures precisely, because it sheds such a powerful light on some aspects of a question. In exploring the notion that cities have speech, I cannot stay with the powerful explanations that tell us what a city is. The city's speech happens in an in-between zone: it is not quite simply the city as material and social order. It is an elusive urban capability—not fully material, not fully visible.

A second analytic tactic, partly arising from the first, is the need actively to destabilize stabilized meanings. Such destabilizing allows me to see or understand that which is not contained in the main narratives that explain an epoch or organize a field of scholarship, and we need to do this especially at a time of rapid transformations.

Thus the notion itself that the city has speech entails destabilizing the notion that the city is a self-evident condition marked by density, materiality, and crowds and their multiple interactions. The overwhelming facticity of the city needs to be destabilized. I am interested in recovering the possibility that the interactive deployment of people, firms, infrastructures, buildings, projects, imaginaries, and more, over a confined terrain, produces something akin to speech: resistances, enhanced potentials, in short, that the city talks back.

### Complexity and Incompleteness: The Possibility of Making

Cities are one of the key sites where new norms and identities are made. They have been such sites at various times and in various places and under very diverse conditions. Thus even as cities have long been home to racisms, religious hatreds, expulsions of the poor, they have historically evinced a capacity to triage conflict through commerce and civic activity. This contrasts with the history of the modern national state, which historically has tended to militarize conflict.

The conditions that enable cities to make norms and identities and to transform conflicts into a strengthened civiness vary across time and place.

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which upheld the rights of corporations to make political expenditures under the First Amendment right of free speech. Cities, like corporations, do not speak in the human voice; they speak in their voice.

Epochal change, as in our shift to the global, is often a source of new types of urban capabilities. Today, given globalization and digitization—and all the specific elements they entail—many of these conditions have once again undergone change. Globalization and digitization produce dislocations and destabilizations of existing institutional orders that go well beyond cities. But the disproportionate concentration and acuteness of these new dynamics in cities, especially in global cities, forces the need to craft new types of responses and innovations, especially on the part of both the most powerful and the most disadvantaged, albeit for very different reasons.

Some of these norms and identities justify extreme power and inequality. Some reflect innovation under duress: notably much of what happens in immigrant neighborhoods or in the slums of megacities. While the strategic transformations assume sharp forms and are concentrated in global cities, many are also enacted (besides being diffused) in cities that are not centers of power and extreme inequalities.

Cities are not always the key sites for the making of new norms and identities or institutional innovations generally. For example, in Europe and much of the Western Hemisphere, from the 1930s up until the 1970s, the factory and the government were the strategic sites for innovation through the social contract and the enablement of a prosperous working and middle class based on mass manufacturing and mass consumption. My own reading of the Fordist city corresponds in many ways to Max Weber's notion that the modern city is not a space of innovation, unlike the medieval cities of Europe. The strategic scale under Fordism is the national scale, in which cities lose significance. But I part company from Weber in that historically the large Fordist factory and the mines were sites of innovation: the making of a modern working class and a syndicalist project. In short, it is not always the city that is the site for making norms and identities.

In our global era, cities have emerged once again as strategic sites for cultural and institutional change. The conditions that today make some cities strategic sites are basically two, and both capture major transformations that destabilize older systems organizing territory and politics. One of these is the rescaling of the strategic territories that articulate the new politico-economic system and hence at least some features of power. The other is the weakening of the national as container of social process due to the variety of dynamics encompassed by globalization and digitization. The consequences for cities of these two conditions are many; what matters here is that cities emerge as strategic sites for major economic processes and for new types of political actors, including nonurban processes and actors.

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A distinction that matters for my examination is between ritualized spaces we recognize as such and spaces either that are not ritualized or that we fail to recognize as such. Much of what we experience as urbanity in our Western European tradition is a set of practices and conditions that have gone through a refining and a ritualizing over time and across space. Thus, in our partly imagined European tradition, the passeggiata is not just any walk, and the piazza is not just any square. Both have embedded genealogies of meaning and ritual, and both contribute to the constituting of a public domain via ritualization.

