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Preface

The Devil Is a Local Call Away

So urbanists, tune in to the beats.

—Edgar Pieterse, "Youth Cultures and the Mediation of
Racial Exclusion or Inclusion in Rio de Janeiro and
Cape Town," 2010

At the height of the Cold War, Soviet wags loved to tell ironic tales about their political leaders. Communist Party general secretary Leonid Brezhnev inspired a number of particularly endearing stories, which always somehow related to his being slightly at sea in the middle of the world events swirling around him.[1] One such *anikdot* pitted the witless Brezhnev against a wily Richard Nixon.

Brezhnev and Nixon, it seems, were meeting in the White House when the American president decided to call God for advice. He summoned an aide, who brought a large white phone. A few moments after he had completed his consultation with the Divine Being, another assistant came in with a receipt. Nixon approved the bill of some $20 million for the call.

Flying back to Moscow, a furious Brezhnev inquired of the cowering Red Army officers how it was that the Americans could call God but he could not. He demanded that the entire Soviet military research complex dedicate itself to establishing phone service with God.

A few months later, it was time for Nixon to visit Moscow. The two leaders sat in Brezhnev's Kremlin office. At a critical juncture in the negotiations, Brezhnev summoned an aide, who brought a red

phone that was even bigger than the white one Nixon had used in the Oval Office. Brezhnev dialed a number and had a brief conversation. A few moments later, an obsequious aide shuffled into the meeting with a receipt for just 2 kopecks (or 0.02 ruble). Brezhnev was pleased, but perplexed. Why, he asked his assistant, once the Americans had departed, had it cost Nixon $20 million to place his call, but he, the Communist general secretary, had to pay only 2 kopecks? The subordinate quickly responded, "Because calling the Devil from Moscow is only a local call."

Yet paradoxically, this very Moscow where Hell was just a local call away also happened to be one of the planet's most creative cities. Internationally acclaimed authors were penning their best works, noble ballerinas were training, world-class actors were perfecting their craft, and perhaps the greatest collection of mathematicians in recent centuries were engaged in thought. Brezhnev's Moscow was the headquarters and command center for an ideological empire that extended to nearly every continent—it oversaw massive military and prison kingdoms on a scale that was previously unknown; and it stood at the center of an enormous hinterland covering a dozen time zones. Clocks from Prague to Pyongyang marked Moscow time. People with vast differences came and went every day; they jostled on streets that, indeed, resembled visions of Dante's *Inferno*. Moscow under Brezhnev underscored the reality that creativity does not necessarily coexist with virtue.

Living in and traveling to Brezhnev's Moscow forced me to ponder the apparent contradiction between the gray and repressed existence of everyday life in the Soviet Union (Stalin's terror had subsided, and had been replaced by an eerie, enervating inertia) and the bright and impressive personalities who seemed to abound. I found myself thinking about how beauty can emerge full blown from the most unbeautiful places. I began to understand that the urge to create beauty is a natural response to ugliness; it is a way for individuals and communities to establish their presence in a certain place at a specific time. Thus beauty and creativity can thrive in bleak environments such as Brezhnev's unhappy and dark capital.

But Moscow wasn't just any place; it was one of the largest cities in the world. How did its "urbanness" matter?

Over the course of my career, I have written about a diverse

group of cities: Saint Petersburg (aka Leningrad), Moscow, Yaro-slavl, and Yekaterinburg in Russia; Kyiv and Odessa in Ukraine; Montreal in Canada; Osaka in Japan; and New York, New Orleans, Chicago, and Washington in the United States. On the face of it, this is a rather random collection of cities. Yet there was a logic to their selection. My research and writing have been animated by the deep belief that one of humankind's primary challenges in the twenty-first century is to avoid repeating the slaughters of the twentieth. And because most humans live in cities, I am convinced that we need to figure out how people who can barely stand one another can nonetheless manage to live on top of one another in cities without killing each another. My writing about each of these cities encouraged me—and, hopefully, my readers—to try to think creatively about such larger questions of human existence.

