

## Cultural Relations Collection

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# The importance of the everyday: endotic cultural relations in Cape Town, Rome and Guangzhou

Will Haynes

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# Foreword

Over the past year we have come to understand more clearly than ever the value of cultural relations and connection generally. If the world is to face and overcome the challenges of the future in a co-operative and collaborative manner, then cultural relations has a vital role to play.

The British Council's responsibility is to create the person-to-person connections that build trust and enable collaboration across national borders. Coming at the same time as a global pandemic, the United Kingdom's new post-EU status means we have a particular responsibility to use all the tools of international engagement wisely. Last year, like everyone else, the British Council faced some very big challenges. We're now in the process of looking closely at ourselves to make sure we're fit for the future.

The pandemic has shown us how much cultural exchange can take place digitally, and the expansion of our digital services, already under way, will only accelerate. In everything that we do, our values and the values that the UK seeks to promote around the world will be paramount.

It is essential to underpin the many and various activities of the British Council with a body of academic thinking about and around the subject of cultural relations. This essay collection is a showcase of both the quality of that thinking and the breadth of activities that come under the heading of 'cultural relations' – everything from astronomy to the everyday encounters of street and marketplace. It's a rich and optimistic field.

For research into the power and purpose of cultural relations, a period of history when normal human encounters and gatherings are banned presents a special interest. Regardless of the range of subject matter, each essay was written in the context (or shadow) of Covid-19, which has reshaped the meaning of encounter. The pandemic has made some things impossible – or at least illegal – while expanding other channels of communication and connection beyond what we believed achievable just a few short months ago.

What remains both possible and inevitable is the need for human beings to create culture in all its forms, and to communicate their feelings and thoughts about it to others. This collection is a brief and welcome contribution to that endless, fascinating and ultimately human process.

**Kate Ewart-Biggs**

Interim Chief Executive, *British Council*

# Preface to the Cultural Relations Collection

Welcome to the new series of essays from the British Council's Research and Policy Insight Team. This collection seeks to deepen understanding of cultural relations by inviting early-career researchers to examine both theory and practice. An important word in our open invitation for submissions was 'afresh,' with the aim to seek new voices to explore what has been the British Council's business – building connections, understanding and trust – for more than 80 years.

*Under one sky.* When first reading this submission from one of this collection's authors, I was struck by the aptness of the title, not just for her own work – a fascinating journey through cultural co-operation through astronomy – but for the situation we find ourselves in today.

Much has been said about whether or not we are, as some commentators claim, all 'in the same boat' when it comes to Covid-19. The statistics in the UK alone about infection and death falling disproportionately on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities suggest otherwise, as do concerns about the long-term impact on young people due to their extended time out of school. On the global stage, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned in January 2021 of a 'catastrophic moral failure' if equitable access to vaccines is not achieved, with the poorest countries far behind the Global North when it comes to vaccinating their populations.

Yet while we are not all in that boat, we are all under one sky. That means that as well as the moral impetus to ensure vaccines are distributed around the world, there is a practical one – if the virus grows and mutates in countries where they cannot vaccinate populations, while at the same time wealthier countries are opening up borders and economies, we may find ourselves once more facing restrictions to halt that spread. Covid-19 is yet another common challenge that requires collective dialogue and action.

Through building connections, understanding and trust, the British Council's work in cultural relations seeks to create the conditions for dialogue and co-operation, whether it is around tackling a pandemic, addressing climate change or achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

In this collection, our writers explore cultural relations through varied lenses – astronomy, science communication, arts festivals and urban public space – but all address the power of coming together, of interacting and collaborating. In his essay, Will Haynes suggests that cultural relations happen in the spaces immediately around us, in the way city dwellers negotiate the places around them, navigating through difference and challenge as they come. Hannah Dagleish looks to the space above, in outlining the history of 'remarkable' intercultural openness and collaboration between astronomers.

The two remaining essays examine how Covid-19 has accelerated innovation in cultural relations activity. Gary Kerr explores the role of science diplomacy, and how a major international competition in science communication was rapidly forced online by the onset of Covid-19. Co-operation and innovation allowed for the move to digital. Poppy Spowage looks at how African arts festivals have led the way in delivering continued meaningful interactions between artists and audiences, despite the global pandemic. Both essays raise questions about how experiences are made, audiences are nurtured and connections developed and sustained in a virtual world.

