

Unbounding difference-making in diversifying cities: Encountering Singapore and Auckland

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This commentary thinks of ordinary spaces and everyday life as productive sites to explore the breadth and complexity of the global, conjoined processes of migration and urbanisation. The growing “diversity turn” in the social scientific study of the city and migration highlights coexistence in what Amin (2002, p. 959) terms “micro-publics,” that is, shared spaces where interactions across differences can flourish: schools, playgrounds, community centre, cafes, parks, markets, public transport and sidewalks. Social science scholarship has pinpointed an array of “contact zones” that are shaped by encounters that hinge on several multiple intersecting registers, including nationality, race, religion, language, class, legal status, gender and sexuality (Back & Sinha, 2018; Binnie, Holloway, Millington, & Young, 2006; Collins, Lai, & Yeoh, 2013). As such, cities are often conceptualised as places of meeting with a stranger. Fleeting public encounters with such strangers in public spaces are seen as important because, it is argued, the majority of our encounters with diversity occur within these situations (Lofland, 1998). While people may grow increasingly indifferent to differences over time in these contact zones, these encounters may not always overcome prejudice. Rather, these encounters can hide within them the underlying tensions of race, ethnicity and gender. In more exceptional circumstances, encounters across differences can also erupt in more violent ways. Management, both at the level of policy and every day, plays an important role in shaping how these encounters unfold.

While these dynamics are global in their extent, they have particular significance in countries like New Zealand and Singapore where contemporary patterns of migration-led diversification take shape around varied colonial,

settler-colonial and post-colonial pasts and presents. Yet, in these and other contexts, there is sometimes silence on the very nature of how difference is managed within these geographical transformations. While much has been said about encounters with difference and diversity in these contact zones, how is difference *managed* in cities and nations that are rapidly diversifying through migration? In this commentary, I take up these issues of diversification, difference and management through a reflection on their materialisation in New Zealand and Singapore and consider what can be learned through reflections across these geographies. I refer to management as, first, governance at the level of policy and at the level of everyday, unspoken, tacit norms. Second, I also apply the idea of management as a way to “deal with difference” in very mundane ways in both public and parochial spaces. Incorporation and inclusion through the discourse of “integration” tend to be understood as antidotes to marginalisation and segregation in the city. Yet, the application of inclusive measures, programmes and policies are rarely, if ever, even. Furthermore, practices claiming to support diversity are never universally open. Management practices can have pedagogical and assimilative effects that, instead, reinforce difference.

1 | SITUATING UNBOUNDING

Addressing the effects of diversification and differences demands a focus on knowledge building in place, an unbounding the locations of theoretical and empirical knowledge construction. By “unbounding,” I refer to both the decentring of where we write, as well as the conceptual focus of literature on urban diversity and difference. The bulk of recent work on urban diversity remains centred on Western European contexts such as the

[Correction added on 15 May 2020, after first online publication: Acknowledgement section has been added.]

United Kingdom (Amin, 2012; Harris, 2016; Neal, Vincent, & Iqbal, 2016; Valentine, 2008; Wilson, 2013) and “immigrant” countries such as Canada and Australia (Hiebert, 2002). 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). By widening our range of sites for empirical *and* theoretical enquiry, we multiply our range of analytical tools and conceptual contours, an agenda that is particularly significant for thinking through the difference in cities. In so doing, there is potential to uncover novel and important socio-spatial formations as they play out, rather than prescribing an “ought-ness” to living with diversity (i.e., how coexistence in the context of diversification *ought to be*), building our references through contexts that are, ultimately, non-universal. The experience of colonialism, of political-economic development and migration histories in London, for example, is not the same as in South Africa or Hong Kong. Knowledge is, as Haraway (1998) pointed out, situated. The comments included here are based on two projects in which I was involved. My comments on Singapore are based on my long work on diversification in the city-state. While in Auckland, New Zealand, I was involved in the Urban Encounters arm of a much bigger project focus on Capturing the Diversity Dividend in Aotearoa New Zealand (CaDDANZ) from 2014 to 2017.

