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Contours of urban diversity and coexistence

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Abstract

The celebration of co-presence within city life has a long history in
urban studies, beginning with analyses of contact with subjects
different from ourselves. As new diversities arising from migration
continue to both enrich and complicate the dynamics of urban com-
munity, there has been a renewed interest in the potential of the
everyday intercultural encounter in shared spaces. This paper iden-
tifies two key strands of geographical imaginations in the growing
fields of urban diversity and coexistence. I first review the geogra-
phy of togetherness through the sharing of space before moving
on to discuss the spatialities of structured and structuring practices
that can enclose these micro-publics. Consequently, I then highlight
the work of difference-making that is done at both policy and every-
day level that generates, filters, sorts, and organizes diversity. What
emerges is the need for more attention to the impact of governance
and management of diversity and the contingent effects of the
characteristics and histories of migrant populations and the local
politics of place.

1 │ INTRODUCTION

"...cities are precisely arenas of chance encounters. (And yet that thought itself should also bring to mind the countless
exclusions which together accumulate to produce that space of the city)" (Massey, 2005: 179).

This paper identifies two key strands of geographical imaginations in the growing fields of urban diversity and coex-
istence. The growing "diversity-turn" in the social scientific study of the city and of migration highlights coexistence in
shared spaces where what Amin terms "micro-publics" can flourish: schools, playgrounds, parks, markets, public transport,
and sidewalks (Amin, 2002: 959). I first review the geography of togetherness through the sharing of space. Here, I discuss
predominant themes of sociality, encounters, and strangerhood in everyday spaces that constitute a type of "common-
place diversity" (Wessendorf, 2014). Strangers can engage each other in acts of kindness and compassion in their every-
day interactions or through more quotidian and civil engagements as neighbours, vendors, and customers. In this strand of
work, these encounters express conviviality and constitute coexistence in public. Indeed, migration and the growing diver-
sity of urban populations have brought about new experiences of space and contact, of cosmopolitanism, creolization and
conviviality, and more crucially, new patterns of inequality, segregation, and prejudice. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, through

her critique of post-colonial theory, however, is "its failure to account for the structural conditions in which 'local encounters' with hybridity and difference take place" (Ahmed, 2000: 12). Indeed, a narrative of urban diversity and coexistence that emphasizes play, hybridity, and inbetweenness obscures the injuries of class, race, and ethnicity and filters out the structural richness of space. Furthermore, the *knowing* of strangers, of difference, of newcomers is "a means by which the 'we' of the community is established, enforced and legitimated" (Ahmed, 2000: 37). The second strand, thus, is a geography of structured and structuring practices that can enclose these micro-publics. Consequently, it bears highlighting the work of difference-making that is done at both policy and everyday level that filters, sorts, and organizes diversity. What emerges is the need for more attention to the impact of structural inequalities on positive outcomes, contingent effects of the characteristics and histories of migrant populations, and the local politics of place.

Much of the recent work on urban diversity, however, remains centred on Western European contexts such as the United Kingdom (Amin, 2012; Neal, et al, 2015; Valentine, 2008; Valentine & Waite, 2012; Wilson, 2011) and "immigrant" countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Hiebert, 2002; Pearson, 2001). Yet, as Jennifer Robinson, Ananya Roy, and Aihwa Ong remind us, there is not only potential but indeed, *urgency*, in "worlding" urban theory such that the non-West contributes conceptually rather than just empirically (Roy & Ong, 2011; Roy, 2009; Robinson, 2002, 2003). By widening our range of sites for empirical *and* theoretical enquiry, we multiply our range of analytical tools and conceptual contours along the lines discussed in the following. In so doing, we uncover the novel and important socio-political formations as they are playing out, rather than prescribing as "ought-ness" to living with diversity (i.e., how coexistence in the context of diversification *ought to be*). I am not seeking to identify a city or cities that might be deemed paradigmatic for an increasingly de-Western-centred world. My wider concern is with ways in which diverse cities, including Asian cities such as Singapore, not only exceed existing conceptualizations of urban diversity but can *highlight* the structural dimension of diversity management by state agencies, or what emerges in the absence of state management. Furthermore, these forms of management surpass explicit policies and programmes by being adopted and perpetuated by people in everyday shared spaces.

2 | CO-PRESENCE IN THE CITY

The celebration of co-presence within city life has a long history in urban studies, beginning with analyses of contact with subjects different from ourselves; from Simmel (1950) who hailed everyday encounters with difference as crucial for development of novel personalities, through Jacobs (1961) "eyes upon the street" theory of collectively co-created safety of everyday urban streetscapes, to Young's emphasis on contact with strangers to reduce prejudice and Sennett's idea of urban cooperation (Sennett, 2012).