At the time of writing, it seems likely that this shift to digital interaction will remain, if not as the new normal, then as a major part of our ways of living and working for some time to come. We will need to negotiate new ways of interacting with our neighbours, locally and globally, and to co-operate on the major challenges ahead. As Poppy Spowage notes in her essay, uncertainty itself is the catalyst for change. It is likely that uncertainty is here to stay. We hope that this collection offers some new insight into how cultural relations can help navigate the way ahead.

**Christine Wilson**

Head of Research

Research and Policy Insight, *British Council*

# Editor's notes

In this essay, Will Haynes takes us to three major global cities – Cape Town, Guangzhou and Rome – and invites us to look beyond the surface, to explore the everyday actions between people going about their daily lives, and examine how that creates a particular type of cultural relations interaction. Diverse groups of people, he notes, engage with each other on a daily basis, navigating their differences and acting as 'agents of globalisation'. These ordinary encounters, while hyper-localised, reflect and influence intercultural encounters at a global level, both positively, in enhanced understanding of different cultures, and negatively, in experiences of racism and xenophobia.

By focusing on cities, and on their busiest places – transport hubs and markets – this essay highlights how cultural relations is not a static experience, but fluid. Places are connected by flows – of people, money, goods and data – and with those come flows of culture: of belief, values, art and behaviours. In exploring these complexities, and how they are translated by human action and interaction, this essay allows us to reflect on our own daily cultural relations experience through those activities we may take for granted.

Cities have a particular resonance at this time, with many urban spaces having been hollowed out by the impact of Covid-19. Their most marginalised inhabitants have been deeply hit by infection due to their work and their living conditions; and those communities, as outlined in this essay, have also been hard hit by public health measures that restrict spaces and interactions between people.

This contribution suggests that more research is needed about low-end globalisation, about how the connections are forged and sustained between migrant groups living and working at the centre of these cultural relations flows, and in particular about how Covid-19 has affected these communities, and their intercultural interactions.

In an essay for *Peace and Beyond: reflections on building inclusive and sustainable peace*,<sup>1</sup> Professor Jo Beall described cities as 'a source of [...] human agency from which new beginnings can be forged'. Many communities will be looking to forge new beginnings post Covid-19, but mindful of new global challenges, all of which will require human agency and imagination. Outlined in this essay may be steps toward building the required connections, stemming from the vibrant social and cultural interaction that flows from our everyday spaces.

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1. See [www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/j063\\_peace\\_and\\_beyond\\_essays\\_final\\_web\\_new\\_0.pdf](http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/j063_peace_and_beyond_essays_final_web_new_0.pdf)

# Introduction

Cities are messy, complicated places. They can be inspiring centres of culture yet also sites of massive inequalities. They are places where bonds are made but where conflicts can arise too. In cities, diverse peoples and communities come together and forge relationships – forming, sharing, preserving and creating all sorts of identities. They earn money in various ways – hustling, buying, selling. Of course, I am not saying that people outside of cities *don't* do these things, but it is a question of scale; simply put, most people now live in and centre around urban environments.

Due to the prominence of cities on the world's stage as well as their cultural value, 'the urban' has become an important focus for cultural relations practitioners. While it is important to focus on cities collectively, a nuanced urban approach should also focus on the social processes that happen at the local level. It is in the interstices of the city – often the public spaces – where city dwellers carve out spaces for themselves. In these seemingly unremarkable spaces, what I refer to as *endotic* cultural relations take place 'on the ground' between different city inhabitants.

This introductory research will introduce vignettes from public spaces in three global cities that exemplify endotic cultural relations:

1. the bus network of Cape Town in South Africa
2. Termini train station in Rome, Italy
3. the wholesale markets of Guangzhou, China.

Initially, these examples may seem disparate. But while they are unique in their own right, they share important characteristics that speak more widely to urban processes across the world. They are all important sites of migration, locations of widespread inequalities, and contain specific sites where diverse groups of people come together; they are microcosms of wider processes mirroring national and transnational socio-political trends. Significantly, writing this in 2021, those who live in these three cities have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in significant ways.

While these vignettes focus on the cities of Cape Town, Rome and Guangzhou, endotic cultural relations is concerned more generally with the everyday lived experiences of people living in urban environments. In this essay, I put forward the idea that everyday interactions are an opportunity for deeper understandings among citizens and difference can be negotiated in these everyday spaces. It is here – in the ordinary, everyday acts of city life – that endotic cultural relations happen.