Difference management is not new for both Auckland and Singapore. Both cities and countries have been shaped by immigrants since the processes of colonisation became entrenched in the 19th century. Racial imaginaries are, however, different in both places. In Singapore, the post-independent government (since 1965) continued the colonial legacy of managing racialised difference through the Chinese–Malay–Indian–Other (CMIO) multiracial framework. In New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840, introduced a settler colonial framework wherein the Māori were subjugated and displaced from land, evident most obviously in the halving of the pre-colonial population by the end of the 19th century. Since the 1970s, neoliberal political change has incrementally shifted the country towards biculturalism between Māori and Pakeha.¹ While migration is not a problem in itself, new arrivals to New Zealand could reinforce a colonial system initiated by White settlers. This history of managing diversity is therefore linked to the colonial experiences of both Singapore and New Zealand. In both cities, multiculturalism has developed noticeably in the urban arena, and cosmopolitanism is part of Auckland’s (as New Zealand’s largest city and migrant-receiving area) and Singapore’s image. Both places are also currently experiencing newer groups of migrants from different sending areas and who are

admitted into the country on an ever-growing number of visas.

This commentary, however, is not meant to be a comparative discussion of Auckland and Singapore. Rather, these are portraits of long-time diversifying cities that lie outside of Europe and North America. Having said this, the neighbourhoods that I draw attention to (Avondale and Jurong West, respectively) are not spectacular and are, indeed, marked by their ordinaryness. Engaging quotidian perspectives from these neighbourhoods, I focus on migrant enclaves and “hotspots” often privileged in migration literature. Thinking about urban diversification from these mundane parts of major cities also demonstrates the saturation of new arrivals within each and across both urban contexts. By unbounding the spatialisation of diversity beyond migrant enclaves, Jurong West and Avondale offer a view of migration as integral to ongoing processes of societal change and diversification, rather than as exceptional.

This commentary follows Chen’s, 2010 call in his book, *Asia as Method*, to broaden our frames of reference to include cities outside of dominant centres of knowledge production. As such, drawing upon examples from Singapore and Auckland is an exercise in open-ended imagination. They are promising sites through which we can multiply our perspectives and conceptualise differences beyond (a) Europe and North America and (b) beyond the “ethnic lens” (Glick Schiller & Caglar, 2013) that continues to dominate writings on urban diversity. As neighbourhoods in cities that have had long histories as settler cities, encounters with differences in both Jurong West and Avondale are situated against a broader spatiotemporal imaginary of who is “in” and “out” of both place and time in their contact zones. By discussing the difference in these two locations that are experiencing migrant-driven diversification, I am responding to Glick Schiller and Çağlar’s repeated call to think “beyond the ethnic lens” (2013; 2011), that is, to overcome a methodological nationalism that very often equates migration—and diversity—with ethnicity. In expanding the analytical lens beyond ethnicity, I position difference and diversity as dynamic and intersectional. While race and ethnicity remain important categories of differentiation and are integral to the idea of diversity in both Singapore and Auckland, the difference is not reducible to ethnicity. Focusing only on ethnicity risks remaining bound to its mobilisation and essentialism in popular discourse. Rather, in the research I have undertaken, race-tinged civility and neighbourly relations have emerged as the more salient marker of difference in the context of Singapore’s Jurong West and Auckland’s Avondale neighbourhoods. As Glick Schiller and Caglar (2013), p. 495) argue, “by rejecting the ethnic lens,

scholars can explore the ways in which all people, including people of migrant background, deploy multiple frames of action and forms of belonging.” Both neighbourhoods complicate our understandings of belonging, otherness and identity in racialised settler societies. Who is “in place” and who is “out of place” in both neighbourhoods are therefore contested in ways that exceed ethnicity and race, in part *because* there have been long histories of racialisation in both places. In this sense, I wish to add rather than subtract. This piece is meant to continue to provoke us to multiply not only our reference sites but also to foreground forms of change and differentiation in diverse settings that are beyond ethnicity.

