

Interview



Of singularities and new spatialities: An interview with Tariq Jazeel

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Introduction by Laleh Foroughanfar

Urban theory often commences within familiar places: canonical texts, established frameworks, and long-standing conversations, grounded in Euro-American experiences, about what cities are and how they should be understood. But what happens when we start somewhere else? When we allow theory to emerge from multiple, diverse “elsewheres”? Elsewheres with singularities and from contexts usually treated as empirical illustrations rather than conceptual starting points?

On a bright and sunny afternoon in May 2025, I engaged in a stimulating conversation with Professor Tariq Jazeel, discussing how to approach the important task of decolonizing geographical knowledge by using methodological and theoretical strategies that can be mobilized towards particularities and singularities. Jazeel invites us to first rethink the very terrain of “theory”, as theory does not reside only in formal academic arguments. It unfolds in narratives—on the page of a novel, in the cadence of documentary testimony, or in the poetics of everyday life. These forms of theory are neither merely supplementary nor data. They are knowledge-bearing in themselves, revealing how people experience, remember, contest, and imagine places. They reveal the city not as an abstract object but as a lived, relational, sensorial world.

This becomes particularly vivid in post-colonial geographies, where relational and mobile imaginaries shape how people understand and inhabit urban spaces. Post-colonial cities such as London and Malmö are palimpsests of imperial, colonial, and post-colonial histories. Their everyday spaces carry the traces of these histories, yet their representations often erase the relational geographies that make these cities what they are. Their literature, films, and musical cultures carry the testimonies of migration and displacement, or the everyday ways people rework a city that was never fully built for them. Even moments of improvisation—dancing to music you do not yet know, hybrid music scenes, multilingual street cultures, inventing a rhythm as you go—speak to creative practices that produce new urban spatialities and enact forms of conviviality that complicate dominant narratives about belonging, difference, and urban identity. It is precisely here that the spatial politics of representation come into view. Who gets to represent the city, and through which mediums? Whose experiences become legible as knowledge?

This interview invites the reader to treat such narratives not as background or marginal text, but as methodological and theoretical strategies, contextualized historically, socially, and culturally. This is a call for new ways of learning and, equally, ways of unlearning the theoretical orthodoxies that shape how we see and study the urban. As European cities face rising white supremacist, right-wing politics and polarized debates over migration, examining forms of aesthetic cultural production and *new spatialities* in relation to the emergence of urban racialization, exclusion, and erasure becomes increasingly urgent.

Interview transcript (edited)

LF: I would like to begin this conversation by posing the first question about the urban.

How would you define “the urban”?

TJ: Well, firstly, thank you for having me here and doing a rooftop interview with me. It's very lovely to be here. I guess I would probably want to sidestep the question of defining the urban, or sidestep the task of defining the urban. I don't really see that as something that is my role or something I can do. I'm not, and I wouldn't call myself an urban studies scholar. Actually, I work, I guess, more closely in the fields of cultural geography and cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and South Asian studies. However, the urban is something with which I engage. In other words, issues to do with the city, or forms of culture that emerge in the city, are very much a part of my work. So I think I'm interested in the ways that those forms of culture with which I engage are perhaps of the urban, but not necessarily urban per se. So, I would probably want to sidestep the task of having to define the urban. And actually, I think that's something that a certain kind of indifference to the urban can also be productive, I think, in the context of urban studies scholarship more generally, actually, because there are so many forms of culture, so many forms of life, and so many forms of spatiality that cut across cities and rural spaces, the urban, the not urban, etc.

LF: How can—and how should—we come to know the urban, particularly in light of your critique of “methodological urbanization”? And how does this critique relate to concepts such as “the city” and “cityness”?

TJ: I think one of the ways that I've in my work tried to think about cityness is to think about cityness as a kind of spatial categorization, a kind of textual approach to thinking about the city. So, in other words, whilst not denying the political, economic realities of urban life and the city. I would also want to argue that the city is a spatial category. It's a particular kind of geographical imagination. And that has implications, I think, for the ways that we might think about how cityness becomes... or the city becomes, in some senses, over-determined as the spatial objects that we can't help but always find when we work within this complex of urban studies. But also it might lead us to thinking about the ways that cityness is a geographical imagination that can also be a form of governance, right? It also has particular kinds of effects in spaces or settlements, right, in particular kinds of ways, and it can be exercised as a form of power as well.