# The British Council, cities and (endotic) cultural relations

The British Council's cultural relations activity takes place in hundreds if not thousands of cities across the world. However, cultural relations is a slippery concept and is difficult to define. Despite this, a recent review of cultural relations practices by the Goethe-Institut and British Council provides a working definition:

*Cultural relations are understood as reciprocal transnational interactions between two or more cultures, encompassing a range of activities conducted by state and/or non-state actors within the space of culture and civil society. The overall outcomes of cultural relations are greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between people and cultures (2018: p. 7).*

While this definition is related to cultural relations approaches in their traditional sense, it could easily apply to informal cultural interactions 'on the street', where diverse groups meet and mix in public spaces. These everyday spaces may in fact be of significance, where a bottom-up, informal and localised understanding of urban experiences and practices might build a more holistic understanding of cultural relations. Isabel Dyck (2005: p. 243) explains that a focus on the 'everyday' does not confine work to what might be erroneously thought of as merely 'local'. Rather, it holds potential for opening up understanding of processes operating at much bigger scales: regional, national and global.

In an era of globalisation, of migration and international cultural contact, we might ask if what happens in the physical and, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, increasingly digital spaces of a city is an important focus for cultural relations research. This raises several questions:

1. Can cities be seen as gateways to more open, just and dynamic futures (Sennett, 2006)?
2. How can the informal, fleeting, and often slippery relationships and encounters between city dwellers be conceptualised through a cultural relations lens?

# Endotic cultural relations

The endotic – an antonym of exotic – has been used in the non-fiction writings of the celebrated observational sociologist Georges Perec as a conceptual tool to approach everyday life. The endotic refers to the ordinary – *infra-ordinary* even – aspects of everyday life. It ‘refers to unspectacular ordinary things and happenings’ and ‘that which usually goes unnoticed and unremarked’ (Phillips, 2018: pp. 181–2). As will be explored in greater length, endotic cultural relations gives value to the ordinary encounters that take place in the markets, train stations and other ‘ordinary’ pockets of cities and the people who inhabit them that are usually marginalised or ignored. This contrasts with the more traditional notion of cultural relations, and the ‘range of activities conducted by state and/or non-state actors within the space of culture and civil society’ (British Council & Goethe-Institute, 2018).

By focusing on everyday encounters between individuals and groups in everyday places, an endotic cultural relations approach gives space to our own identities and everyday experiences, encouraging dignity, trust and reciprocity as a basis for interaction. As is being explored by British Council work, cities are spaces of flows, not stasis, and future urban research ought to reflect this. Endotic cultural relations is a sustainable approach, relying on local expertise and knowledge. It may provide a template from which to approach complex global problems, as well as the role that cultural relations thinking and approaches can play in supporting solutions to local and global challenges in cities across the world.

# Introducing three vignettes of endotic cultural relations

As cities increasingly act as actors in their own right at a national and international level (Beall & Adam 2017) an endotic cultural relations approach acknowledges and shines a light on cities themselves rather than traditional country-based or even regional analysis. By focussing on Cape Town, Rome and Guangzhou, this essay introduces three important centres of global flows, albeit not ones that are considered super cities like London, Tokyo, Hong Kong or New York. This essay continues in the tradition of decentering British Council research away from the UK, looking to partnerships and collaborations abroad, while responding to wider geopolitical trends.

The Cape Town vignette will explore its bus network, the pressures on the city's transport systems and why they are crucial for cultural encounters for and between migrants and Capetonians alike. Subsequently, attention will shift to Termini train station in Rome, Italy's largest station and major hub for newly arrived migrants despite extremely difficult conditions for living. Lastly, the wholesale markets of Guangzhou will be introduced, physically and symbolically connected to the city's own train station and a crucial space of employment and network building for the city's large African migrant population. After a brief exploration of each site, reflection on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on livelihoods and the continuing vitality of cities will be discussed.

# The micropolitics of mobility in Cape Town's bus network

Cape Town is an exciting city of diversity, but one historically associated with exclusion and division. South Africa's second-largest city was structured along racial lines through colonialism and apartheid; a legacy that the city still tackles, through a complex interplay between race and class (Seekings, 2010).

Cape Town's bus networks reflect wider societal and political experiences where buses themselves are spaces intimately tied to a history of segregation and questions of racial justice. During apartheid, the mobility of South Africa's majority populations was controlled through separate systems of ticketing and transportation. Nowadays, the buses are a primary source of transportation for many Capetonians, while the stations themselves are important sites of informality and trade, notably for poorer citizens and migrants.