I came to consider cities through an intellectual back door. During the mid-1970s, I conducted dissertation research in Leningrad for a study of Soviet trade unions. Once I had published my revised doctoral thesis as *Soviet Trade Unions*, I began to look for a new project.[2] The editors at the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, happened to be searching for a Western political scientist with research experience in Leningrad who might want to write a volume about the city for their Lane Series in Regional Government. The appropriate connections were made, and I began to think about how to place metropolitan government in Leningrad within a broad, comparative framework.

Examining the development of the Soviet Union's second-largest metropolis during the late Soviet period in my Lane Series monograph titled *Leningrad*—which appeared just as the city was once again being renamed Saint Petersburg—I argued that shaping the face of a great city is a complex task.[3] Order within a metropolitan region is the result of the accumulation of layer upon layer of social, economic, cultural, and political sediment. For the vast majority of residents, much of what takes place in a city seems spontaneous. To the extent that conscious rationality determines a city's fate, it emerges as the sum of the rationalities of its constituent parts.

This process of city building is particularly exposed at moments of great societal transformation, such as the one after the Soviet

Union's implosion and during the emergence of a new, market-oriented economic system in Russia. The Soviet collapse prompted a sweeping reorganization of Russian social, political, and economic life, which dramatically altered entrenched patterns of urban existence. As I demonstrated in *Money Sings*, social differentiation and fragmentation increase as market mechanisms take hold.[4] New cleavages generate previously unknown—or at least submerged—conflicts and competition, which alter the distribution of urban political and economic power. And this contention produces diverse interests, which appear, at times, to undermine the social, economic, and political underpinnings of urban life.

Growing competition among diverse groups requires those with custodianship of cities to confront this diversity, manage it, and convert it into an asset. In *Second Metropolis*, I explored the evolution of three burgeoning industrial metropolises—Chicago, Moscow, and Osaka—that were among the world's largest and fastest-growing cities at the dawn of the twentieth century. These cities' explosive capitalist industrialization spurred their wild expansion.[5] In this context, their political entrepreneurs were spurred to develop shared strategies, whereby groups and people that could hardly tolerate one another learned how to choose their battles carefully so they could enter into alliances that enabled them to move beyond the destructiveness of zero-sum competition. The result was a "pragmatic pluralism," which maximized any group's capacity to achieve its most important goals. However, in the cases of these three cities, practically minded municipal regimes collapsed in the face of a failure to institutionalize the practice of pragmatic pluralism in local political and social life.

I continued my investigation into the pragmatic acceptance of urban diversity by exploring the impact of transnational migrants in three communities that had long been divided by binary definitions of language and race: Montreal, Washington, and Kyiv. In *Creating Diversity Capital*, I argued that the growing presence of individuals who do not fit within long-standing group boundaries fundamentally alters the social, cultural, and political contours of such traditionally bifurcated regions.[6] For me, "diversity capital" provides a menu of responses to diversity that advances accommodation to differences. Like monetary capital, over time "diversity

capital" can accumulate interest and grow, be invested, be spent, be lost, and be put to good or bad use. And this entire repertoire can expand or contract. The rationale for developing diversity capital need not be as ambitious as convincing intolerant people of the virtues of tolerance. More simply, the objective can be to establish rules of the game that make it advantageous for intolerant people to act as if they are tolerant.

I came to understand through my research and writing that effective responses to diversity must become embedded in official—usually democratic—institutions. And just as important, they must promote customs and norms, and thus habits of acceptable behavior and thought. In other words, what happens on a bus or in a shop can be as important—perhaps even more important—as what happens at city hall. This insight led me to appreciate the critical role of the arts and sports in promoting cross-group contact.

