



SUBDIVIDED

CITY-BUILDING
IN AN AGE OF
HYPER-DIVERSITY

EDITED BY

JAY PITTER AND JOHN LORINC



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Coach House Books, Toronto

Jay Pitter dedicates this book to Kirsten Breanna Azan
John Lorinc dedicates this book to Joan York and Vera Halmos

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Introduction

Jay Pitter

I remember three things about second grade: the powdery aftermath that candy cigarettes left above my lips; the itchy floral dress my mother made me wear on special occasions; and my teacher, an Irish-Canadian man with curly hair that resembled an afro. It was the late 1970s – an unlikely decade for reasonable fashion or snack options, and an era when it was even more unlikely for a teacher and a student from vastly different experiences to forge an enduring relationship.

Our narrative begins in an elementary school located between a residential subdivision in Toronto's east end and the public housing community where I grew up. I was a gregarious, feisty little girl who often spoke out of turn. One day, while I was telling a story in the back of the class, Mr. Frank¹ stopped the lesson and said, 'It really doesn't make sense for both of us to speak at once. Is there something important you'd like to share with everyone?'

Typically, an eight-year-old would be silenced by such a question. But I confidently shared my tale. What came next was profoundly transformative. Mr. Frank acknowledged the value of my voice and, perhaps more importantly, provided a safe space for me to be heard. This was especially significant to me because I often felt unsafe as a child.

From that moment forward, our lives intertwined. He encouraged me to be a part of the larger classroom community, which progressed into excursions to the theatre, ballet, library and frequent pizza lunches. During summer vacations, Mr. Frank sidestepped the intimidating characters who patrolled the perimeter of my neighbourhood to bring me books and reminders that it was crucial for me to imagine myself beyond its narrow margins.

As I think back to this relationship, which shaped my life, I see how it could exemplify multiculturalism, as championed by Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. It was an instance of how the lives of two people situated in opposite social locations – Black and white, male and female, child and adult, poor and economically stable – intersected meaningfully within the context of a fast-growing city. It *seems* like a story that supports our proclamation that diversity does,

in fact, work. Yet as I observe today's teeming city-region, I know that such stories, and the intricate forces that create them, are far too rare to validate the efficacy of diversity and the paint-by-numbers politics of urban identity. It isn't that diversity is bad; it's inherent in the urban project's built environment and natural ecology. But when it comes to the human beings who collectively make up a global city like Toronto – a place with accelerating social, economic and ethnocultural divisions – the over-emphasis placed on diversity is lazy social shorthand, an attempt to smooth over ragged edges we struggle to understand. Civic leaders endlessly repeat the catchphrase 'Diversity is our strength,' as if it could resolve our issues or conclude difficult discussions.

Cities and Social Diversity

Cities are a constant negotiation of distance and difference. Across time, people have cast their hopes toward these collectively conceived places of possibility that are at once immutable and fragile. Within a few city blocks, towers of industry and influence preside over cars and cyclists competing for space, parkettes constrained by concrete and pedestrians navigating the new homeless – entire families huddling atop street grates.

As a result of unprecedented migration and intensification, we are building global cities in which we literally live on top of one another. We have created a complex convergence of stories that reveal growing social disparities. More than ever, many urban dwellers exist in a daily dissonance of economic despair and polarized ideology, while others revel in an affluent world of chic boutiques, high-end restaurants and impossibly expensive homes.

In recent decades, we've wrongly deployed the language and paradigm of diversity to address – or in some instances avoid – a complicated range of issues arising from, among others, improper policing, NIMBYism, gendered violence, transit inequality and an increasingly precarious urban labour force.

While there isn't a single agreed-upon definition or approach to diversity, the phenomenon is generally understood to be a way of defining and responding to the increasing number of 'others' within

cities. Of course, *everyone* is diverse: we are all distinct and different. However, in the language of municipal policy and planning, someone like me – a visible ‘minority’ and woman – has come to be understood and widely accepted as ‘diverse’ while my teacher turned lifelong mentor – a white male – would be considered ‘normal,’ the centralized status. Unspoken notions of power, differently valued bodies, spatial entitlement, and economic and social capital are all implicit in a term we have come to consider virtuous.

