
Pandemic, Protest, and Pandemonium: North Brooklyn, USA

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When I first proposed this essay, it was going to focus on public responses to and representations of this global pandemic with a focus on North Brooklyn. Since that time, however, a series of individual events have occurred in the U.S. and converged. Thus, the focus has broadened.

In early March, there were reports of elders dying in nursing homes in Seattle, Washington from Covid-19. This quickly spread and New York City became the epicentre in the U.S. Residents were told by Governor Andrew Cuomo to 'stay at home', and engage in social distancing (6 feet apart). Wearing masks was eventually advised by the Center for Disease Control (CDC). This was additional advice to social distancing and was beneficial in New York City, since it is difficult to maintain a space of 6 feet on city sidewalks. Children's playgrounds were closed. Sidewalks and residential stoops became substitutes.

North Brooklyn has become a vibrant destination for new residents and visitors. The East River waterfront has a new built community of mostly luxury high-rise developments, with some affordable units, and boutique hotels. These towers include upscale stores and restaurants at street level. Greenpoint's waterfront development is in at an earlier stage, but it is underway. The loud banging of pile driving is heard daily. A commuter ferry service was re-established. One had existed prior to the Great Depression (Reiss 2001). Trendy, boutique clothing stores, and bars have taken root near the waterfront as well as on the other commercial streets within the neighbourhoods. Many small, local businesses have been replaced by corporate chains such as Starbucks. Other merchants have been forced to close because of dramatic rent increases. The cost of living, in terms of food, housing and other services, has substantially increased thereby pricing out the working class and poor. Even modest row houses are selling for millions of dollars. Gut renovations of older residential properties are common, and luxury condominium and rental developments sprout from any available single lot or assembled parcels of land. The old ethnic flavour of these neighbourhoods has diminished. It is now more upscale, mainstream, multi-ethnic, selling artisanal wares. Williamsburg in particular is known internationally for its youth (hipster) culture and as a host to artistic and musical events. This transformation has not completely obliterated Williamsburg's Latinx and Hasidic Jewish communities where publicly supported housing exists, but the Latinx community has declined. In addition, the Polish community in Greenpoint has also been diminished by the increasing cost of housing and more general cost of living. The trendy, hipster culture of Williamsburg has spread to Greenpoint and Bushwick. This rebuilt and reconfigured community is in stark contrast to its industrial and deindustrialized past.

As in its industrial past, North Brooklyn continues to be a live/play/work community. This was not altered by the pandemic. Establishments selling alcoholic drinks and food

continued to operate exclusively through take-out. Taps of beer were brought to the front door and customers were served outside. Cocktails were sold ‘to-go’. Patrons would gather outside the front door of establishments. The idea of social distancing was either forgotten or ignored by some.

A sunny, warm Spring day and many are out. Some ignore recommendations for social distancing and mask wearing. People have congregated in Transmitter Park and crowd Franklin Street. The pizza slice shop remains a point of gathering. Residential stoops are used as a dining room. McCarren Park is also crowded. Many languages are heard. Young visitors are in town (Field notes, 2 May 2020).

Domino Park became so crowded that the *New York Times* reported the following account. At Domino Park in Williamsburg, a masked park employee walked amid sunbathers and picnickers, pointing to his face and telling people to put their masks on. Eric Freeman, 27, a mixed martial arts fighter who lives in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, pulled the mask around his chin up over his mouth when he was confronted, only to pull it back down when the park employee was gone. ‘The mask is really annoying’, he said, lifting a paper cup filled with what appeared to be pink lemonade. ‘How do you drink with a mask on?’ (Goldstein and Kilgannon 2020).

Social distancing circles were later created in the park to keep people apart (Schultz 2020). Meanwhile there was racial bias in the enforcement of social distancing. Black and Brown individuals were arrested, while in White communities masks were distributed (Southall 2020).

Masks have become a fashion statement. They are sold and bought in all styles, colours and prints. Even ‘The Gap’ clothing store features denim masks with the caption, ‘We’ve got you covered’. Mask wearing varies for each person as well. Some do not cover their nose, while others wear them under their chin. And there are those who do not wear one at all.

In March a young, black woman, Brionna Taylor, who was an emergency medical technician was killed by Louisville, Kentucky police as they raided her home in error. She was asleep (Burke 2020). In addition, a 25-year-old black man, Ahmaud Arbery, was chased, gunned down and killed in southern Georgia. After public outcry, three white men were finally arrested (Fausset 2020). Anger against police violence toward black citizens has been raging throughout U.S. history. The final straw came with the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis by a police officer choking him with his knee. With this, U.S. cities erupted into protests and in some places, looting also occurred. But the killing of black men does not end there, and the list continues to grow.