In my next book, *Washington's U Street*, I argued that perhaps the greatest of all human achievements is the ability to add beauty to the world in the face of injustice, horrors, and stupidity.[7] This observation—which is drawn from the Washington novelist Olga Grushin's haunting debut novel *The Dream Life of Sukhanov*—allowed me to better grasp the connection between artistic and urban achievement.[8] Grushin's insight drew me toward an investigation of how particular urban settings promote creativity.

With the passage of time, I have come to believe that cities, because of their density and diversity, are a natural environment for the sort of cultural creativity that fascinates me: the creation of beauty in the midst of ugliness. Urban decay is not the only stimulus for humans to try to step out of themselves to add a note of splendor to the world; nor are cities a unique venue for creativity. But cities are places where people who often can barely tolerate one another crash together while coming and going to their houses and apartments, places of worship, doctors' offices, funeral parlors, restaurants, cafés, bars, theaters, stores, stadiums, and schools. Cities, together with the arts, Benjamin Barber has argued, "reflect a common creativity, a shared attachment to openness and transparency, and a core commitment to play and playfulness."[9] Cities are where people meet with a purpose and, just as important, without one. Indeed, providing spaces for aimless wandering may be one of

the most creative functions of any street or neighborhood or town. Such jagged urban edges are where cities both fail and succeed.

The urban experience in inherently contradictory and conflict-ridden places—such as Brezhnev's Moscow and Washington's segregation-plagued U Street—in almost any era are the urban wetlands of our lives. Like wetlands in the natural environment, such mixing bowls of urban diversity often appear to outsiders to be little more than wastelands. They are the first places to be reconceived, redesigned, rebuilt, and reconstituted when "reformers" grandiosely decide to "improve" our lives. Yet this arrogant reforming is a terrible mistake. Like wetlands, a city's jagged edges are among its most fertile and productive corners. And like wetlands, cities must be revitalized from time to time for them to continue to enrich society.

This book seeks to explore the relationship between urban life and creativity through a series of chapters examining the vibrant invention and reinvention of the various performing arts in specific cities—and even neighborhoods—at particular historical moments. It is more of a slide show than a video, and thus it offers a variety of snapshots rather than a panoptic, synthetic overview. My hope is that I have been able to select a half dozen examples, drawn from different eras and continents, to illustrate my three primary arguments: humankind needs more places where diversity can be converted into an advantage; cities offer the most likely venues for such a conversion; and the performing arts offer potent opportunities for doing so.

The selections of cities, performance styles, and eras that follow are highly personal. Some obvious stories—such as the emergence of jazz in New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century, and the birth of hip-hop in the Bronx a century later—have been omitted. I make no claim to comprehensive inclusion, though I have tried to incorporate examples that reflect different dimensions of the perpetual conflict between shocking urban realities and the beauty of human creativity.

More specifically, the book's journey begins with two examples—Naples and Osaka—drawn from among the many eighteenth-century cities controlled by early modern autocratic rulers that were being transformed by a rising middling merchant class

preoccupied with creating its own sense of self. Next, we turn to two of the great immigrant cities of the early twentieth century—New York and Buenos Aires—where longtime residents were forced to accommodate previously unimagined neighbors as new communities burst forth, seemingly out of thin air. And finally, we find the creative impulse in two contemporary cities—Cape Town and Yekaterinburg—struggling with postauthoritarian transitions and reincorporation into globalized economies and cultural practices.

Like flickering images on a computer screen, these chapters highlight how the dislocations of urban life during periods of intense and rapid social transformation spurred the invention of compelling new forms of the performing arts, which eventually transcended the boundaries of any one community or city. All six cases explored here represent moments when the lived experience of urban delirium has become the muse for extraordinary outbursts of human creativity.

This book, then, is about such moments of urban healing that emerge from the creation of new forms in the performing arts. It rests on the belief that cities are more than places of production and consumption. Cities heal through the joy of creativity. In the face of real and profound sorrow and grief, humans need joy. Successful cities nurture spaces where emotions are transformed into new forms of being. As the South African urban observer Edgar Pieterse argues, if you want to understand why the city is important, "tune in to the beats" of creative urban invention.