In an ethnography of Cape Town's buses, Bradley Rink (2016) identifies the 'micropolitics of mobility': the ways people encounter each other in everyday transport spaces and the significance and wider meaning of these encounters. Through an understanding of these micropolitics as endotic cultural relations, we can try to unpack these spaces where people come together to hustle, work, commute, and hang-out. Places that, in a city of widespread difference, may present highly interesting examples of possibility and potential through coming together.

Bus networks are sites of endotic cultural relations because they are where diverse communities come together. Rink's ethnography on buses provides an enlightening example of social mixing in the city and the intercultural space that the bus can provide (2016). Through daily use of the Golden Arrow Bus Service, buses themselves are found to be bound in a complex web between race, gender, and class, or what is alternatively called 'the micropolitics of mobility'. The author describes moments of light sociality with a student on the bus, which shape 'my [the author's] connection to the microcommunity of bus passengers as we set off on our journey' (p. 71). Rink's research asks whether everyday locations like buses are spaces where relations are formed, trust is built and connections are wrought, particularly though the act of moving through the city but *with* others (see also Wilson, 2011, on buses in the UK).

As well as on the buses themselves, bus stations are also of interest as spaces of endotic cultural relations as bustling sites of informal economic activity, where many poorer citizens and migrants<sup>2</sup> work informally and pursue livelihoods which are carved out of 'gaps' in urban space (Rogerson, 2018). Informality is a commonplace socioeconomic feature of a Southern<sup>3</sup> city like Cape Town and one well-connected to public transport spaces, like bus stations, that various authors have noted as colourful sites of hawking, gathering, and entrepreneurship, as well as encounters between different groups of people (see Stasik & Cissokho, 2018; Alhourani, 2017 and Rink, 2016).

2. See Tawodzera et al.'s (2015) report on international migrants and refugees in Cape Town's informal economy.

3. Recent urban scholarship has highlighted the importance of Southern urbanism, and focusing on urban processes cities in the Global South, for example Parnell and Oldfield (2014).

Public transport is also a place where division and discrimination, reflective of South Africa's history of racism and segregation, is still witnessed today. The divisions often run along racial lines and other accompanying intersectionalities, impacting and influencing relations between bus users. Service provision is unevenly distributed in the city, while public transport remains predominantly used by black communities (while white communities mostly use private transport). Experiences have also highlighted xenophobic attitudes from South Africans towards migrants from other African countries, which remains a major contemporary contributor to structural poverty in South Africa today (Abdi, 2011).

The bus network is of great economic and social importance to many migrants in the city, which can be targeted by authorities due to their informality. Similar spaces have witnessed the active exclusion of migrant entrepreneurs as part of the local economy, for example the Operation Fiela attack by the police and army on migrant market vendors at the Cape Town railway station in 2015 (Tawodzera et al., 2015).

In essence, behind the closed doors of a bus or within a station, there are all sorts of social processes that go on that might be considered endotic cultural relations: chatting, meeting, making connections and forms of light sociality. By understanding transport systems as spaces of endotic cultural relations, we acknowledge the overlooked space of transport systems as places where diversity and difference interact and mirror wider societal divisions. Through the micropolitics of mobility, we witness spaces of and examples of endotic cultural relations where relationships are built and experienced and we explore what it means to move through a city *with* others.

# Rome's Termini station as a liminal space

In recent years Rome has become a gateway city to Europe for migrants, as a result of Italy's geographical position and proximity to North Africa. It is a city now home to thousands of irregular and forced migrants (mostly from Africa and the Middle East), particularly in the wake of the so-called European 'refugee crisis' (MSF, 2018). Many of these migrants face a stringent migration regime in Italy and widespread racism and prejudice in society (Bialasiewicz & Haynes, 2019). Rome also experiences a number of urban processes shared with cities worldwide, such as gentrification, commercialisation and a broad widening of inequalities, that only serve to worsen the condition for migrants in the city.

With little institutional support or employment opportunities, this had led to a proliferation of 'liminal spaces' like its largest train station, Termini, the focus of this vignette. Referred to as 'Mamma Termini' by local filmmakers TerminiTV,<sup>4</sup> Italy's largest train station is at the beating heart of Rome. Despite the station's glass-and-concrete permanence, Termini is a space constantly in flux. The constant rhythmic movement of trains, buses, taxis, bodies, trade, money and languages flows in and out of the station into the surrounding neighbourhoods and beyond.