As new diversities arising from migration continue to both enrich and complicate the dynamics of urban community, there has been a renewed interest in the potential of intercultural encounter. Indeed, the keen awareness of growing social diversity arising from migration in the contemporary global city has prompted a range of interest in coexistence, urban citizenship, and contact across difference (Seidman, 2012; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002; Phillips, 2015; Vertovec, 2007). Geographical scholarship on the social and cultural texture of globalizing cities has revealed a proliferating range of "contact zones" shaped by local–transnational encounters, which hinge on a number of registers including nationality, race, religion, language, class, legal status, gender, and sexuality (Binnie, Holloway, Millington, & Young, 2006; Jarvis, Kantor, & Cloke, 2009; Lai, Collins and Yeoh, 2013; Vertovec, 2015). In describing the diversification processes in the global city, Sandercock (2003) used the metaphor of the "mongrel city" to characterize "an emerging condition in which difference, otherness, multiplicity, heterogeneity, diversity and plurality prevail", while Amin and Graham (1997) coined the term "the multiplex city" to describe the contemporary urban as the co-presence of multiple spaces, times, and networks of relations, tying local sites, subjects, and fragments into globalizing networks of economic, social, and cultural change. In cities that are thoroughly hybrid and which are crucibles of diverse stranger gatherings, it becomes all the more important for the politics of the impersonal where there is a respect for distance amongst strangers (Amin, 2012).

Terms such as "multiculturalism," "social cohesion," and indeed, "diversity" have become prominent in both political and academic discourse in describing social relations and often, prescribing *how they ought to be* in contexts peopled by individuals of different backgrounds. A growing stream of research celebrates convivial coexistence. Space, in this body of work, is imagined as open and constantly in genesis. In re-imagined cities, Thrift argues that strangers engage each other in "acts of kindness and compassion" in their everyday interactions (2005: 140). Their quotidian and civil engagements as neighbours or as vendors and customers express and constitute "being-togetherness" (Amin, 2006: 1012). Furthermore, the intense gathering of ethnic and cultural difference is seen as spurring transformation of cities into "cosmopolitan melting pots where hybrid identities connect the most intimate relations with the most remote places" (Simonsen, 2008: 146). Koch and Latham's ethnographic observations of the Prince of Wales Junction in West London further shows the forms of sociality and togetherness through actions that "domesticate" public spaces (Koch & Latham, 2011).

Crawford's garage sales on the front lawns in Los Angeles are another example of such shared places, mixing people up and representing a space of co-mingling (Crawford, 1999). In her book, *City Publics: The (Dis)enchantments of Urban Encounters*, Watson proposes the notion of "rubbing along" as a form of transient encounters between social subjects where recognition of different others through a glance or gaze, seeing and being seen, sharing embodied spaces, in talk or silence, has the potential to militate against the withdrawal into the self or private realm (Watson, 2006). In writing about the transformative potential of the market, Watson goes on to argue that a minimal level of encounter that comes through inhabiting the same space as those who are different from oneself, such as markets, can have the "potential to play a part in challenging racist discourses and stereotypes of unknown others. This is not the Habermasian notion of public space as a site for rational debate and communication; rather, it is the space of pedestrian rhetoric..., of weaving complexity and difference into the texture of mundane everyday life" (Watson, 2009:1582). Similarly, Wise and Velayutham also demonstrate that the enactment of caring for others in everyday spaces contributes to the buzz of the place (Wise & Velayutham, 2014). Very little antagonism or hostility to different others was expressed in these shared spaces, reinforcing their importance in challenging the fear of unknown others. This forms the active basis of "inclusive sociality" in particular towards marginalized groups, such as traders and shoppers with disabilities and newcomers from other parts of Europe and Australia (Hiebert, Rath, & Vertovec, 2015; Watson, 2009; Wise & Velayutham, 2014).

3 | STRUCTURING DIFFERENCE AND DIVERSITY IN EVERYDAY SHARED SPACES

Such affirmative assessments of physical proximities of people from diverse cultural, social, or ethnic backgrounds that seem to embody city life have long been, of course, accompanied by equally strong critical accounts of contact, cities, and city life. In his book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) cautions against romanticizing contact as sufficient to improve inter-group relations.