Across time and space also, history has given us glimpses of a very different type of space, one that is less ritualized and with few, if any, embedded codes. It is a space for making by those who lack access to established instrumentalities. I have been working at a conceptual recovery of this type of space and have called it the "global street" (Sassen 2011). This is a space with few, if any, of the ritualized practices or codes that the larger society might recognize. It is rough, easily seen as "uncivilized."

The city, and especially the street, is a space where the powerless can make history, in ways they cannot in rural areas. That is not to say that it is the only space, but it is certainly a critical one. Becoming present, visible, to each other can alter the character of powerlessness. This allows me to make a distinction between different types of powerlessness (Sassen 2008, chaps. 6 and 8). Powerlessness is not simply an absolute status that can be flattened into the absence of power. Under certain conditions, powerlessness can become complex, by which I mean that it contains the possibility of making the political, the civic, a history. This brings to the fore the fact of a difference between powerlessness and invisibility/impotence. Many of the protest movements we have seen in the Middle East and North Africa, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere are a case in point: these protesters may not have gained power; they are still powerless, but they are making a history and a politics.

This leads me to a second distinction, which contains a critique of the common notion that if something good happens to the powerless, it signals empowerment. Recognizing that powerlessness can become complex makes conceptual room for the proposition that the powerless can make history, even if they do not become empowered, and that thereby their work is consequential even if it does not become visible promptly and can indeed take generations. Elsewhere (Sassen 2008, chaps. 2, 3, and 6) I have interpreted several historiographies as indicating that the temporal frame of the histories made by the powerless tends to be much longer than the histories made by those with power.

### Urban Capabilities: They Precede Speech and Make It Legible

If the city has speech, what might it look or sound like? What language does it speak? How does it become legible to us who speak another language and whose voice is at best a cacophony?

A first, little step is to posit that the city's speech is a capability to alter, to shape, to provoke, to invite, all following a logic that aims at enhancing or protecting the city's complexity and its incompleteness. Let me elaborate on this in a somewhat exaggerated way for the sake of clarity and argue that focusing only on the facticity of the city is not enough to understand the question of whether the city has speech.

The question of speech cannot be reduced to that facticity even as it requires recognition and an analytic awakening of that facticity. That is to say, we have flattened the facticity of the city, when we should make visible its differentiations so that it can work analytically. Such flattening does not help us see how this facticity interacts with people's actions or that there is a making here, a collective making between urban space and people. For instance, rush hour in the city is a process where we bump into one another, rip off a button here and there, step on one another's feet. Yet we know none of these actions are personal in the city's center at rush hour, unlike the neighborhood, where they would all be provocations.

What makes this possible is a tacit code embedded in this type of time/space—not place per se, but the space that is constituted by people in the city center during rush hour. We need to name this capability that is a collective production emerging out of an intersection of time/space/people/routinized practices. I think of this as an urban capability—urban centrality is made through built environments, people's routinized practices, and an embedded and shared code. It enables a series of complex interactions and sequences and, in so doing, mobilizes a specific meaning.

Not just the outcome but the work itself of making the public and making the political in urban space is constitutive of cityness. In cities we can see the making of new subjects and identities that would not be possible in, for example, rural areas or a country at large. There is a kind of public-making work that can disrupt established narratives and thereby make legible the local and the silenced even in visual orders that seek to cleanse urban space. One example is the early high-end gentrification in Manhattan—a whole new visual order that could not, for a while, render invisible the homeless it had produced. A second example is the immigrant street vendor on Wall Street catering to the high-level financier in a rush, altering the visual corporate landscape with the robust smell of roasted sausages. I see in