As a crucial place to many migrants in the city, Termini is an example of a 'liminal' space. Liminality, coined by folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1909), means literally 'being on a threshold'. It can be a state of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of any process and might apply well to certain spaces, like the arrivals hall of an airport (Cresswell 2006), or even a refugee camp, inhabited by those in a state of official 'betweenness' (Ramadan 2013). This state is well reflected by Termini and the uncertainties in the lives of the people who use the station. The station is often a sojourn in the travels of people passing through it, whether a short commute to work, a journey to find food, or something lengthier like the transcontinental passage of a migrant. This is also reflected by Termini's location in the city, situated at the gateway of one of Rome's most diverse neighbourhoods, Esquilino. Here, many migrants (and others) might find their footing in the city, going on to build networks and forge friendships.

Endotic cultural relations may be a useful way of grappling with tricky concepts like liminality in spaces of survival and solidarity in spaces like Termini, where difference is negotiated through everyday acts like commuting, working, and hanging out. An endotic cultural relations lens may also deepen understanding into how everyday life at such spaces might permeate into the wider city.

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4. TerminiTV is a Rome-based online television channel, telling stories from train stations in Rome and beyond, focusing on travel and migration.

As an accessible and central space, the Termini station has become an essential space for migrants and other marginalised people in Rome, within one of its most diverse neighbourhoods. It has become a microcosm of 'New Roman' society, and in many ways a reflection of intercultural European city life. Its liminality gives it an extraordinary energy, resulting in the proliferation of endotic cultural relations that could be studied: it is where people of many cultures and languages pass through, a place of busking, art expositions, musical performances, trading, all sorts of buying and selling (including drugs and illegal items). The surrounding area is equally varied in telling the story of modern Rome, occupied by Chinese shops, kebab restaurants, bars, churches, mosques and colonial monuments.

At the same time, Termini is a place of inequality and home to some of Europe's most marginalised people. The station is a link in the chain of spaces of displacement across Europe and the racialised policing of spaces and bodies. Every night, hundreds of homeless migrants,<sup>5</sup> mostly from African countries, stay for the night. By day these men (they are mostly men) have informal jobs to go to or can access amnesty or food near to the station, but at night, they simply have nowhere else to go (MSF 2018). Many forced migrants, without the required documentation, cannot work formally and therefore rely on their social networks in Rome to get by.

Witnessed in this day-to-night transition, and as a liminal space, Termini is also in many ways perhaps the place in Rome where urban

political and societal processes are concentrated. Processes like gentrification<sup>6</sup> and securitisation are highly visible as Termini begins to resemble a shopping mall, with standardised chain-stores, high security and related concerns to who *is* welcome and who *is not*. At the same time, Rome experiences urban processes that amplify its inequalities. The city has a large homeless population, stemming from a considerable housing crisis in the city (Mudu, 2014), while its neighbourhoods experience gentrification and increasing spatial exclusion, all to the backdrop of the city's world-famous and illustrious architecture, churches, museums and galleries, frequented by tourists and residents alike.

Termini is a liminal space: a station characterised by flux, transit and crossed paths. But it also a space of permanent limbo for many migrants that live and work there and a space that is constantly being further restricted. But the continual negotiations at liminal spaces like Termini and the surrounding Esquilino neighbourhood provide a welcome opportunity for endotic cultural relations research. There is a role for cultural relations organisations in mapping out the potential for a more trusting, open and interconnected European urban society. Recalling Johny Pitts's 2019 book *Afropean*, Termini is reminiscent and a continued reminder of the indivisible connection between Europe and Africa, both in terms of intertwined history through colonialism, but also through the huge presence of communities from across Africa and their descendants in Europe today.

5. Ethnographic observations made as part of research in Rome in 2017 – see Bialasiewicz and Haynes (2019), as well as statistics from the Medici Senza Frontiere (2018) report *Fuori Campo*.

6. See Lees et al. (2015) for more detailed analysis of global gentrification.

# Low-end globalisation: Guangzhou's wholesale markets

Guangzhou is the largest city in China's Pearl River Delta industrial region, the urban centre of the world's manufacturing powerhouse. Expressed by its nickname 'Capital of the Third World', it is also a major centre for migration for African migrants particularly, with Guangzhou boasting a culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse population. This migration has largely accompanied increased Chinese geopolitical interests in Africa in recent years, further decentring perceptions of the Global North as the centre of modern-day migration.