To date, there is a smaller, but, more importantly, growing body of urban encounters research that addresses the structural context in which these encounters occur. This is the second significant strand of contemporary literature on encounters and urban diversity underlines that monitoring measures are limited in bridging differences and providing feelings of safety and comfort in public spaces (Amin, 2012; Fincher & Iveson, 2008). Space, in this understanding of diversity, is much more ambivalent. This strand of work that takes structure into consideration highlights that pre-existing social and spatial inequality can heighten intolerance, setting the stage for discriminatory treatment in everyday spaces (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011). In workplaces where people from diverse ethno-racial groups are called upon to cooperate, their interactions are influenced by hierarchical social relations amongst co-workers that characterize most workplaces. This could reduce the positive impacts of contact. As Ray and Preston argue, however, the adverse effects of these hierarchical relations may be confounded at least partially by repeated, albeit superficial, contacts with diverse strangers that characterize many work locations (Ray & Preston, 2014).

Within this branch of work, physical proximity of diverse populations in spaces such as buses, parks, public squares have the potential to generate hostility as much as conviviality. Exploring diversity in Australian cities, Fincher and Iveson note that planning for encounters is more likely to be successful if it involves a "light touch," rather than the micromanagement of individuals (Fincher & Iveson, 2008: 211). In examining the hierarchical nature of settler–Indigenous sociality in Australia, Povinelli argues that liberal forms of cultural recognition have the unintended effect of either bracketing difference or establishing a "red line of toleration" (Povinelli, 2011: 93). The outcome is that tolerance is always practiced along modalities of recognition that spy on Indigenous peoples who try to penetrate sealed social spaces and uncloak those who hide via embodied disguise (Povinelli, 2011). Exploring the politics of belonging in a small town in Minnesota that is being transformed through immigration, Leitner reminds us that long-time residents often try to "defend their place and associated identities that they feel are under threat from global and mobile forces, conceiving of place as a site with a clearly circumscribed culture and identity, rather than as a site that is open and constantly emerging" (Leitner, 2012: 831). In a different stream of argument, Valentine has argued strongly that everyday encounters are often only indicators of socially accepted forms of public civility, and "urban etiquette does not equate with an ethics of care and mutual respect for difference" (Valentine, 2008: 329). This line of argument also highlights that transient encounters, even of a positive nature, do not necessarily "scale up," that is, develop any lasting challenge to embedded prejudices and stereotypes (see also Clayton, 2009). Regardless, Valentine's more recent work has continued to show how mundane and routine forms of sharing space are embedded with acts and justifications of prejudice against people of different backgrounds (Valentine, Piekut, Winiarska, Harris, & Jackson, 2015).

While encounters may frequently reflect and reinforce the positionalities of those involved, they also hold possibilities of change because they are mediated socially. The complexities of living with diversity are therefore conveyed through a productive ambivalence within this strand of the literature. Indeed, the uncertainty about what can be delivered by the focus on encounter has been examined by Askins and Pain (2011) in their work with a mixed group of youth in a community arts project in the north-east of England. Wilson (2011) has also explored the social relations of mixed populations using public transport in the English city of Birmingham. What the research of Askins and Pain (2011) and Wilson (2011) both particularly highlight is first, the unstable nature of an encounter and second, the importance of the materiality of place in shaping its tone. For instance, Askins and Pain argue that the tactility of the actual art materials invited interactions and mixing, "contact with and through objects … mediated points of connection and similarity, opening up potential for new social relations to be enacted" (Askins & Pain, 2011: 817)—bodies closely sharing confined spaces—demands sets of practices and obligations that can produce sometimes conflictual, but also sometimes consensual social relations and even a sense of being part of a "collective culture" and "temporary community" (Askins and Pain, 2011: 646). Neal et al. focus on the importance of public parks as a site for multicultural interaction where green spaces are valued and celebrated as convivial and inclusive even if they are also associated with conflict (2015). This approach to diversity offers a distinct way of addressing contemporary public spaces and the dynamics of difference that shape them.

Public spaces remain sites where both long-time residents of multicultural makeup must co-exist and interact with newcomers in highly prosaic and constantly evolving ways. Indeed, fleeting encounters in shared spaces are still the most common in terms of associations in public (Lofland, 1998). Occurring between or amongst individuals who are personally unknown to one another, these associations, as the name implies, are short-lived and do not necessarily involve spoken exchanges, and even if there were words exchanged, these could be limited to "restrained helpfulness," as one of the examples in this paper demonstrates (Lofland, 1998:53). Fleeting encounters challenge the fear of the "other" embedded in relations with strangers, they disrupt stereotypical categories, and open up space for reflection and change afforded by its temporary nature. I would also argue that situating the understanding of everyday diversity and coexistence through fleeting encounters tells us about the micro tones of civility and codes of conduct of a place.