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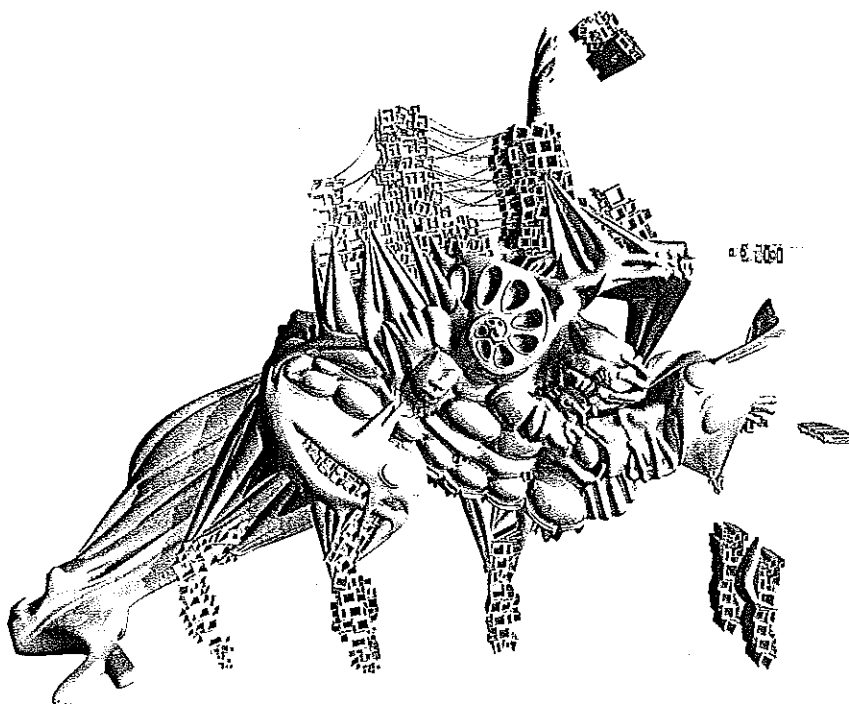


Figure 1 Hilary Koob-Sassen, "Speech Acts of a Different Sort" (still, video, Venice Architecture Biennale 2012)

these examples the city talking back, altering the outcome sought with elegant visual orders. At the other extreme, a city's sociality can bring out and underline the urbanity of subject and setting and dilute more local or more essentialist signifiers; the need for new solidarities when cities confront major challenges can bring this shift about.

In my research, I find that key components of cityness have been crafted out of the hard work of going beyond the conflicts and racisms that might mark an epoch (Sassen 2008, chap. 6). It is out of this type of dialectic that came the open urbanity that historically made European cities spaces for expanded citizenship. More generally, movements that comprise disparate groups with a variety of grievances can coalesce no matter how diverse their politics. The actual lived interdependence of daily life in a city enables such coalescing—if water, electricity, or transport fails in a city, it affects all regardless of their social or political differences. Such a coalescing would be unlikely and unnecessary in national political space given less mutual interdependence/dependence and generally in a

more abstract space. These partial orderings we see in cities can add to the DNA of the city's civiness: they feed the making of an *urban* subject, rather than a religious or ethnic or class-based subject. These are among the features that make cities a space of great complexity and diversity.

Large cities at the intersection of vast migrations and expulsions often were and are spaces with the capacity to accommodate enormous diversity of groups. And such accommodating is often the work of further developing cityness—either this or spatial segregations that deurbanize a city. It is worth noting that when it all succeeds, such cities actually enable a kind of peaceful coexistence for long stretches of time. Coexistence does not mean equality and mutual respect: my concern here is with built-in features and constraints in cities that produce such a capacity for interdependence even if there are major differences in religion, politics, class, and more. I am thinking here of urban capabilities more akin to infrastructural or subterranean capacities whose outcomes are partly shaped by the necessity of maintaining a complex system marked by enormous diversities and by incompleteness. This gives cities speech.

Perhaps the most familiar and clearest instances are periods of peaceful coexistence in cities with sharp religious differences; these make visible that conflict does not necessarily inhere in such differences. And it is not only the famous cases of Augsburg and Moorish Spain, with their much-admired coexistence of very diverse religions, collective prosperity, and enlightened leaderships. It is also Old Jerusalem's bazaar as a space of commercial and religious coexistence across centuries. Baghdad was a flourishing polyreligious city under the Abbasid caliphs, around the year 800, and even under Saddam Hussein's extremely brutal leadership was a city where religious minorities, such as Christian and Jewish communities, often centuries old, lived in relative peace.