2 | MIGRANT-DRIVEN DIVERSIFICATION IN SINGAPORE: INTERSECTIONS OF LABOUR, MIGRATION AND CIVILITY

In parts of Southeast Asia, it is the stringent management of migration flows and labour policies that underwrites its recent contours of diversity. Rather than race and ethnicity as key markers of difference, it is skills that differentiate new arrivals. No longer able to meet its own labour needs domestically, Thailand has as many as three million transnational migrants from Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar to fill its interstitial economic spaces as part of its rapid urbanisation since the 1980s. Within this regional context, Singapore brings in men and women from the Philippines, Bangladesh, China and India as low-waged, transient migrants because of the closely related fears that mixing migrants of the wrong sort and in the wrong numbers might either have negative economic and/or social effects. One of the spatial features of incorporating low-waged male labour migrants in cities such as Singapore is seen through the industrial enclave and the migrant worker dormitory (Ye, 2013, 2016a). The majority of migrants working in industrial enclaves and residing in large-scale dormitories are men from South Asia and China. The enclave and dormitory manifest particularly calculated spatial forms of migrant incorporation that shape the geography of difference in everyday life in the diversifying city. These spatial forms underline the theoretical connection, as well as the spatial disconnections, between labour migration and urban diversity in Southeast Asia. This is a key way in which urban theories of diversity might be advanced based on the non-Western experience. These forms of migrant-driven labour management certainly exist elsewhere, such as Egypt and Jordan (Azmeah, 2014), Indonesia and the Philippines (Kelly, 2002). They represent particularly distinct elements of non-Western cities that are often silenced within extant literature on the management of urban

diversity and encounters. These measures of governance not only exceed existing conceptualisations of urban diversity but, furthermore, emphasise the governmental dimensions of diversity management and incorporation by state agencies. These views neither privilege nor dismiss the importance of ethnicity. Rather, they emphasise how there are perspectives of differentiation (such as skills and space) that can consequently be ethnicised.

In my engagements with everyday diversity management in Singapore, I have also found that norms of civility are a subtle yet prevalent form of power through the mundane way in which urban diversity is encountered and governed in the everyday (Ye, 2016b). Aside from the state leading initiatives and campaigns that manage use of and behaviours in public space, residents also reinforce these norms through tacit, implicit ways. It is through norms that people are evaluated regarding whether they belong or not. It is, therefore, through norms that the power of management is reinforced. The violation of civility, norms and values by people, which in rapidly diversifying cities such as Singapore also include new arrivals, exposes the spatial grammar of coexisting with diversity, that is, dominant orderings in spaces of encounters with difference. These orderings highlight who knows how to behave and who does not. In this sense, (non)belonging is constituted through these orderings, where the overarching logics of state management regimes intersect with and are inflected with localised practices. Viewing urban diversity in this way 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.

The town of Jurong West lies in the western part of the city-state and may not immediately come to mind as a known site of living with diversity in Singapore. Yet, it was chosen as a field site for my research precisely because it is both similar to many towns or neighbourhoods in Singapore but also distinct in its migrant geographies. Typical of the rest of the country, Jurong West’s composition of old diversity is representative of the CMIO model, yet with a far larger number of newcomers than in most other areas of the city-state. The initial post-independence development in the 1960s in Jurong West was heavily industrial. It was designated for such use given its relative distance to the city centre, proximity to the western offshore islands where oil refining and chemical processing take place, as well as the port of Singapore, which remains a significant trade hub in the region and globe. The development of the town as a place of residence began when workers were relocated to Jurong West to live in state-subsidized housing development board (HDB) flats. The town remains a major employment centre and is steadily growing.² The

population living and working in Jurong more recently has come to include new migrants, reflecting the increase in Singapore's foreign workforce. These are predominantly low-waged migrant workers who are housed here in purpose-built dormitories, some of which are more remotely located than others as mentioned above. While there are some new migrants living in HDB flats, there remain large clusters of new arrivals who live separately from long-term residents. This separation of housing for a large percentage of the low-waged migrant population from longer-term residents further demonstrates the spatial demarcations between the local-born as well.

