
Life in the Time of Covid-19 in a Hyper-Super-Gentrified Neighbourhood

Jerome Krase
(Brooklyn College, CUNY, USA)
JKrase@brooklyn.cuny.edu

The Covid19 pandemic provided an opportunity to look more closely at microsocial life in my ‘super’, and ‘hyper-gentrified’ neighbourhood. These value-laden terms have negative connotations for inhabitants of such privileged, ironically, stigmatized places. More importantly, the labels are of little value for ethnographers. This multi-modal autoethnographic essay explores daily life on one face-block in Park Slope, Brooklyn between the New York State Phase 1 lockdown on March 20, and the start of Phase 2 on June 22.

Introduction

Gentrification’s history remains closely tied to the process defined by Ruth Glass (1964). Since then it has been described progressively grander prefixes: Super (Lees 2003); Hyper (Shaw 2008); and Planetary (Lees et al 2016). They fall under two general types: Political Economic following Neil Smith (1979), and Cultural Consumption following David Ley (1996).

Literature on Gentrification describes it as destroying nostalgic urban neighbourhoods, and replacing them with individualism and consumerism. Gentrifiers are viewed as (neo)colonizers, appropriating working and lower-middle-class lifestyles (de Oliver 2016). John Joe Schlichtman and Jason Patch (2014) explored their own ‘culpability’ as gentrifiers. Schlichtman lived in Park Slope, and provided a description that would be unrecognizable to many residents, as most studies focus on sections where displacement was most likely to occur such as poor and working-class areas (Slater 2003, Halasz 2018).

Methods Review

As an antidote to the prejudgment, Michael Borer (2019) employs the rubric of ‘scenes’ to describe Las Vegas and compare how it is perceived by tourists as opposed to how it is lived by residents. Following Clifford Geertz’s advice, he immersed himself in the ordinary acts of locals and produced descriptions that reveal the ‘normalness’ of people’s culture without reducing its ‘particularity’ (Geertz 1973: 14). Borer described a scene as ‘[...] an expressive entity, and claims about it come in verbal, textual, visual, and behavioral forms’ (Borer 2019: 247).

For this article, I gathered Visual and Digital data (Krase 2018). Donna Schwartz suggested that the simplest and least ideological Visual Ethnography is best fitted to the research scene and most useful for humanist sensibilities (1989: 152). Autoethnography describes and systematically analyses personal experience to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al 2011: §1). As noted by Domínguez et al., digital ethnography, ethnography through the Internet, ‘maintains its own dialogue with the established tradition of ethnography and formulates its relation to this tradition in different ways’ (2007: 1).

Observations

I have lived on 9th Street since 1985 when I bought a two-family home during one of the periodic surges in housing prices in a ‘hot’ real estate market. Since then, prices have risen and fallen drastically several times. I have seen little if any forced ‘displacement’ here, as most homes are sold on after the death of an elderly owner, and heirs sought the best price. There have also been a number of resales between one another loosely-defined ‘gentrifier’. In recent years, a few, very wealthy buyers, have paid for costly renovations. The socioeconomic profile of 9th Street residents, drawn from Community Survey Census Tract 167, fit the general pattern of much higher than average education, income, occupation, as outlined by Halasz and other demographic studies of gentrification in Brooklyn (2018).

Virtual Observations

Because people have been reluctant to meet face-to-face during this health crisis, social media has increased in importance for communication. What was said ‘over the fence’ is now said via social media. Previously, if there was a problem such as a noisy party, interaction would be direct, such as knocking on a neighbour’s door. Now, passing the word by old-fashioned ‘telephone tree’ calls has been replaced by electronic media. Although the 9th Street Google Group was created before the crisis, it is used more often now, and COVID-19 related topics are frequent.

Observation 1

During the COVID-19 crisis, people have been encouraged to thank ‘essential workers’. One of the ways that this takes place in New York City is that every day at 7 PM residents from more than a dozen buildings make loud noises. Below is a facsimile of the messages ending the practice at the start of Phase 2 of the lockdown with a message about Black Lives Matter activities.

Subject: Re: NYers Plan 'Outdoor Moment' Protest For Minutes After 8pm Curfew
[New York City, NY Patch Date: Thu, 4 Jun 2020, at 9:01 am

‘Only a few people out last night. perhaps protest fatigue as are out at 7 pm making lots of righteous noise. we’ll be out again tonight at 8 for a few minutes to show solidarity. last night I sang one verse of “we shall overcome”, which was fantastic!