But history also shows us that this is a capability that can be destroyed and has often been destroyed. The destruction has inevitably brought with it a deurbanizing and ghettoizing of urban space. Thus, in sharp contrast with that older period, Baghdad is today a city where ethnic cleansing and intolerance are the de facto "regime," one catapulted by the disastrous and unwarranted US invasion. These and so many other historical cases show that a particular exogenous, indeed a deurbanizing, event can suddenly reposition religious or ethnic difference as agents for conflict. The same individuals can experience and enact that switch. The systemic logic in Hussein's Baghdad was of indifference to minorities like Christians and Jews; it was not a question of tolerance by residents or an enlightened leadership.

Systemic indifference, I would argue, can in many cases function as a kind of

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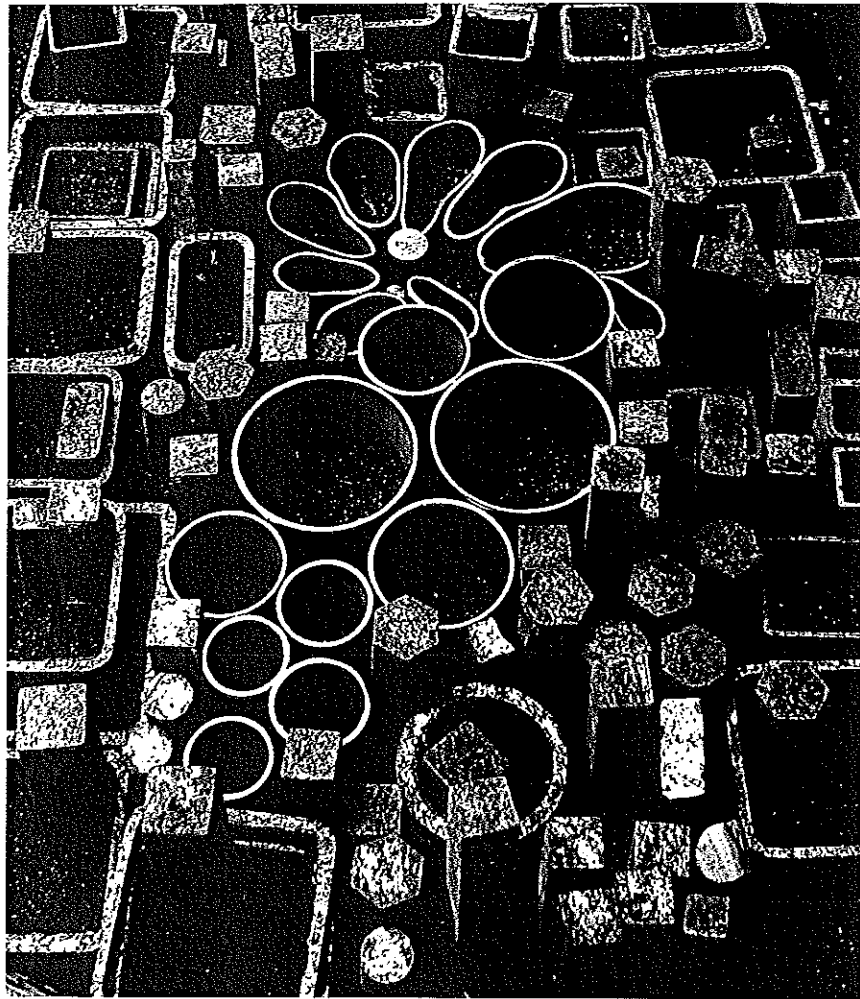


subterranean urban capability at work: a civiness that does not depend on tolerant citizens and enlightened leaders but is an outcome of interdependencies and interactions in the physical and economic life of the city. Conversely, its breakdown becomes visible as collapse into lethal conflicts and ethnic cleansings that deurbanize the city and savage that urban capability.

