
Quotidian Mobility and Community Activism¹

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Although there are multiple meanings and interpretations of spatial use and urban life, here I investigate the quotidian: daily activity encapsulating the mundane. A phenomenological outlook employing ‘footwork’, which includes an array of pedestrian exploration of the urban landscape not limited to the flâneur or dérive, is utilized as the best means to arrive at an understanding of an authentic, bottom-up, perspective of a community as well as a means of data access. In the process of this community exploration, the importance of the visual, ‘seeing’ and materiality is noted when exploring semiotics and vernacular landscapes as a version of community activism hidden within daily activity.

Keywords: Ethnography, walking, urbanism, visual studies, ethnic communities.

Introduction

The complexities and layers of city life continue to be explored. Conceptions of spatial appropriation and use acknowledge variations in interpretive meanings. What is appropriated and interpreted by embedded urban dwellers may hold as unnoticeable to visitors. Investigations, queries and means of explorations include the discussions of city design and flows of human and cultural capital. This article, by focusing on the neighbourhood level, explores city meaning from a pedestrian perspective by employing the tools of the urban explorer — Walter Benjamin’s flâneur (1983) and Guy Debord’s dérive (1961)) — to understand the social cityscape. As Michel de Certeau’s (1985) notion of the city and everyday life exemplifies an organic development of neighbourhood and areal identification, a grounded approach through walking or pedestrian activity presents itself as a logical means to explore it. As noted recently, as a means of studying the urban social landscape and urbanity, walking allows an understanding of ‘urban vernacular specificity that comparative ethnographic methodology both recognizes and builds upon.’ (Pardo and Prato 2018: 5). This allows one to acquire a neighbourhoods’ representation of a city as its synecdochic meaning; hence its significance and intricacy. Essentially, what a city means to its residents is what they infuse into and extract from the neighbourhood in which they live. Walking is simply one medium to explore the city as a gateway to understanding urban life as it steers the walker to experience and appreciate all of the human senses (Low 2012). The immersive full sensorial or synesthetic embodied experience allows one to absorb the backdrop, or scenery, of community life including the sounds of automobile and pedestrian traffic, music from storefronts and other familiar places to the common areas of congestion (Pink 2009, Gallagher and Prior 2017). Such commonalities embedded in the quotidian, embolden residents to appreciate and reify a communal identity, while also stimulating academic and research interest.

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The Search for Community Culture

Historical studies of urban neighbourhoods focused on how larger economic forces preceded the development of dense and diverse communities of residentially unstable renters with a lapse of tight communal bonds and, with some exceptions (Whyte 1943, Jonassen 1949), offered little discussion of permeating the field (Burgess 1925 [1967], Zorbaugh 1929, Cressey 1932).² What was seen as neighbourhood disorganization was supported by field research which covered the growth of taxi-dance halls and rooming houses in economically and socially repressed communities. Each of the two urban phenomena arguably supported the notion of the negative impact massive urban development had on human social relations such as the nuclear family. The residue of city growth and development presented a heavily dependent, fragile neighbourhood structure weakened as transient derivatives of invasion and succession (Burgess 1925). Although the argument of disintegrating communities was dominant in the early 20th century, it was challenged by Jonassen and in more detail through the work of William F Whyte in *Street Corner Society* as he discussed, although in an appendix, the procedures he used to gain entry into a community.

In his Boston neighbourhood study, Whyte (1943) acquired knowledge of an Italian neighbourhood by an informal walking tour of the area. When he observed young men and women congregating in groups at a local settlement house, he was able to initiate a relationship with an eventual informant who would help launch his study and establish a friendship that would last several decades, ‘Doc’. The engagement and outcomes of the mechanisms and techniques of this process of gaining entry have been documented in various studies that emphasized the necessity of comprehending the social context (Gans 1962, 1999; Anderson 1990, 1999; Fong 1994; Pardo 1996; Sanjek 1998; Krase 2002, 2004, 2012a, 2012b; Venkatesh 2002; Kusenbach 2003; Scott 2004; Britton 2008; Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017; Abraham 2018).