However, how do migration pathways of new arrivals shape demographic dynamics of a place? How do strategies of state actors and institutions sort, regulate, constitute, and set the terms of diversity? Furthermore, how do these organizing strategies contour the politics of everyday coexistence in shared spaces? How do people differentiate in contexts of diversification? How do people systematize the kaleidoscope of difference? In asking these questions, I

aim to conceptualize diversity as composed of a wider yet highly nuanced set of practices that re-engages wider structures with its seepage into everyday encounters.

I do not assert, however, that the ethos of public spaces is always or even *should* be speaking to a sense of shared identity or collective bond as many scholars mentioned above have argued. Indeed, in spaces of rapid change, the sharing of space with different others could be an instrumental rather than an intrinsic desire for a cosmopolitan conviviality. As Landau and Freemantle's work in informal settlements in peri-urban Kenya and South Africa reminds us, however, a functional form of togetherness can require little sense of shared identity or enduring bonds (Landau & Freemantle, 2016). Urban conviviality in Rongai and Katlehong is rooted in a usufruct, utilitarian extraction, that is, people interact on a daily basis through a "largely instrumental ethics: oriented towards accessing and extracting the 'fruits' of urban space while simultaneously … enacting life elsewhere" (Landau & Freemantle, 2016: 933). Much of this is a response to the informal ways in which people arrive in these two peri-urban neighbourhoods and, also, in response to the absence of coherent state interventions (Landau & Freemantle, 2016). Indeed, while much of the work on daily encounters has been helpful in addressing the significance of everyday forms of rubbing along, it remains unclear what the mechanisms, principles, or ethos are that enable people to negotiate the boundaries of diversity through everyday encounters. Laudau and Freemantle's work is particularly helpful in addressing a gap in the literature on encounters on the modes of organization in a context of rapid diversification. Many African migrants actively *resist* the bonds of belonging as their intentions are for rural retirements or to move elsewhere. This directly challenges the sizable European literature that often asserts that people *want* to invest in the meaning of community, belonging, and criteria for membership in the context of immigration and diversity (Yuval-Davis, Floya, & Eleonore, 2005; Kalra & Kapoor, 2009).

Pre-existing inequalities can also be subverted in spatial ways even in places where state agencies hold strong legitimacy. Yeoh and Huang draw attention to the way low-waged Filipina domestic workers use public spaces, such as Orchard Road's Lucky Plaza, during their rest days (Yeoh & Huang, 1998). The temporary but regular appropriation of these spaces by female domestic workers as well as the ways in which they are accommodated both reflect, reinforce, and sometimes circumvent larger unequal power relations at these public spaces temporarily. Similarly, low-waged, low-status Bangladeshi male migrants also assert their presence within different public spaces in the Singaporean landscape in complex and contentious ways (see, e.g., Ye, 2013). By appropriating spaces that are overlooked by other urban residents as socializing spaces, these migrants are circumventing official policy, marking their presence in the city (Collins, 2012). In other words, while their use of such spaces is largely a result of exclusion from typically middle-class places such as within shopping malls, their act of appropriation reconfigures the dynamics of specific urban spaces. Undoubtedly, there remains great precarity in the lives of low-waged migrants where strong and sometimes abusive relations of power occur in everyday life and reflect inter-group attitudes and practices. Thus, while these instances of appropriation do not directly or permanently challenge broader inequalities, such practices of claiming space are important precisely because they allude to the different spatialized forms of coexisting with difference in the city. Where these practices of space-claiming happen, however, is scarcely the sort of harmonious getting along that Anderson describes in *The Cosmopolitan Canopy* (Anderson, 2011). There are constant tensions, struggles, and disquiet over how things *ought to be* in such spaces, revealing political dynamics—norms, acceptable and legitimate codes of conduct—that shape the nature of specific diverse, shared spaces.

This second key branch of work on urban diversity, therefore, highlights the modalities of power that shape the way diversity is organized in particular places, spatializing the politics of diversification. In my own engagements with diversity management in Singapore, I find that norms of civility are also a prevalent form of power through the mundane way in which urban diversity is encountered and governed in the everyday (Ye, 2016). The violation of civility, norms, and values by people, which in rapidly diversifying cities like Singapore also include new arrivals, exposes dominant orderings in space, who knows how to behave and who does not, who belongs and who does not. This approach allows us to "scale up" fleeting encounters in public zones of contact by situating them within a broader structural context led by state policies and initiatives. It is to this approach which we now turn.