Versions of urban capabilities can be found in a series of cases, some more elusive than others. One of these concerns the question of repetition, a basic feature of the built environment of cities and generally of our economic and technical worlds. Yet, in the city, repetition becomes the active making of multiplication and iteration. Further, urban settings actually unsettle the meaning of repetition.

There is plenty of repetition in any city, but it keeps being captured by the specifics, the conditionalities, across different urban spaces. A bus, a telephone booth, an apartment or office building, even if standardized throughout much of a city, will take on diverse meanings and utilities across the diverse types of spaces of a city. It makes visible how the diversity of urban environments re-marks even the most standardized item and makes it part of that neighborhood, that public space, that city center. On a more complex level, neighborhoods in the same city can exude very different auras, sounds, smells, choreographies of how people move through that neighborhood, and who is welcome and who is not. In short, repetition in a city can be quite different from mechanical repetition as in an assembly line or the reproduction of a graphic. I want to take it a step further and posit that we see in these instances a capacity that I would like to see as speech.

A more elusive form of speech is the making of presence. In my own work I have developed notions of "making presence" to rescue an actor, an event, from the silence of absence, invisibility, the virtual/representational eviction from membership in the city. I am especially interested in understanding how groups and "projects" at risk of invisibility due to societal prejudices and fears become present to themselves, to others like themselves, and to others unlike themselves. What I seek to capture is a very specific feature. It is the possibility of making presence where there is silence and absence. A variant of such making of presence is the *terrain vague*, an underutilized or abandoned space that lies forgotten among massive structures and construction projects. It is not unique to today's period—under other arrangements, and with variable particularities, it also existed in the past. I think that this elusive in-between space is essential to the experience of urban living and that it lends legibility to transitions and the uneasiness of specific spatial configurations. We can find the *terrain vague* in even the densest city. With its visual marking as underutilized space, these spaces are often charged with memories of other visual orders, with presences of the past, thereby unsettling their



**Figure 2** Hillary Koob-Sassen, "Subterranean Shapes"  
(still, video, Venice Architecture Biennale 2012)

current meaning as underutilized space. They are thus charged precisely because they are underutilized. As memories, these spaces become part of the "interiority" of the city, the city's present, but it is the making of an interiority that is outside the dominant profit-driven utility logics and their spatial framings. They are the vacant grounds that enable residents who feel bypassed by their city to connect

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with it via memory at a time of rapid changes—an empty space that can be filled with memories. And it is where activists and artists find a space for their projects. This is a making of presence that is an act of speech.

**Does the City  
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### **Deurbanizing Forces**

Given their complexity and incompleteness, cities have historically evinced a capacity to survive upheavals, in part by talking back and constraining deurbanizing tendencies. But they never succeed fully. Power, whether in the form of elites, government policies, or innovations in built environments, can override the speech of the city. We see this in the development of megabuildings, highways running through the city, extreme high-income gentrification that privatizes urban space, the proliferation of vast concentrations of poor-quality high-rise residential buildings without commercial centers and workplaces, and more. All of these are among current deurbanizing trends.

Ours is a time when stabilized meanings have become unstable. The large complex city with all its diversities is a new frontier zone. This is especially true if it is a global city, defined by its partial shaping within a network of other cities across borders. Actors from different worlds meet there, but without clear rules of engagement. Where the historic frontier was in the far stretches of colonial empires, today it lies in our large complex cities. For instance, much of the work by global firms to push for deregulation, privatization, and new fiscal and monetary policies took shape and has become concrete in global cities. It is how global firms construct their equivalent of the old military fort of the historic frontier: their network of forts is the regulatory environment they need in city after city worldwide to ensure a global space of operations (Sassen 2008, chap. 5). This is a formidable onslaught on the city and its capabilities to ensure cityness.