This series of individual events, Covid-19, a ‘stay at home’ policy, Black, Brown, and low-income persons disproportionately contracting and dying from the virus (Blow 2020), the continued display of racial bias, brutality and killings by police officers, unemployment and loss of jobs, and George Floyd’s death by choking sparks a social movement. All of these events unite to create this moment in history, reminiscent of Weber’s notion of elective affinity (Weber 1958).

There is a joining of crises. As protests, looting and arson continue in cities around the U.S. as well as in Black communities in Brooklyn, North Brooklyn shows signs of a somewhat usual Saturday night. There are groups gathered on street corners engaged in loud conversations. And the streets near the waterfront connecting Greenpoint and Williamsburg are populated with pedal bicyclists and electric powered bikes. The nightly soundtrack during this pandemic includes NYPD helicopters patrolling the city.

Silent protests take place in McCarren Park, and pop-up protests throughout North Brooklyn. Domino Park served as a destination for protesters marching over the Williamsburg Bridge from Manhattan (Field notes, Saturday, 30 May 11pm-7 June, 2020).

The pandemonium during this juncture stems from the Trump Administration and their unwillingness to address the virus in any rational way. The U.S. was completely unprepared for it, even though it was foreseen. Trump engaged in racist rhetoric by referring to Covid-19 as the ‘Chinese virus’. He denies science and expert scientists and medical authorities. Trump denies the virus and takes the position that it will go away. He disagrees with the renowned Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), and has recommended treatments to Americans without medical basis or knowledge. He will not wear a mask. He recently held a campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Some of his supporters wore masks while others did not. People were not systematically kept apart, nor were masks required. He proudly claimed that he told his officials to slow down testing for the virus because testing increases the cases. Meanwhile, around the country there is presently an uptick in new cases where places re-opened quickly. Trump wants states re-opened in order to get the economy moving. By not addressing the virus, he is responsible for the economic decline. There is an expression that is used, ‘the fish stinks from the head’. We are witnesses to it. This President incites hate among diverse groups of Americans. He has unleashed and condones white supremacy. During the protests, he walked to a church near the White House with members of the administration to hold up a bible. As police cleared the crowds in his path, they used rubber bullets and tear gas on peaceful protesters exercising their freedom of speech. He used the Fourth of July, U.S. Independence Day, to declare that he will ‘defeat the radical left’ (BBC News 2020).

As New York City has entered Phase 2 of re-opening, more people are out in North Brooklyn. Playgrounds contain children and their guardians once more. Hair salons are busy again, some with schedules full weeks in advance. Outdoor dining has opened with restaurants arranging tables and serving customers on the sidewalk or in the street. There are fewer people wearing face masks. Given where New York City began as the epicentre of Covid-19, it has done well and plans to re-open fully in August. Phase 3 of re-opening: mostly personal care businesses, started in early July with the exception of indoor restaurant dining. That has been delayed with the resurgence of cases in other states and poor compliance to safety guidelines (McKinley and Ferre-Sadurni 2020). New York’s Governor Andrew Cuomo advised, ‘our actions today determine our numbers tomorrow [...] I strongly urge everyone to closely follow state guidance on safe practices and local governments to enforce that guidance. Being New

York tough means being New York smart: wear a mask, wash your hands and practice social distancing’ (Loud 2020).

The future of everyday life within the context of this pandemic is unclear, and this essay raises more questions than it answers. How has these crises affected North Brooklyn? Will the large-scale development projects continue? Do their designs make sense given communal spaces and gyms? Will there be too many buildings that eventually lay dormant? What is the fate of small businesses and trendy boutiques? Some have already closed. And how will ordinary people, who find themselves unemployed, survive and recover while the larger city is also in dire need of recovery? In Spike Lee’s new short film, *New York, New York*, he pays tribute to New York City and films a city on ‘pause’ at the height of the virus with empty streets, but overcrowded and harried medical facilities. Lee comments, ‘I would not want to be in any other place in the world, but here in the epicenter’ (Spike Lee 2020).



Figure 1. Social Distancing. Photo by the Author.



Figure 2. Waiting at a Pizza Slice Shop. Photo by the Author.



Figure 3. Residents Engaged in Protests.



Figure 4. Correcting Trump's Advice. Photos by the Author.

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