Elijah Anderson acquired a robust understanding of the social-psychological interplay of street-level interaction (Anderson 1990: x). The results of his ethnographic work yielded informative accounts and explicit descriptions of neighbourhoods in Philadelphia while explaining the norms guiding the fragile and strained interactions of pedestrians. Meanwhile, Sudhir Venkatesh (2002) was initially viewed as one of the intrusive, ever present state agents

² Although he did not document his entry into the field, Jonassen emphasized the cultural factors in the spatial trends of a Norwegian Settlement in the metropolitan area of New York City. He noted that, in contrast to a strictly “biotic” or economic based trend of social forces, which include rising real estate values due to business development, Norwegians settled in areas of the city which reflected their cultural roots. Thus, since Norway is a bucolic fishing and boating culture, Norwegians who migrated here during the late 19th and early 20th century often sought areas that were characterized by greenery and close access to the sea or waterway. Rather than emphasizing the push factors of economic growth and residential development Jonassen suggests that there was a pull factor of residential preference in which the residents moved to areas that were strongly influenced by their cultural roots. Thus, through field research he was able to find evidence suggesting the resilience of community.

in a public housing project in Chicago which made his foray into the field problematic. He eventually learned how to identify with the residents by volunteering personal information voicing his angst concerning a lack viable income and employment. Residents were eventually able to re-establish his role from state agent to academic ‘hustler’. Given the nature of poverty for residents in public housing, the role of a ‘hustler’ as one who seeks economic survival, possibly through an enterprising informal means, was contextually pertinent to them. Once his presence was attributed recognizable characteristics, he was eventually permitted access to data in the form of interviews and allowed to collaborate with informants by sharing social space. Scott (2004) employed this understanding of researcher repertoire as he studied the relationship of gang members prior to and after incarceration in Chicago. His purposeful ‘Ethnographic Immersion’ involved a revelation of past deviant activity to informants as a streetwise academic hustler which increased his level of access and trust with respondents (Scott 2004: 114). Jannaki Abraham’s (2018) study of two cities in India (Thelassery and Bikaner) details the importance of neighbourhood effects on gender at the sub-community level. For example, within the Bikaner neighbourhood, Abraham features gender differences between two Muslim congregations (Mohallas). Women in the Choongaraon Mohalla are encouraged to venture outside of the home and become school teachers; whereas, the educational pursuit of those in Churigarh are stifled. Thus, neighbourhoods/communities may have similar class/caste and religious categories, but even within them their cultural practices may differ. This process of an immersive query can also be summarized through the work of sociologist Howard Becker. In the beginning of his instructional essay, he suggested that the researcher as participant-observer: ‘gathers data by participating in the daily life of the group or organization he studies.... he is studying to see what situations they ordinarily meet and how they behave in them’ (Becker 1958: 652). The reflexive work appears as a natural outgrowth of the process in which the researcher must ‘learn how the group members define him’ (Becker 1958: 655). His concern, not dissimilar to the more recent studies, was for researchers to understand their implied role from informants and how it may help or jeopardize validity and access.

Kusenbach (2003) used a similar strategy labelling the activity of access as the ‘go-along’ in which the fieldworker accompanies individual informants in their ‘natural’ settings while they are engaging in their daily routines. This facilitates the researcher’s access to forms of data not available through interviews but through the observation of personal, and lived biographies; thereby, uncovering ways individuals apply depth and meaning to their daily round in their lived social experiences and not by the interviews or, as she refers, the ‘static encounters’ which forces recall. Her ‘go-along’ involved shared embodied spatial experiences between the researcher and community residents. As argued elsewhere this approach ‘has enabled research interviews to be informed, not just by the lives of research participants, but also by the landscapes in which they live’ (Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017: 2). Furthermore, this mobility method emboldens residents further as the researcher temporarily yields control to the informants in an effort to gain access and overcome boundaries created by community gatekeepers.

Meanwhile, Krase emphasizes the visual component to the study of community and urban life. Here, the visual is not simply an addendum to the research process, but a key element to decoding the usage of space by community residents themselves. Thus, it is a theoretical and methodological tool to understanding the practice of spatial identity formation and meaning.

Whereas a visitor to an ethnic neighbourhood or community would readily see a flag or other symbol from a home country with a limited superficial interpretation, Krase asserts that an advanced researcher or 'spatial semiotician would recognize that social and cultural meanings are attached to urban landscapes as well as to the people and activities observed on the scene' (Krase 2002: 277).