In Guangzhou, corporate employees and traders from all over the world work at the city's sprawling wholesale markets; a fascinating space of cultural contact mixing in the heart of the city. Mirroring experiences in Rome in many ways, these wholesale markets (and their surrounding neighbourhoods like Xiaobei) have developed due to proximity to Guangzhou train station and are places for migrants to work. These markets have been described in the book *The World in Guangzhou* by Lin and Yang (2017) as spaces of 'low-end globalisation'. This concept of low-end globalisation is defined as 'the flow of people and goods across borders that involve small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes semi-legal or illegal transactions' (Mathews, 2018).

Endotic cultural relations seem a particularly appropriate lens for analysis here. The markets are places of diversity and bustling centres of economic activity, but are also a microcosm for other transnational processes, such as the emergent political and economic relationship between China and the continent of Africa.<sup>7</sup> This has accompanied the growing mobility of African traders and businesspeople as well as the emergence of physical enclaves of African culture and communities within Guangzhou, mirroring the omnipresence of 'Chinatowns' in cities around the world.

The prevalent settling of Africans in the city has involved the building of informal networks and interpersonal trust within the existing migrant community. Many live in Xiaobei area of the city, already home to an existing Muslim population, where new arrivals found the convenience of halal compliant foods (Liang & Le Billon, 2020). With many migrants in Guangzhou on short-term business visas (which are often expired), it is unclear how many African migrants are actually settled in the city. While globalisation in Guangzhou has been described as 'low-end' due to the trading practices, filmmaker Marie Voignier's *Na China* (displayed at Guangzhou's Times Museum in 2019–20) portrays African woman traders as active agents in 'anti-hegemonic globalisation', telling everyday stories of trading and sociality. While portraying them as active agents in the city, Voignier also presents these African women traders' day-to-day challenges, for instance facing erroneous restrictions on counterfeit goods.

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7. See Akyeampong & Fofack (2019) on emerging patterns of economic engagement between Africa and China.

There are a number of very serious challenges facing African migrants in Guangzhou connected to the wholesale markets, particularly stemming from widespread racism and xenophobia, mirroring experiences in Rome as well as Cape Town. Xiaobei, the main trading and residential hub for Africans has been pejoratively referred to as 'Chocolate City' by some locals (Li et al., 2012), while prejudice has been encountered in public spaces as well as by police and government officials (Zhang et al., 2020). Exclusion has also enacted on the level of local government too, as urban renewal projects in the city have targeted the areas marked by African migrant presence in an attempt to 'clean' them up (Wilczak, 2018).

Low-end globalisation in Guangzhou highlights that local experiences are reflective of wider global geopolitics. African migrants in Guangzhou are agents of globalisation, adapting ordinary spaces such as markets and the surrounding neighbourhoods into blossoming transnational sites. Through an endotic cultural relations lens, these experiences are not only reflective of wider globalisation trends, but also document real-life experiences and the challenges that come with diverse communities coming together; in the case of Guangzhou – and also Rome and Cape Town – discrimination, racism and xenophobia. Similarly to work in Rome and Cape Town, an endotic cultural relations lens enables us to ask *who* cities are actually for and how to build better relationships between communities in order to open spaces up for all city dwellers.

# Covid-19, cities and endotic cultural relations

Writing in 2021, it is hard to underestimate the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on urban environments worldwide. The Karachi Urban Lab has called the pandemic crisis an 'urban crisis'.<sup>8</sup> Cities account for the most dramatic infection rates and have also in turn led the diffusion of unprecedented restrictive measures across the world. Marked generally by a retreat from busy to empty streets (Lancione & Simone, 2020a) and 'profound alteration in terms of social life and livelihoods which have the potential to last well beyond the emergency itself' (Lancione & Simone, 2020b), life in cities has been dramatically transformed.

In each of the three cities introduced in this essay, the Covid-19 pandemic has had existential consequences on city life. While the pandemic effects all city dwellers, it is particularly significant for those living in more informal settlements, many with limited access to clean water and sanitation, and being unable to socially distance in dense social settings. The use of public spaces as venues for socialising and meeting has also been curtailed, most significantly impacting the lives of society's most disadvantaged.