LF: Taking into account the importance of historical difference—as you argue in your work—how can specific processes be incorporated into a broader conceptual framework that acknowledges singularities, particularities, and generalities?

TJ: Through my work, you're absolutely right, I've been very interested in historical difference, so the importance and the hard work that's required to track and trace and do one's homework on the forms of historical difference that we can learn about and do research on in any place on which we work. My long-term engagement with Sri Lanka, for example, has been about trying as best I can to get to know that place and that context and the things on which I work. So insofar as there are particular, I guess, theoretical concerns that underpin my work, they're about trying to find ways of engaging with particular kinds of places and particular social and spatial formations, how one historicizes them. Always historicize, I think, is something I would say is hugely important

to the work we do, particularly those of us who work on various places in the so-called global South.

I'm not sure that those singularities necessarily need to, insofar as if our concern is about the politics of particular places and communities, we need to engage with those particular concerns, those particularities, right? When we work in the space of the Euro-American University, we're speaking to— particularly within, I guess, urban studies or geography departments— we are speaking to people with myriad different empirical concerns around the world. And we need to be able to make sense of each other's particular and ongoing research projects. So we need common languages of discussion and communication. I guess that raises the question of theory and theorization. But I would also say that theorization becomes important for me strategically insofar as it can, how does theory help you to engage with the problems in place on which you're working, right, or on particular communities with whom you're working. How does theory help you in that task? You know, what's the so-what of the theoretical endeavors that one is engaged with.

LF: From where can we theorize the urban? Could you explain how the invention of “new languages”—a theme central to your thinking—might contribute to the task of theorizing the urban from multiple, diverse *elsewheres*?

TJ: I think theorization is an inherently creative process, or it should be an inherently creative process, insofar as if we're looking for explanations of the places on which we're working and explanations of the way the world works, then we need creative forms of intervention, creative forms of giving expression to and bringing into representation those things that we find out through the process of our research. So yeah, I absolutely think that new languages, new categorizations, new neologisms even, might be a necessary part of theorization. But not necessarily a theory for the sake of theory. As I said, we, I think what we're interested in is perspectives that help us unlock particular problems that might be grounded in place and might be relevant to and for particular communities who've struggled with those problems. Right? So, yes, creativity, I think, is a part of that process. I guess I would add to that that, you know, another question, which is really about what it is that we mean when we mobilize this word “theory”, right? What is it that the theoretical text has that is necessarily different from the empirical text or from empirical data, right? So, what do we mean when we talk about theory? Actually, what exactly are we mobilizing when we talk about theory? And I think we can find theory, if we want to use that word, in many, many different places, in narrative form, in literary fiction, in documentary form, for example, absolutely in poetics as well, right?

LF: How can we understand theory as a form of knowledge production, and what role do empirical case studies from the global South play in relation to theory?

TJ: I think theory is knowledge production, right? I guess one thing I worry about is this tendency to treat global South contexts as empirical data for a set of theorizations that take place predominantly in the Euro-American knowledge production, read: university, complex, right? So again, I would come back to what I just said about, you know, what do we mean by this notion of theory, right? So when we're thinking about narratives that we might pick up in ethnographic field work, in archival research, why are these narratives

not considered forms of knowledge production in and of themselves? Why are they not considered forms of theorization about the city, the spatial settlement, or whatever, themselves? Right? I think I would want to ask those kinds of questions. What can that so-called data tell us about how to think about place?

LF: Do you consider the concept of “global South urbanisms” to be useful?