Footwork as a mobility method not only made investigators available to informant recruitment by 'hanging out' and as a circulating fixture in the community. As an immersive member of the community, albeit temporary, gaining a certain level of trust and familiarity with an area is inherently visual. What is included in this survey and observation of the neighbourhood through its rhythmic pulses of daily activity and residential routines, is the researcher's proximal experiences to the vernacular. Essentially, while one is being seen one also learns ways of seeing (Wagner 2011a, 2011b; Krase 2012a).

Spatial Meaning: Semiotics, Habitus and the Visual

Research that focuses on the socio-cultural aspects of communal life reveals properties that distinguish certain semiotics of space. Residents carve and impute meaning on social space which researchers are initially unaware of but eventually grasp and interpret. The attribution of multiple meanings on space that evokes a sense of familiarity is what Lyn Lofland defines as realms that vary in significance according to usage (Lofland 1998). Space which is characterized by a continuous presence of strangers or 'others' is noted as the public realm. In such an environment, particularly an urban one, individuals have a categorical, and thus limited, repertoire of knowledge to base assessment of one another. Character evaluations are limited to the manner of dress, body language, and other mainly non-verbal cues. Despite the variations in presentation, what is often common and understood in this realm, is the notion of 'Civil Inattention' as a protocol of social rules that govern interaction based on an informal consensus of recognized social distance or personal space (Goffman 1963). These rules are often adhered to and respected with few normative violations. Most often, however, individuals seek and create their own private space or, in the case of groups, parochial realms which represent carved social niches. Often such social spaces are defined as situational and temporary as a group that claims a niche does so for a specific event or culturally specific ceremony as when a family decides to occupy a portion of a public park for a picnic. In this manner, as claimed social space for semi-private use, communities, particularly ethnic communities, represent forms of non-situational and relatively stable parochial realms where dominant rules and structural scripts vary as they are circumscribed by locals. Within this understanding, the claim for turf is understood to be taken by those who share semi-primary kin-like bonds. Thus, community and neighbourhood members may not only claim a similar ancestry but engage in historically

significant shared cultural practices such as a carnival or parade. Their common identities further reinforce aspects of the parochial realm through territory or turf (Jacobs 1961).

The implications of these collective practices coincide with Bourdieu's notion of habitus as a form and structure of embodied practices that shape and are shaped by such patterns. An inclusive component reflects the scale of this concept beyond an individual or group collective to a community conveying a 'demeanour' or disposition on a grander scale. This often reflects conventional knowledge of an area which is often created by 'the fusion of space ... through the repetition of behaviors in physical space' (Fraser 2013: 974). Areas become bounded with collective memory and meaning as different groups construct their own territories and researchers are able to study how area residents live within them in contrast to the constructed, top-down intention of city politicians and real estate interests.

Familiar spatial behaviours accented with rhythmic synchronicities of movement and use patterns influence visual representations intensifying spatial identities. These contextually driven agglomerations of group identities, affiliations and pedestrian activities accompany an infusion of meaning and place identity. These spaces of representation, according to Henri Lefebvre, are known places of active cultural representation embedded with associated images, signals and an accretion of pedestrian activity (Stanek 2011).

Inspired by the work of John Brinckerhoff Jackson (1984), Kruse (2012a: 19) argued that:

'seeing' the uses and or meanings of space requires sensitivity and understanding of the particular culture that creates, maintains, and uses the re-signified space... [recognizing that] the most powerless of urban dwellers is a social 'agent' and therefore participates in the local reproduction of regional, national, and global societal relations.

A researcher gains the skill and knowledge at 'seeing', those who occupy and define vernacular landscape are already actively engaging Wagner's (2011) concept of Materiality. He defines it as a constellation of relationships between culture and social life reflecting a fusion of ideas, artefacts and visual elements including symbols and signage. Within this complex pattern of being is an emotional and attitudinal attachment to places and things for an immersive experience accentuated by the visual, but not limited there with greater sensorial potential (Gallagher and Prior 2017, Kartal 2021). More specifically, one can get residential behavioural cues about motility from street vendors informally occupying unused portions of a sidewalk. Formal pedestrian use may involve rules of maintaining a flow of foot traffic, but in such an environment the presence of obstacles is understood and expected. Moreover, the presence of police in most neighbourhoods represents visual signs of social control and safety to some, while in others they stoke fear and external threat to community sovereignty and freedom.