On 2 Jun 2020, at 6:52 PM, XXXX wrote:

‘Thanks - let’s use that 7pm clap energy to promote some change.’

On Tue, 2 Jun 2020, at 6:32 PM. Sent: Wed, 3 Jun 2020, at 8:36 pm:

‘We fully support the protests against police brutality and the curfew. Would it possible for the 8pm event to be something quieter than banging pots and pans? Perhaps singing as previously suggested or kneeling? As a family with a young kid and a baby, we have built our schedule with the understanding that 7pm is a sleepless time. As the evenings warm up and windows remain open, it will be difficult to schedule naps and bedtime around TWO noisy daily events. Thoughts?

Sent remotely, from XXXX’

On 3 Jun 2020, at 12:58 PM, So and so wrote:

‘We’ll join in, and I can tell our roof-top neighbors (who are on PPW), and try to get them to join [...] Rain or shine, or is there a rain-date? XXXX’

Observation 2

Because of the lockdown of many stores during the crisis, residents have been ordering more items to be delivered to their homes. The traffic in parcels is so great that they are often left at the doorstep. In several cases they have been misdelivered and notice given, or in this case packages were stolen, and the 9th Street Google Group has provided suggestions.

On 4 Jun 2020, at 5:14 AM XXXX wrote:

‘Hi – we’re on 9th between 7th/8th. Yesterday, one of our neighbors chased a woman down the block after observing her taking a package from their front area. She was carrying two large shopping bags of packages. Our neighbor demanded her package back (she gave it to her), and then the woman ran toward 7th Ave. Our neighbor described her as 50’s/60’s, Caucasian, with long black hair.’

On Thu, 4 Jun 2020, at 7:29 AM XXXX wrote:

‘I found two empty packages left on my table ripped open and empty. Seems unlikely the wind blew them onto my table. I’m sharing in case these houses were waiting for a package and it was stolen. XXXX @ XXX and XXXX @ XXX’

Observation 3

Most of the 9th Street Google Group messages concerned street noise, things for sale, looking for apartments to rent, and security. A few were celebratory such as this about celebrating a birthday of a long-time resident.

On Sat, 9 May 2020, at 7:37 PM XXXX wrote:

‘Hi XX, you may have gotten So and so daughter’s flyer re: singing Happy Birthday to her father on Tuesday 5-12 at the time block comes out to cheer first responders. It’s his 70th. She asked me to pass info around to those she may not know. It’s also 1st Mother’s Day without her mom. I sent her a message I read from block ass email but not sure if it was correct. If u have correct email send to me or her. I hope you and XXXX and all your family are well. Not even sure if you are home. So many in PS have homes away from city they have fled to! Stay safe. Kind regards, XXXX. Sent from my iPhone’.

Visual Observations

For at least a month, many block residents stood outside on their front stoops or yards, or on roofs at 7 PM, to join thousands of other New Yorkers to thank essential workers for their sacrifices in service to the city as a whole. Most banged on pots and pans; others made noises as loud as they could with bells or other, more or less, musical instruments. The festive noise-making lasted about five minutes, but was sometimes extended so they could greet the MTA Bus which passed by the street about that time. The appreciative bus driver would honk his horn all the way up the block in response.



Figure 1. Visual Observation 1. Roof Cymbals. Photo by Jerry Krase



Figure 2. Visual Observation 2: The Bus. Photo by Jerry Krase

Another way by which essential workers, especially those at a nearby hospital, were thanked was by placing ‘thank you’ signs outside of buildings. I surveyed the face-block and nearby streets for such grateful signage. I had studied the same streets for visible responses in the aftermath of destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 (Krase 2014), although most signs were simple, such a heart, others were very elaborate, and many were done by or with the help of young children as those below.



Figure 3. Visual Observation 3: Thank You. Photo by Jerry Krase



Figure 4. Visual Observation 4: Thank You Essential Workers. Photo by Jerry Krase

Because Prospect Park remained open during the lockdown people from all over the borough came to enjoy the space. The crowding was moderated by official signage that instructed park goers about safer behaviors. While looking for signs during my walks I came across a hand-drawn sign that warned, among other things, not to ‘organize play dates with other peoples’ kids.’



Figure 5. Visual Observation 5: Hand-Drawn Sign. Photo by Suzanne Nicoletti-Krase

The New York City Police Department also had a large flashing lighted sign that intermittently signaled ‘Be Safe’, and ‘Wear Masks’.



Figure 6. Visual Observation 6: NYPD Sign. Photo by Jerry Krase

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