Using this flawed framework, which reinforces rather than redresses social power dynamics, we’ve developed public policy, business-based programs and mandated workplace training to increase our collective capacity to deal with difference. In fact, diversity is so knitted into Canada’s national identity and its values that, for some, any critique of this rhetoric amounts to a challenge to our collective sense of respectability. But while we’ve been focused on embracing the identities of ‘others’ and celebrating their differences, the economic disparities between city dwellers – and not just in Canada – have greatly increased.

In an urban context, accelerating income disparity has created an insidious form of social segregation within and across neighbourhoods. Here in Toronto, the most culturally diverse city in the world, University of Toronto sociologist David Hulchanski’s ‘Three Cities’ research² has shown how, over the past two generations, wealthy and poor neighbourhoods have become increasingly concentrated and isolated from one another, producing a social geography that offers a ground-level rebuke to the redemptive rhetoric extolling the virtues of diversity.

Conversations focusing on social disparity are on the rise. In his 2006 book, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*,³ American literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels argues that by emphasizing the celebration of difference – primarily cultural difference – for the past three decades, we’ve ignored the more uncomfortable matter of economic inequality.

Michaels reminds us that race is merely a social construct with no meaningful scientific legitimacy. But our preoccupation with racial or ethnocultural categories precludes a more fluid and holistic way of seeing the world, one that allows us to identify ourselves with other points of reference, such as economics, passion, politics, belief and

the kind of society we value. My reading of his work is not without reservation. Race and economic inequality are obviously not mutually exclusive, nor do we live in a post-racial society. However, his deliberations raise important and uncomfortable questions that should prompt us to strive for a discourse that goes beyond diversity's superficial rhetoric, policies and celebrations.

If Not Diversity, Then What?

In recent years, a few city-builders across North America and Europe have begun to use the term *hyper-diversity* to describe the social realities of these places we call urban regions. As a 2014 study commissioned by the European Union⁴ explains, urban hyper-diversity refers to an intense diversification of the population in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms, but also with respect to lifestyles, attitudes and activities. While theoretical frameworks are not wholly equipped to describe the beauty, contradictions and messiness of our lives, the concept of hyper-diversity enables us to move beyond the oversimplifications of diversity and identity politics and explore more deeply what, exactly, it means to live in twenty-first-century global cities like Toronto.

Refreshingly, the term implicates all of us, not just those whom we've come to categorize as 'others.' This approach is a good start because history has taught us that imposing labels on others, even in seemingly benign ways, is an oppressive act, one that prevents us from truly seeing and meeting each other on equal ground. Without prescribed categories or policies that reinforce divisions while negating social disparities, we are forced to be more observant to what legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw describes as 'intersectionality'⁵ – a theory that calls for us to acknowledge the multiple parts of our identities, constructed, as they are, in relation to the social environments in which we function.

The notion of individual beings comprised of multiple, intersecting identities that shape the way they experience the world disrupts the neat boxes on census documents and employer diversity forms. It is also a fundamentally urban idea, one that enables us to confront disparities across hyper-diverse cities. In addition to recognizing how

various elements of our identities impact the way we navigate spaces, inequitable systems and social environments, intersectionality requires us to acknowledge that our cities contain diversities within diversities within diversities. They are deeply complicated places.

A vivid illustration of urban hyper-diversity, and the fluidity of our identities as city-dwellers, occurs each June, during Toronto's Pride Parade, following a year of programming and dialogue. Fundamentally, Pride is a place-making initiative that galvanizes queer people and their supporters to recognize the right to be their full selves in public. Yet to take in the festivities is also to understand that there is no such thing as a homogenous LGBTQ+ community. Rather, Pride is a festival of multiple, nested and overlapping diversities, with stages for French, Filipino, South Asian and Caribbean LGBTQ+ communities and special marches for those who identify as transgendered and lesbian.

There are also spaces for ethno-racial youth and for individuals involved in punk and emo culture. Equally important, a large number of parade attendees are not members of the LGBTQ+ communities. More than ever, loved ones, friends and colleagues attend the parade to show their solidarity. Some members of the queer community, moreover, avoid the event for fear of disclosure or feelings of alienation.