This article draws on past research and reflects an ongoing study of the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn, New York. I argue that by circulating the community through the pedestrian walkways, I was able to understand how the experiences of the everyday or mundane behaviors of residents lead to ways of 'seeing' the 'ordinary details of quotidian routines to the

foreground’, and an eventual understanding of the importance of materiality for activism in a vernacular landscape (Shortell 2015: 5).

East Flatbush

Brooklyn is one of the largest cities in the United States with a population over 2.5 million according to the recent United States’ Census. Its neighbourhoods are composed of the ethnic mosaic many speak of with great pride, noting the vitality, richness and strength of each. An area in the central portion of Brooklyn, defined as District 17 by the New York City Planning Department, is known as East Flatbush and is the focal area of this study. The district has a western boundary that zigzags along Bedford, Nostrand and Glenmont avenues and East 32nd street. The northern boundary includes the avenues of Clarkson, Utica and East New York bounded by the L.I.R.R. (Long Island Railroad) tracks to the south. According to the New York City Planning department, the total population is reported at 155,252, of which 88.4% are classified as non-Hispanic Black or African American, followed by those of Hispanic origin (7.8%), non-Hispanic of two or more races (1.6), and non-Hispanic Whites (1.4). When taking into consideration the reported ancestry in the 2013 American Community Survey roughly 66% of the Black population in the district claimed a West Indian Identity.

Within the confines of this predominantly Black Caribbean Community, residents address their ‘quality of life’ concerns through the local, neighbourhood-level forum for civic engagement known as the community board where they meet the police, and elected representatives at the federal, state and city levels along with local board members. Through an official mandate in the New York City Charter, the community board is allowed to function with minor oversight from the Brooklyn Borough President (Goodman 1974). Such a law underwrites a localized belief in self efficacy and community sovereignty. Indeed, local boards across the boroughs of New York City are empowered to write and selectively enforce their own rules and regulations.

Although the fifty board members are residents appointed by either the Brooklyn Borough President (25) or City Council Members whose district falls within the Board boundaries (the remaining 25 divided among those council members), participation at monthly board meetings is extended to all present. Consequently, any person can attend board meetings and participate. The monthly general meetings are officially guided by Roberts Rules of Order which are arbitrarily followed with little rebuke from those present. This arrangement strengthens a belief in a certain amount of spatial autonomy that board members and many community activists have extended to average residents as well. For example, one thinks of multiple Block Parties and Summer Street Festivals, such as the Unity Walk, where a portion of a street is closed to vehicular traffic allowing residents occupy the entire thoroughfare while patronizing vendors, listening to music and entertainment with a distinctive Caribbean beat. Organizers, through the community board, are able to appropriate space to disrupt the rhythm of vehicular traffic while enhancing pedestrian use. At least during the warmer days of spring and summer, the residents have an expansive motility and expanded range of mobility for their identity construction —

these are Caribbean events. Throughout the rest of the year this contraction of expression does not negate its presence; in fact, because of its prevalence it may be of equal or greater importance as it is a part of the quotidian.

Footwork as Access to The Vernacular

One of the most effective means of gaining an understanding of the semiotics of East Flatbush and the place-based habitus of the residents was initiated through informal undirected walks throughout the district. Rather than solely engage in the wanderings of the flâneur as representing a way to explore and understand urban life in the area, I also employed the *dérive* as I allowed myself to be ‘drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters’ that I found (Debord 1961). The value of the latter approach is rooted in the situationalist’s revolutionary practice of re-defining urban life away from the spectacle created by consumption or top-down city planning to an urbanism characterized by ‘what an ordinary person might see as they traverse space’ (Manzo 2012: 100). This affords an opportunity to experience and grasp the patterns of the rhythms and flows defined by residents’ spatial use; thereby, enhancing neighbourhood familiarity (Williamson 2015). Essentially, the cadence of the bobbing and weaving of the crowd formulates the backdrop of the community. It may be an unseen, but the sensed component of an ethnic community that residents feel marks it as their own in a city ruled by economic forces and commercial interests. Distant places like Manhattan and other neighbourhoods with foreign faces, smells, and paces are beyond their control, but East Flatbush represents a community of their own (Low 2012).