4 | DIVERSITY AND SPATIALIZING DIFFERENTIATED INCLUSION

Here the contours of the management of diversity become more nuanced. Fleeting modes of everyday "rubbing along" in public spaces must be contextualized within broader structural forms shaped by state institutions and actors. Indeed, government policy measures, campaigns, and discourses of diversity do not lie separate from everyday modes of governance and organization of difference. But rather, they selectively link and organize places and people through the everyday re-enactment of narratives of diversity that do not simply form the backdrop but indeed, produce, the very contours of how diversity ought to be. It is these dynamics of management that also shape processes of differential inclusion through everyday encounters. The geography of coexistence is constituted through socio-spatial processes where the politics of living with diversity are mediated through, although not limited to fleeting encounters. Norms of civility clarify the messiness inherent in public spaces, to filter, curtail, and simplify diversity. Rather than as a narrowly focused set of rules, social norms are perhaps more effectively grasped when conceived in terms of broad, overarching principles that guide everyday encounters in public through practices of inclusion and exclusion. The rituals of everyday contact with diverse others—so fundamental to the collaborative act of sharing space—can also become a ritualized form of selective incorporation where acceptance is dependent upon people subscribing to established norms and values. Consequently, everyday spaces become the arena where the gradual construction of a social and civil order takes place.

In thinking about how norms and civility act as tools of management and governance through co-optation, we move beyond clarifying how diversity is managed and negotiated in the everyday vis a vis uneven interconnections amongst people of different backgrounds. Instead, it is not only exclusion but *inclusion* that is also highly politicized as difference-making. Rather than being intriniscally open or opposed to exclusion, the aggregate processes of "integration" alluded to above render people subject to particular imaginaries of diversity. There are two key aspects of differential inclusion we might think of (a) the *explicit rules* that form the basis of differential state treatment of its population by race, ethnicity, and citizenship status and (b) how explicit rules shape the *implicit principles* in which migrants are included or choose to follow according to normative forms of appropriate behaviour in shared spaces (see, e.g., Ye, 2016). The former refers to formal policies and programmes led by state agencies that shape the latter that refers to everyday codes of conduct that organize how shared spaces ought to be used. By imposing these ordered ways of proceeding, legitimized codes of conduct do not only exclude those who do not conform accordingly but also sets up a relative and normative form of inclusion where newcomers are welcomed on condition that they behave in socially accepted ways. Social norms and civility then become tools of inclusion, and, subsequently, enclosure and exclusion, which form a particular and politicized logic of diversification. In recognizing the boundaries of inclusion, inclusion itself is therefore posited not as opposite to exclusion but as *intrinsic* to exclusion. In a place like Singapore where meritocracy and multiracialism have historically precluded discussions of difference along racial and ethnic lines, the micropolitics of everyday co-existence are organized through the intertwined processes of management and continuous re-enactment of appropriate conduct.

5 | CONCLUDING NOTES

This paper has discussed two key strands of geographical imaginations in the growing fields of urban diversity and coexistence. Much of the geography of togetherness with its predominant themes of sociality, encounters, and strangerhood have highlighted the importance of micro encounters in everyday life. In this body of work, distance between and coming together of strangers with diverse backgrounds characterize the increasingly hybrid contact zones of cities. Coexistence in shared spaces is argued to generate not only tolerance but conviviality and a form of living with difference without rancour. Another growing strand of work, however, cautions against the romanticization, and often Euro-centric prescription, of coexistence, by addressing the structural context in which these encounters occur. Not only are state and city-led measures of governance—and indeed, in the case of sites like Katlehong and Rongai, the *absence of formal state-led measures*—

fundamentally shaping the forms of coexistence, urban inhabitants are themselves organizing and *normalizing* particular contours of differentiation. Rather than sharing of space as indicative of urban conviviality and shared bonds, there are boundaries and enclosures embedded within these public spaces. Coexistence in a diverse context in this sense is marked relationally by broader structural inequalities, spatial subversion, and selective incorporation. Contributing to this latter body of work, I argue that it is the differentiated processes of inclusion that manage and politically ground the everyday enactments of difference in diverse settings. Future urban sociality and modes of accommodating difference in the global North may hardly resemble Singapore, Shanghai, Katlehong, and Rongai. Yet, as we expand our portfolio of sites for empirical *and* theoretical engagements, we multiply our range of analytical tools and normative standards along the lines discussed here. In so doing, we uncover the novel and important socio-political formations that are already in motion.

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