TJ: I can be, sometimes, quite uneasy about this notion of the global South, or the global South as an ontological position, because I think there are, of course, myriad and many different global Souths. And as someone who works in South Asia, particularly on Sri Lanka and in parts of southern India, I would claim to know a little bit about those contexts, emphasis on *a little bit*, but I wouldn't want to set myself up as someone who speaks on behalf of the global South, right? So, the global South is an uneasy category for me. Nonetheless, it is a category, and I think it can sometimes be useful as a sort of strategic essentialism, sometimes, a term that can precipitate kinds of solidarities and transnational and trans-oceanic connections that we might want to think about and mobilize and bring into representation in the face of colonial histories, actually. So I'm uneasy about the category, but I do also think that it does have some value in terms of the way it can be mobilized strategically at specific points. I think sometimes one would want to think about the global South as perhaps valuable as a strategic essentialism, sometimes, but at the same time, I can be quite uneasy about, you know, wearing that burden of representation of speaking *for* the global South, which is absolutely a position I refuse.

LF: Considering forms of “southness” in “northern” contexts, how can the so-called global South manifest within cities of the global North or the “West”?

TJ: I think that's absolutely central to some of the things I've been concerned with in my own work. So in my last book, the book on post-colonialism, the front cover of that book actually is a picture taken from my grandmother's family archives, and it's a photograph of my grandmother and my aunt. My aunt, actually, who ended up living in Copenhagen, here in Scandinavia. It's a photograph of both of them standing outside a polling station in London dressed in their saris, their best saris, having voted for the first time in 1951, I think it was, standing there proudly. And I chose that photograph because it really seemed, to me, to speak to some of the things that really interested me about the way that the Empire, the British Empire, was always in here, like when I say in here, I mean for me, in London, it was proximate, close to us. And you know, my mum, for example, growing up in Sri Lanka, and my grandmother and aunts, growing up in Sri Lanka – I think they always considered, in some sense, London to be their capital city. So, there's an inherent sense of relationality and mobility in their geographical imaginations, which I've wanted to, I think, bring into representation in some of my own work on post-colonial geographies, right? These relational spatialities are key to the geography of empire and the geographies of post-coloniality. And they're inherent to and a crucial part of a city like London today, a city like Malmö as well, a city like Copenhagen, right? These places would not be the cities they are, London would not be London, were it not for its rich imperial, colonial, and post-colonial history, right? And many of those forms of aesthetic cultural production, like literature, film, art, music, I'm profoundly interested in precisely because

they provide documents and testimonies to that immigrant experience that is key, I think, to understanding a city like London, as I'm sure it is also to understanding a city like Malmö.

The project that I'm working on at the moment is really, I'm trying to write a history of British Asian dance music, or what became known in the 1990s in the UK as the Asian underground scene, music scene, if you like, or new Asian cool. And this was a form of music and a form of club culture that I grew up with. So in the mid-1990s, this was the kind of music that was really important to me. It was a club scene that I participated in. And one of the reasons it became really important to me as a young, British-born South Asian, was that this, in many senses, was the first time that people of my generation, people who were born in Britain, but had parents from South Asia, the first time that they were bringing themselves into representation in public culture and producing a form of cultural production, a form of music, that was avant-garde, that was trendy and was also somehow "cool". And this was really important at the time, because I think up to that point, the ways that British South Asians had been represented in public culture in the UK had mainly been as objects of fetish and exoticization, or the butt of jokes, right, or racial stereotypes and jokes. So this was, I think, the first time that British South Asians were beginning to bring themselves into representation in public culture on their own terms. And what really interests me about this particular kind of music and this music scene was the way, incrementally, it created space within the national polity for British South Asians to come into visibility, to become part of the national narrative, to become part of the national polity and the national story. And what I think is really interesting is the effects that the music had on changing and opening and unfolding what the perceptions were of what Britishness was. So, Britishness becomes something that is a little less white, that can have the ability to include some of its South Asian post-colonial immigrants, right? And this becomes a really important moment, I think, between around 1996 and 2003 when this music, the Asian underground music scene, begins to create spaces, first in clubs in London, in East London and North London predominantly, that then proliferate into the music charts, the national charts, and then, I guess, a more national sense that British South Asian music culture, and British South Asian culture generally, is something that Britain can export to the world, that it can be proud of, right? And this is congruent with the moment where Tony Blair's New Labour government gets elected to power in 1997, so it's congruent with this notion of "cool" Britannia that the New Labour government wanted to promulgate. And I'm really interested in really just sort of writing this history, which is about, as I've said, to come back to your question, it's about the production of new kinds of spatialities for British South Asian belonging, both, I guess, initially in underground spaces, in clubs and dingy back rooms of pubs and clubs, etc., through to then more public visibility, or publicly visible spaces and the national charts and the national narrative, subsequently.