It's also true that Pride has been critiqued in recent years for its corporatization, the subtle decisions about which floats and stages get sponsorship dollars and which don't, and the lack of equal space for members of the communities it strives to reflect. By using a hyper-diversity lens, we are able to assess multiple social and economic aspects of the parade, which can help us to understand the intricacies of communities that are wrongly perceived as monolithic, wherein all members have equal social power. This more complex and nuanced framework – the notion that our identities are fundamentally fluid, considering our social and economic contexts – can help us to actively co-create city-building processes that respond deftly to rapidly changing urban neighbourhoods.

The timing couldn't be better, because our insistence on the apparent strength of our diversity has caused us to ignore these shifts. Two decades ago, the notion of a gender spectrum was implausible, and no

one could have envisioned how digital culture would define a generation and ultimately change the way our cities function. Individuals are boldly redefining notions of identity and demanding more of urban spaces and city-building processes.

In my own place-making practice, I often encounter these complexities, which reflect the emerging hyper-diversity of cities. I recently met a young activist who is Asian, lesbian and an active member of her church. She challenges systems and works to carve out spaces for herself and others who embrace identities that have historically been at odds. Another young activist committed to uncovering Indigenous peoples' history and contributions in cities leads walking tours and is creating an archive to educate the public. For her, this place and its meanings are even more complex, fraught with unspeakably painful histories and erased contributions – but also incredible teachings and hope for a reconciled future. Her work extends beyond cultural archiving and is situated in place-making and policy development. These next-generation leaders expect to be centralized in city-building processes and defy imposed boundaries of space and identity.

Even for folks of my generation – Canadians who came here at an early age or are first-generation – our stories became a series of hyphenations, partially spoken in our grandparents' dialects. For years, I struggled with the seemingly incongruent details of my lived experience and the ways it has caused me to sometimes hover between and across spaces. And it's no surprise. My two most significant role models are my Caribbean mother, who taught me fortitude through her struggle to move us out of public housing, and an Irish-Canadian mentor, who modelled unconditional love. My story would not be possible anywhere but here. I love the city in all its promise. Still, I always carry with me an uneasy awareness of the stark disparities inscribed in our neighbourhoods, our cultural venues and our workplaces. I have numerous social and professional networks, yet they rarely intersect. Why is that, and what does it say about our city?

The experience of living and observing disparities across urban spaces is a reality for a growing number of city dwellers. Despite that, the relatively small number of designers, investors and decision-makers who have historically driven city-building processes don't have the

breadth of insight to address this degree of hyper-diversity. If metropolitan communities are predicated on the equal participation and vision of their citizens, the challenge that a global region like Toronto faces is actually an opportunity – to embrace an inclusive, creative and nuanced approach to city-building. This book presents a small yet compelling sample of those perspectives and voices.

A Conversation

I will never forget my final conversation with the teacher who became a beloved mentor. We sat across from each other in an Irish pub near Spadina and Bloor with pints of beer and a lot of history and mutual respect between us. I had recently recorded a radio commentary about him, which he'd heard on his way up to the cottage with a friend. He told me how proud he was to hear our story in the car and that I was the daughter he thought he'd never be permitted to have. You see, my mentor was a privately gay man who lived in a time that dictated his identity and restricted him from expressing his full self across urban spaces. Like that little girl who constantly spoke out of turn, he, too, was lodged in the margins. I imagine that's why he risked so much for me.

At the time, I didn't realize the differences between us, nor how incredibly progressive he was. Although he and I met long before we began to recognize the hyper-diversity that is redefining our cities, he intuited the need to address the social inequalities I'd undoubtedly encounter rather than focus on my 'diversity.' Besides emphasizing literacy, he gave me opportunities to explore urban spaces and leadership roles outside of my community. Through our conversations and explorations, he provided me with the tools to overcome social disparities and become a citizen of the city.

His example has informed the work I do now. Whether leading national engagement strategies, design equity charrettes or neighbourhood walks, I stress the importance of facilitating difficult conversations across difference – conversations intended to create social cohesion, belonging and equity.

From the moment that urban affairs writer John Lorinc invited me to collaborate on this anthology, it was clear that our partnership would

be marked by this same kind of conversation. My first response was ‘I’m not interested in writing a book about diversity; that’s boring.’ John wasn’t at all taken aback. Like me, he wanted to dig into something more complex, something that would animate what we’d both addressed in different ways in our city-building work and personal lives. We agreed to go beyond traditional notions of identity and unpack the ways that diversities within diversity could disrupt and improve current models of city-building.