Understandably, a slew of visible data and access is most available in the warm spring and sweltering summer months when residents are gathered on their front steps or strolling in the midst of the boisterous cacophony of blaring Caribbean music from either cruising vehicles or homes — one can be confronted with a combination of both on weekends. Such displays of an Afro-Caribbean culture are often, and sometimes grudgingly, accepted as a common marker of a Caribbean community. The musical rowdiness on main commercial strips such as Church and Utica avenues is complemented by the quieter exhibits ranging from the bundled seven-foot stalks of sugar cane leaning against corner grocery stores and fruit stands to men baring dreadlocks hawking boiled corn or some other commodity competing with businesses that specialize in Caribbean food. Not to be undone, the stores respond to the hawkers by extending their commerce of jerk chicken and roasted corn heated over coals in split barrels to the sidewalk. Residents who desire to cook their own meals can often find their raw ingredients at either one of the local supermarkets, fruit stands or, smelly fish stores.

However, this is a community within a larger urban setting and not all displays show a Caribbean distinction from prevailing cultural practices. Similar to Majors and Billson’s description of masculinity in their book *Cool Pose* and Elijah Anderson’s portrayal of it in *Code of The Street*, in this central Brooklyn Neighbourhood there exists a mixture of African-American and Afro-Caribbean men of various ages ‘hanging out’, idly standing on street corners ‘posturing’ or projecting a socially agreed form of toughness (Majors and Billson 1992, Anderson 1999). It is mostly the younger men who swagger in their sagging jeans with a Pit

Bull in tow. Such samples of the between spaces of pedestrian activity supplement the notion of transitional space as the ‘middle ground’ between the field, formal interviews and an analytic report for presentation (Churchill Jr. 2005). There is much to place-based meaning which can be understood even in the so-called ‘between’ spaces rife with pedestrian activity. Eventually this continual, ‘purposeful stroll’ permitted access to valuable data through an informant who was apparently gauging my level of seriousness for the study by regarding my continued circulation throughout the community while I attended various meetings in addition to being an ever present and inquisitive investigator.

Activism in the Quotidian

I had the opportunity to engage in what would be a series of ‘go-along’ walking activities with an interviewee who would later become a valuable neighbourhood informant. I met this informant after attending multiple public meetings and nearly all of the community board’s sub-committee meetings. I was granted an initial interview that ultimately lasted four hours and subsequent, shorter interviews. I was eventually asked to accompany them on their daily routine of paying bills and making rounds to various locations throughout the community board district and beyond. I felt this would be advantageous since this particular individual was described as having an elusive political influence and decisive power in getting political candidates elected. Often influential movers and shakers in the political arena travel with an entourage as an ostentatious display of power; however, this diminutive person travelled alone and oftentimes barely noticeable by anyone. I was able to understand how this informant’s particular strategy, an apparent informal acephalous organic activism that has been noted by Matsuda (2018) as an effective means of addressing community needs, involved covert political strength. I learned of the qualifying characteristics which granted me access to this ‘go-along’ when asked:

‘You are alone. You are observing and shrewd to make yourself seem invisible. No one notices you when you go to these events and you don’t say anything. You wanted to learn and would not speak much. Others in the community who came to me were not interested in learning they were interested in themselves because they were running for office. You were not. Many of the men in the community were about ego and you were not because of the way you approached.’³

The methodological requisite of fading to the scenery and minimizing exposure complementing and reflecting the quotidian was seen as essential in making the ‘go-along’ possible. This, in contrast to a repertoire of previous experiences the informant had with others seeking information.