One implication of this is that public transit and its hubs, such as mass rapid transit stations and bus interchanges, especially at certain times of the day and week, become extremely tight and crowded spaces of bodily negotiation and movement. The sheer density of bodies in such public spaces is also an important aspect of understanding how everyday diversity is negotiated. It is these visceral and sensorial elements of encounter that generate affective reactions that often shape the ways in which different Others are perceived. This is evidenced by social media and popular discussions around multicultural living that often emerge from concerns over the everyday visual and embodied—indeed, *lived*—aspects of difference. Occasionally, these daily negotiations of living with difference bubble over into much more high-profile expressions of anger, such as the case of Anton Casey, a British expatriate whose comments on the “stench of public transport” and “poor people” in Singapore made headlines in 2014.³ In quotidian public spaces, however, it is much more common for people to be people guided by the principles of managing differences. Many of these principles are visualised through the numerous signs that are posted at transit hubs, such as the “No Littering” and “No Durian” signs. This does not mean that race is unnoticed in Jurong West; indeed, not adhering to the normative set of rules in public places highlights difference, whether this be race, ethnicity, nationality or gender. Civility is hence also subtly exclusionary in that people, *especially* new arrivals, are expected to behave in particular ways. Recognising the presence of social organising principles in any public space thus reveals not only the salience of exclusion but, furthermore, the calculated ways in which diversity is accepted along differentiated lines.

3 | UNDERSTANDING MIGRANT-DRIVEN DIVERSIFICATION IN AUCKLAND'S AVONDALE THROUGH CLASS

Like Jurong West in Singapore, the suburb of Avondale is often considered somewhat unremarkable in Auckland,

although the suburb is an ethnically diverse area that is the product of waves of migration over the neighbourhood's history. It lies at the western front of Auckland's inner city and was traditionally a working-class Pākehā area. Since the late 1970s, Māori and Pacific peoples settled in Avondale when a mix of gentrification and a decline in industries, as well as transport planning practices, displaced them from the inner-city suburbs they inhabited at the time. Since the 1990s, there has been a larger number of international migrants moving to Avondale. This trend resulted from the diverse population flows that emerged through the drastic liberalisation of New Zealand's immigration policy in 1987. The majority of international migrants settling in Avondale in recent years have been from the Asia region, with Chinese and Indian migrants forming the biggest groups. Migrants of Middle Eastern and African backgrounds have increasingly been settling in Avondale on this side of the 21st century, even though their numbers remain small. In 2013, approximately half of Avondale's population of approximately 21,000 was born overseas, whereas the overseas-born population for Auckland as a whole was around 39%. The extent of Avondale's growing ethnic diversification is underlined by the statistic that one of the four Census Area Units (CAUs) that comprise the suburb is the fifth most diverse CAU in New Zealand, meaning that no one ethnic group forms a majority. This majority-minority pattern in Avondale has emerged in line with ongoing changes in New Zealand's policy approach towards migration. There have been shifts away from migration regimes that presume a direct path between arrival, settlement and residence rights towards a focus on the management of multiple streams of populations holding varying temporary status (Collins, 2018). In this sense, the complexification of international migration into Avondale is indicative of, rather than an exception to, the country's policy change.