LF: How can we understand the cultural moments you refer to within broader urban processes? How does the spatial production of culture influence a city's livability?

TJ: I think one of the things I would like to talk about in this respect is culture and histories of conviviality, so the bringing together of maybe previously these figures and

communities in these club spaces, in spaces of leisure. Bringing together people from different backgrounds and different positions in music and in sounds. And the forms of conviviality that are produced there. The forms of everyday, of multiculture, of kind of rubbing along, together, with difference. Of working it out, that happens through these moments. I think that the music powerfully articulates these kinds of moments, the historical conjunctions that I have spoken about with respect to this project. So the mid-90s and the mid 2000s, characterized not only by the music, but also by forms of TV, and TV comedy in particular. There is a particular program on UK television, a comedy sketch that was named “Goodness Gracious Me” which made everybody laugh. And it was a group of British South Asian comedians who were doing a hell of a lot of sketches and comedies that played on racial stereotypes and forms of racism of the time. It made people laugh, and I think there is something political in that laugh, at the laughing together at the stereotypes, at the ridiculous stereotypes. It was a sort of powerful convivial moment, and the fact that we all sort of thought that we were all watching these things at the same time. This is similar to the conviviality of being in the club space together, and dancing to music that you don’t know how to dance to properly, but you work it out. And you are doing something very different; these are forms of popular culture that I think produced social and cultural newness, that produced what Stuart Hall referred to as *new ethnicities*. Those are the kinds of things I am interested in. As a geographer, I am also interested in these *new spatialities* that came along with the new ethnicities, the emergent forms of space and culture. And that we can track by doing this historical work.

LF: Which forgotten or lesser-known theories from the global South—and beyond—can help us advance anti-colonial and anti-capitalist critique when we try to understand the urban condition?

TJ: That is a really difficult question, I think. Because I have people whose writings, and other forms of dissemination, are really important to me with respect to the work that I do. I don’t want to be prescriptive about what everyone should read. But I think that people who work on places, in the so-called notion of the global South, wherever that might be for them, would know the answer intuitively. They would know the answer to that question because that is the point of doing your homework: when you get to know the important voices with respect to the particular context of your topic.

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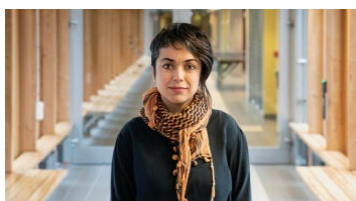
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Tariq Jazeel teaches at University College London in the UK. He is Professor of Human Geography, founding co-Director of UCL's Centre for the Study of South Asia and the Indian Ocean World, and Faculty Fellow as well as former co-Director of the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Racism and Racialisation. His research is positioned at the intersection of Postcolonial and Cultural Studies, Critical Geography, and South Asian Studies. He has written broadly on the spatial politics of culture, as well as on the politics of geographical knowledge production, particularly with respect to urban imaginations and theorizations.



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Laleh Foroughanfar is a researcher at Institute for Urban Studies at Malmö University. She holds a PhD (2022) from Lund University School of Architecture. Her research focuses on urban marginalization, otherwise architecture, and socio-materiality and temporalities of everyday life. Her PhD thesis, entitled *The Street of Associations: Migration and Infrastructural (Re)Production of Norra Grängesbergsgatan, Malmö*, explores the transformation of a post-industrial working-class street, emerging from the intersection of de-industrialization, global migration, and urban marginalization in Malmö. Based on a combination of ethnographic and architectural methods, mapping the in-situ conditions, the thesis elucidates how migrants have (re)produced infrastructures in support of their aspirations to remain in the street; how migrants negotiate their right to difference and their right to the city. The thesis argues that *other* ways of city-making require a revision of the value systems guiding planning institutions, which engage with multiple voices and subjectivities in the pursuit of co-production and co-habitation.