‘There have always been people coming to me either about a job or some community concern, since I am a community person. They always want something and never give in return. They’re demanding and arrogant when I ask them what they know about the community. They say they know, but I’ve never seen them out

³ Interview, June 2012.

shopping, going to meetings or even block parties to just socialize. It is always about grandstanding and then leaving. They know nothing except stroking their ego and are not interested except for their platform. They don't watch and be observant.⁴

As I walked side-by-side with this informant I took out a notepad and initially jotted down observations and particular points. After a while, I simply observed and took notes since there were recurrent examples of tactics that became increasingly relevant and easy to remember. Other times there was an insistence that I write down certain facts and was given information primarily in the form of political flyers that were often posted throughout the community and quizzed on interpreting their effectiveness, something I would learn through subsequent walks. The errands to the various local stores and businesses were a means of extending their particular assertive but charming personality to garner possible support either for local political functions or, to be used as a future show of strength in fundraising events through ticket sales and journal ads. In one particular instance we walked to a local clothing store and were immediately greeted by the proprietor who had a standing relationship with my informant who introduced me as a person interested in learning about the community. They both proceeded to engage in a brief discussion about an event that was going to take place at a catering hall; an agreement was made where the proprietor promised a donation in the form of decorations. We continued to a series of other community stores where the process was repeated with some promising participation in future events. I observed the benefits of this nomadic bartering for resources. First, it allows the person seeking support the ability to establish an interpersonal relationship with the business owner, something invaluable in a community setting. Secondly, this alliance tends to become semi-exclusive as subsequent attempts by others are assessed by the original one and almost always subject to rejection. Conversely, there is the inherent risk of one already being established. Third, this form of rapport building becomes a part of a network of information exchange as business owners represent 'eyes on the street' who eventually provide more than donations. Finally, such relationships are semi-clandestine as this network is not openly displayed but covertly inferred when one attends community events that are funded and well stocked with items donated for attendees. Program journals at fundraisers show which organizations and businesses provide the donations, but do not disclose who approached them for contributions. Such information could have been conveyed in an interview but it would have lacked the full dimensional and sensorial experience of witnessing its occurrence and effects through the surprising outcome of overwhelming financial support.

Subsequent walks in the area included trips to a nearby former workplace containing unionized city workers including some who live within the community board district. It became clear that this particular location represented more than a workplace, but another medium for garnering political support as an exchange of critical union information in the form of worker's rights was given in exchange for backing for a local candidate in the form of volunteers (when

⁴ Interview, June 2012.

they were not in the workplace of course) to hand out flyers and collect signatures. This interpersonal exchange is more effective than a monthly union paper as it creates an informal flow of information and a dynamic stream of trust. None of this data, as experience, would have been possible without circulating not only the community but the political and civic meetings that took place throughout.

In order to achieve a positive assessment for the ‘go-along’, I had to display a potential willingness to engage in actual footwork with a respondent who became an informant. It provided me with a view towards fundraising, community work and political activism from the perspective of an organizer, through their eyes which revealed some of the strength respondents/informants have in ethnographic research in determining its relevance and pace. The moment of access, the type of data I was granted permission to observe and experience was beyond my control. However, when consent was granted, I was able to witness a form of community activism which incorporated the quotidian. One that is contrary to the conventional sensational spectacle that is often associated with such activity replete with placards, bullhorns and the local news. This version is unassuming and, one can argue, is a part of the rhythmic camouflage of daily community activity involving spatial appropriation. As Henri Lefebvre argued, places are complex with multiple meanings with temporal, repetitive even conflicting rhythms (Lefebvre 1996). Quotidian activism is concealed within the temporal ebbs and rhythmic flows of communal living reflecting the everyday.

Discussion and Conclusion

During a neighbourhood protest of a police-involved shooting of a 16-year-old Black male, activists from outside of East Flatbush such as FAITH (Fathers Alive in The Hood) and members from the national movement of Black Lives Matter attempted to seize the momentum to advance their cause. No particular group or local political representative was able to work at the helm and effectively control the protest. It was not possible without understanding the community’s culture or habitus. As I argued elsewhere, ‘a diffusive, relaxed involvement absorbed in the daily routines, conversations and street rhythms of the residents’ was necessary as an effective method for community organizing (Brown 2015: 210). Any local civic organization or group seeking community influence and change will benefit from this awareness. Its members must be engaged in the sustained circulation of the community not only to grasp an understanding of its nuances and habits of spatial appropriation and use, but to be a part of it. Koehlin and Forster argued similarly (2018: 356):

Many social practices generate a body of tacit knowledge of the city — knowledge that only those who live there can have. Their intentions are not articulated: they intend to act without expressing their intentions verbally, but through their practice they relate to the city as a social space.