Another recent notable trend is migration from *within* Auckland. Intra-Auckland migrants are largely middle-class Pākehā who have come to live in Avondale as gentrified inner suburbs have become increasingly unaffordable. Consequently, the numbers and the percentage of Europeans in Avondale have been slowly rising, after a steep decline in the early 2000s. This increased influx of Pākehā closely relates to shifts in Avondale's socioeconomic profile. Avondale had traditionally been a working-class area and, like many of the surrounding West Auckland suburbs, Avondale scores highly in the relative deprivation index.⁴ This is, however, changing. It has been noted that “ongoing gentrification has resulted in the number of middle to high-income households growing and the manufacturing workers living in the area slowly being replaced by

professionals working in the CBD” (Panuku Development Auckland, 2017, p. 28). This influx of younger, higher-income earners has been prompted by skyrocketing house prices, which has closed off some of the more desirable locations in Auckland to first-time homebuyers. This population change is likely to continue due to extensive plans by the city to grow and revitalise the neighbourhood. Avondale has been designated as a key site of building activity to address the city’s housing shortage, and the neighbourhood’s population is projected to increase by approximately 8,000 people over the course of the next 15 years. In their advertising for new dwellings that are being built in Avondale, one of the housing companies explicitly draws attention to the “massive transformation” Avondale is experiencing “due to significant investment in the local infrastructure and an influx of young couples and families buying into the area” (Ockham Residential (2020)).

These changes are shaping how residents in Avondale perceive and interact across difference. While much of the literature on urban diversity, as shaped by earlier work on contact zones, has focused on how public spaces facilitate interactions, Avondale demonstrates that, although there is a dearth of public spaces in the neighbourhood, parochial spaces such as yards and sidewalks become significant places where people encounter one another. The ongoing ethnic diversification and the lack of a single ethnic majority in Avondale has meant that people have learned to become more or less indifferent to ethnic difference. What our research in the neighbourhood has shown is that difference is most prominently expressed through class. It is the middle-class, Pākehā newcomers to the neighbourhood who are identified as not integrating into Avondale by not behaving in socially approved neighbourly ways.

4 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We know that difference matters are place matters. Management of difference is powerfully and differentially constituted through the organising of policy and in everyday shared spaces in ways that exceed race and ethnicity as primary forms of difference. Where the structural workings of policy keep migrants in place while reinforcing their provisional incorporation, urban dwellers also actively, tacitly reinforce dominant structures, norms and imaginations of what it means to belong, whether it is through public civility or practices of neighbourly behaviour in everyday shared spaces. Both Auckland and Singapore are diversifying cities that speak back to the literature on urban diversity and encounters in the city by unbounding. Their unbounding is situated not only

empirically, beyond there being cases outside of the dominant centres of knowledge production, but more importantly, their significance lies in conceptual unbounding. That is, they are places that contribute to conceiving of difference beyond ethnicity. Encounters with difference in both Jurong West and Avondale are grafted upon broader spatiotemporal imaginaries of who is “in” and “out” of both place and time in the contact zones of settler cities because these are places that have already been living with difference for a long time. Indeed, our engagement with diversification should also prompt us to look at modalities of difference-making that are also diversifying to reflect these shifting politics of inclusion and exclusion. As societies grow ever more complex with (super)diversifying migrant streams, we need to carefully consider the changing spatialities, structures and barriers to belonging.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would especially like to thank my friend and colleague, Dr Jessica Terruhn, currently Senior Research Officer on the CaDDANZ project, whose research shaped my opinions within this piece.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Pākehā is a Māori word that emerged during colonisation as a way to distinguish between the indigenous population and the white settlers. It is sometimes used to mean non-Māori or white but is also commonly used for European New Zealanders. It is this second sense in which I use the term.
- ² Jurong West Masterplan 2013, https://www.ura.gov.sg/uol/master-plan/View-Master-Plan/master-plan-2014/master-plan/~/_media/dmp2013/Planning%20Area%20Brochures/Brochure_Jurong%20West.ashx, date accessed February 8, 2016
- ³ See: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/anton-caseys-comments-on-poor-people-in-singapore-make-headlines-in-british-press>, date accessed December 4, 2019
- ⁴ This is an area-based measure of socioeconomic deprivation in New Zealand (Atkinson J, Salmond C, Crampton P. 2014. NZDep2013 Index of Deprivation. Wellington: Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington. Available online: <http://www.otago.ac.nz/wellington/research/hirp/otago020194.html> date accessed February 27, 2020)

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