In my research on our current period (Sassen, forthcoming), I have examined especially three types of developments that can deurbanize the city. One is the sharp growth in inequalities of diverse sorts that can lead to radical expulsions—from homes and neighborhoods, from middle-class lifestyles. These trends take particularly acute and visible shapes in cities, with their expanded luxury spaces and poverty spaces. A second is the building of whole new cities, including intelligent cities often built as a business for profit; there are well over six hundred cities either under construction or in the planning stage. A particular concern is the extreme use of closed intelligent systems to control whole buildings. Given the accelerated rate of obsolescence of technologies, this may well shorten the life of vast stretches of such new cities. One challenge, in my view, is the need to

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urbanize these technologies so that they might contribute to the urbanity of those areas. The third project concerns the large-scale surveillance system now being developed cooperatively by several countries, notably the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. I turn to this third aspect with some detail below.

In July 2010, the *Washington Post* published the findings of a two-year investigation, "Top Secret America," in three parts (Priest and Arkin 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Constituting this "top secret America" are 1,271 government organizations and 1,931 private companies, collectively employing an estimated 854,000 people with top secret security clearance—nearly 1.5 times as many people as live in Washington, D.C.—including 265,000 private contractors (Priest and Arkin 2010a). They work on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security, and intelligence. There are about ten thousand locations where this work is conducted across the United States. Of these buildings, four thousand are in the Washington, D.C., area, occupying 17 million square feet—the equivalent of almost three Pentagons or twenty-two US Capitol buildings (Priest and Arkin 2010a).

Housed in these buildings are powerful computers that collect vast amounts of information from wiretaps, satellites, and other surveillance equipment monitoring people and places both within and outside of US national territory. Each day the National Security Agency alone intercepts and stores 1.7 billion e-mails, instant messages, IP addresses, telephone calls, and other bits of communications, a small proportion of which is sorted and stored on seventy different databases (Priest and Arkin 2010a, 2010c). Some of this information will make it into the tens of thousands of top secret reports produced by analysts each year, but only a handful of individuals have access to all of them, and the volume is so great that many go unread (Priest and Arkin 2010a, 2010c).

This surveillance apparatus is there for our "security." For our security we are all under surveillance; that is to say, we are all constructed as suspects, for our security. It does lead me to ask: under these conditions, who are we, the citizens—the new colonials?

Cities, with their diversities and anarchies, with their built-in capabilities to contest deurbanizing trends, become a strategic space to contest reducing us all to suspects. The city is one place where a kind of structural convergence could develop beneath visible familiar separateness and racisms and work itself into the social level and bring together people from very different communities to contest overwhelming surveillance. This potential does not fall ready-made from the sky—it needs to be made with hard work. But diverse complex cities are one key site for such making.

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## Conclusion

Why does it matter that we recognize the fact of urban capabilities and the possibility that this might be a mode of speech, with all the weight this concept evokes? It matters because these capabilities are systemic properties that aim at securing cityness, that is to say a complex space that thrives on diversities and tends to triage conflict into a strengthened civicness. Further, such capabilities get constituted as hybrids—mixes of the material and social physics of a city. This interdependence entails a continuous transformation of both the material and the social, with periods of stability and continuity and periods of upheaval, as is the current one that took off in the 1980s.

The project is not about anthropomorphizing the city. It is about understanding a systemic dynamic that has the capacity to contest what is destructive to its DNA—to repeat, a DNA that is conducive to cityness and its diversities. At the limit, the city allows the powerless to make a history, thereby producing a critical difference—between mere powerlessness and complex powerlessness where the making of presence and of a history come into play.

But there are limits to the city's capabilities, and historically we see both the capacity of cities to outlive other more formal closed and rigid systems and powerful forces that deurbanize cities. Among these deurbanizing forces in the current period are extreme forms of inequality, the privatizing of urban space with its diverse expulsions, and the rapid expansion of massive surveillance of citizens in the most "advanced" democracies across the world. These forces silence the speech of the city and destroy urban capabilities.

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