This pinpoints the practical benefit of ethnographic research as a means to understanding urban phenomena ‘beyond the stereotypes and condescension’ (Pardo 1996: 4). External community groups lacked the tacit awareness of how to navigate the social landscape of East

Flatbush. They operated on the simple assumption of race and social exclusion without understanding the ‘vernacular specificity’ of East Flatbush (Pardo and Prato 2018). For such knowledge, members must appreciate the utility of footwork, circulating the community through pedestrian venues, in order to have a phenomenologically rich experience. Through such a process, one can learn how the cultural products of an ethnic landscape circumscribe community activism. Through the actions of the informant, I was able to ‘see’ that those businesses which extended their commerce to the sidewalk were more approachable for community activism in contrast to those who remained inside.

Here, I provide an example of the importance of pedestrian activity in an urban environment through phenomenological ethnographic research. By employing the tools of the urban wanderer allowing myself to drift while being drawn to the activities of the pedestrians, I was able to grasp an underrated but powerful form of quotidian activism. Not only did sidewalk use provide a means to access data through its apparent capricious and unstructured nature but it presented itself as a tool as well, largely through experiential observation. By adding this technique to field/ethnographic research, a distinction is emphasized between access and gaining entry. The latter does not mean that all forms of data are available, and it obscures a characterization of the field as containing differential social spheres which may present a challenge to the researcher as they must navigate through each one. This strongly urges the researcher to know and understand the interactive context in which they are gathering data. As has been argued elsewhere, “‘seeing’ the uses and/or meanings of space requires sensitivity and understanding of the particular culture that creates, maintains and uses the re-signified space’ (Krase 2012a: 23). Potential respondents represent objects of authority as gatekeepers; thus, an understanding of available roles as researcher must be taken into account. Participants are more willing to disclose sensitive information/data to those whom they are most comfortable. Fortunately, for urban community research, this can be facilitated by developing collaborative meaning through shared events to which the *dérive* and *flâneur* are excellent supplements. Drifting and strolling while acquiring the rhythms and temporalities of street use affords the immersion required for community study. Learning the community anchors in the form of busy intersections such as Utica and Church Avenues, the locations of 24-hour convenience stores, and the cadence of nightlife permits an effective grasp of the urban vernacular landscape. It allowed me to understand the significance of the Community Board as an initial means of access to community politics and activism.

There are other forms of interpretive meaning of urban life. For example, exploration of the everyday reveals the importance of the visual. Although that was not discussed in detail here, East Flatbush and many other neighbourhoods in cities like New York are replete with signage and forms of materiality which warrants its own discussion (Krase and Shortell 2013, Krase and Desena 2015, Krase 2018). In addition to the flows of pedestrian activity, the signs in storefronts, windows, marquees, and the presence of street vendors convey meaning to those who see them. For this to have significance, a prerequisite immersive contextual understanding must occur, that which happens in the quotidian, which was presented here.

The larger implications of exploring the vernacular pertains to the continual growth in urban populations and its suggestions for city planning. As New Urbanism becomes increasingly popularized and implemented as a policy for city growth, there will be new ways of seeing urban environments. It is believed that the altering of cityscapes to make them walkable will infuse the notions of plausibility as the slow-paced exploration of the city will permit residents to construct and derive meaning from their surroundings; hence, increase their breadth of experience (Demerath and Levinger 2003). There is an additional move to restrict automobile use as the dominance of privately owned vehicles is attributed to the crawl of buses and delayed commutes due to congestion. New York City has been implementing a policy to decrease automobile traffic since the Mayor Michael Bloomberg administration's creation of pedestrian plazas in 2008. As one city council member stated, 'American Cities got hijacked by the automobile'. This idea is supported by the expansion of restricting the automobile as the growth of bus and bike lanes continue (Hu 2019a, 2019b). Recently, cars have been banned from parking and traveling on the West 14th street corridor in Manhattan with the exception of truck deliveries, taxis and ride-share vehicles for picking up and unloading passengers from 6am to 10pm. The early results of this test case yield somewhat mixed results making a strong case for its expansion. Proprietors at local businesses have complained that driving customers are less willing to park further away from where they are accustomed. Whereas, others enthusiastically anticipate growth due to extra foot traffic and commuters already laud the shortened travel time to their places of work. As there is a rise in green spaces and widened sidewalks, pedestrian activity will be increasingly dominant (Hu 2019a, 2019b).

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