In Cape Town, the spread of the virus and the imposition of healthcare measures has meant that usage of the bus network and other spaces of mixing is much lower than previously. Lockdowns have threatened the informal food trade (Resnick, 2020) while social distancing has been cited as a threat to societal norms, which are inherently deeply communal (Haas, 2020).

Likewise in Rome, increasing spatial control by police and the authorities of the city centre and public transport have made life difficult for those who rely on the station. The lack of tourists has taken away a viable source of informal business (as well as charity), worsened by the absence of more formalised support which has been even more truncated during the pandemic.

Rapid measures throughout China led to the formal closedowns of the markets in Guangzhou, with many business exchanges (like clothes modelling) being moved onto online channels, alongside which widespread reported prejudice towards African migrants has led to the departure of thousands from the city. In light of this rapidly developing situation, it is unclear how endotic cultural relations will resurface or restabilise in these urban environments, although it is vital that cultural relations organisations like the British Council continue to investigate these continuing changes.

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8. Karachi Urban Lab (KUL) is an interdisciplinary research platform based in Pakistan, addressing the Southern City through a creative and critical lens.

# Conclusions and reflections

The three vignettes of Cape Town, Rome and Guangzhou speak to separate yet interconnected experiences of endotic cultural relations. These include:

- how difference is negotiated in everyday urban life
- how marginal groups make use of city space
- how these everyday endotic activities connect to broader – often transnational or global – questions.

The vignettes suggest that cultural relations are ubiquitous to different public spaces in cities of all shapes and sizes, and present a plentiful opportunity to focus on trust building, diversity and interculturalism at a global scale. These are also connected broadly by the Covid-19 pandemic and sweeping changes to urban life across the world.

I would like to point to a number of future areas in which both research and practice might develop. The Cape Town vignette suggests that there is an opportunity for cultural relations organisations to deepen analysis in the realm of endotic cultural relations at public transport sites. These could be venues for practitioners to work. This focus could accompany and support efforts to establish more equal and sustainable cities. Future study should continue to probe the meaning and significance of everyday interactions on public transport systems, whether it be on the Cairo Metro or the Mumbai Suburban Railway. These are changeable and unpredictable places that facilitate all sorts of everyday exchanges, flows, and goings-on at a remarkably local level that illustrate wider patterns of inequality as well as cultural differences.

Experiences in Rome and at Termini station speak to wider issues more generally, particularly by asking *who* urban space is actually for; speaking to cities in the United Kingdom, Europe, and beyond. There is value at looking how encounters and relationships are forged on the street-level, under external pressures like policing or local migration rules. But what kind of cultural relations happens in these liminal spaces, where transnational connections between migrant groups and 'local' communities are crystallised? Moreover, cultural relations organisations and practitioners might ask how cities (and sites within them) can be redefined and repurposed by grassroots encounters and everyday urban culture.

Experiences from Guangzhou suggest that future research might continue to focus on the wider impacts of migration and large-scale economic connectivity through the 'low-end globalisation' of cities worldwide, particularly in the Global East and South. For cultural relations practitioners, it would be useful to focus on how new migrant groups find solidarity with existing urban communities, such as the relationship between Guangzhou's existing Chinese Muslim population and the newer African community, and how new identities can be created from meaningful social interaction and an 'everyday' endotic cultural relations approach. Work on Guangzhou (and other Chinese cities) speaks to a growing need to understand China's interactions on the ground and China's relations with the wider world. Engaged cultural relations research will acknowledge China's changing global role, including everyday life in Chinese cities.

The pandemic, as described by Sir Ciarán Devane, the former chief executive of the British Council, is a border-crossing global challenge that cultural relations organisations must adapt to and recognise (Devane, 2020). The advent of the pandemic raises an important question for the British Council: what happens to our understanding of spaces that are open sites of intermixing, encounters and informality when limits are placed on individual mobility?

Because so little empirical data has been collected from these everyday spaces, and their economic and cultural value is eschewed in favour of more formalised, structured places, it is difficult to gauge the effect that the pandemic has on endotic cultural relations. However, the virus has exacerbated many of the existing factors that inhibit the lives of those who live precariously: commercialisation, privatisation, and securitisation of city centre spaces. British Council research might focus on these, so as to understand the challenges and pressures that venues of endotic cultural relations face. Whatever the outcome, these seemingly unremarkable endotic spaces – buses, train stations, markets – are more meaningful than they might first seem.

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