Before we began to set up interviews or determine the book’s contents, we wanted to really talk to potential contributors. We listened for perspectives and professional insights that revealed an understanding of the city in all its complexity. Once we settled on the contributor cohort, it was important to expand the discussion and share our resources and networks. Coach House Books was immediately supportive and arranged for an on-site tour of their tiny yet powerful press – in this digital era, there’s something remarkable about seeing an actual book printed on a Heidelberg press. The excitement of our words being set in ink was palpable in that tiny room.

Yet we’ve always known this book was not just for reading. *Subdivided* aspires to encourage urgent and difficult conversation. The chapters that follow span issues such as hostile police and public relations, transit equity, new approaches to social housing, the emergence of digital gated communities, the complexity of culture and mental health, the shortcomings of youth arts funding, the lack of representation in municipal government, fights over the development of non-traditional religious institutions and the way Indigenous communities experience urban places. The pieces are both analytical and often deeply personal, written by contributors with exceptional insights and deep investment in the topics they address. We want *Subdivided* to prompt thoughtful but spirited discussions about the issues that increasingly confront the global cities now deeply defined by an unprecedented degree of hyper-diversity.

The case for conversation and inclusive city-building has never been more urgent.

Identity and the City: Thinking Through Diversity

Beyhan Farhadi

My story has an infinite number of beginnings, though I usually recount it as if there were only one. It depends on the time and place, on the audience and my mood, and on an imagined present and anticipated future.

It might begin in Edmonton, Alberta, where I was born to immigrant parents. Or Atlanta, Georgia, which marks a transition from their inevitable divorce. Or in Flemingdon Park, Toronto, where my mother did the best she could with very little. Or in Malvern, with my father, from whom I am now estranged. The story might end in Port Union, where I now live with my two children and my partner, and then pick up as if it were beginning again.

My story also pulls collective memory from Istanbul, Mombasa and Mumbai. It romanticizes Costa Rica, Spain and Thailand. If you wish, I can deliver it in Spanish. In my story, I am the rebellious, hurting teen, or the promising academic; I am the lover, daughter, mother, teacher, mentor, writer, friend, foe, menace, rabble rouser, intellectual and model citizen – though in my utopia, I am afforded the space to be all these things at once. It is a narrative of both places and people. I rarely tell it the same way twice.

It's an urban story.

With more than half of the world's population living in cities, the urban is always in our imagination, even if we don't live there. Whether it is in the way we project our desires onto the cityscape, in search of all it can offer us, or in the way we feel we know cities we have never seen, the imagination provides us with as much knowledge about the urban as our claim to or rejection of city living.

I approach this broad understanding of the urban as a human geographer and an urbanite. I consider the role of the city in our stories, taking it as the site of our location, destination and throughway. How do the settings of our stories limit us by organizing social life into categories of identity while simultaneously providing us with

the capacity to imagine people and cities as dynamic organisms in constant flux, defying categorization?

By drawing on the lived experiences of four people in Toronto – Abu Zaid, Avi, Danielle and Farhiya – this essay illustrates the role the city plays in shaping people as well as the role of people in shaping cities. I have used narrative as a method of getting at the complexity of identity – not to disregard the histories it is tethered to, but as a means of opening up spaces for a more plural and therefore satisfying understanding of identity.

What shifts in our framework might be required to think about gender, class, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, race, ability, nationality, [insert identifier here] – not as separate, not as intersectional, but existing at the same time, in ways that exceed any one categorization? If one of the conditions of success in professional and personal practice is asking the right questions, we must consider the possibility that there are questions we never thought to ask. My hope is that these stories provoke such ‘unthinkable’ questions, and that the work of responding thoughtfully gives space, as the city itself does, to a plurality of answers.

Abu Zaid

I was born in South Africa and I lived there for twenty years. This is the foundation of my identity. This is who I am, from South Africa to Syria to Canada. Living through the first twenty years of apartheid, I knew I was read by the colour of my skin, not by my religion. I knew then that we had to defend ourselves and fight to be understood as human.

When we came to Canada and 9/11 happened, I realized I was not only a visible minority but also a Muslim. So I was dealing with it again, after trying to live free of apartheid, after trying to assimilate in Canada. Now I have to defend myself as a Muslim – not so much as a brown person, but as a Muslim. And then I went home with my sexuality, and now it seems like it’s all three that I have to defend.