Race and the infrapolitics of public space in the time of COVID-19: The case of Harlem, New York

ABSTRACT
The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered our associational life and relationship to public space, revealing deadly inequities in access to health care and other resources, particularly in communities of color. In Harlem and other areas of New York City that are experiencing neoliberal redevelopment, the response to the pandemic has also rearticulated public spaces, introducing new and diverse spatial uses and users, and providing low-income and working-class African American and Latinx residents with increased opportunities to contest their exclusion from public and quasi-public spaces and the symbolic economy of gentrification. Based on ethnographic research conducted during the pandemic, I show how black and brown residents in West Harlem encountered, negotiated, and contested these race-cum-class–based, spatio-symbolic exclusions through infrapolitical practices and, in the process, demanded and exercised their “right to the city.”

By May 2021, most in my circle of neighborhood friends had been vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus. And on this Friday evening, six of us gathered, as we had for the past year or so, now maskless, in the barnlike restaurant enclosure that had been hurriedly constructed at curb-side after the city banned indoor dining. Toast was one of six restaurants and bars on Broadway, just south of West 125th, that had built heated outdoor enclosures and survived the summer and winter seasons of 2020–21. The hodgepodge of improvised, wood, and plexiglass structures, decorated with holiday lights, spanned the entire block face, creating a lively and festive atmosphere at night in spite of the pandemic (see Figure 1).

By 7 p.m., a cluster of African American and Latinx women and men had begun to form on the sidewalk, drinks in hand, around the stoops of two apartment buildings near our table. By sunset, the gathering had grown to about 25 revelers in their late 20s and 30s, laughing and talking excitedly in small groups. A mix of African American and Latinx popular music genres played on the sound system of a celebrant’s car parked at the curb. Two black women with the group sat at a table near us, doting on three toddlers, who wrestled with an order of chicken fingers while joyfully arranging a colorful assortment of Lego bricks. “A birthday party,” Frank remarked to us, raising his eyebrows and smiling approvingly. “We all grew up together.” Born in San Pedro de Macorís in the Dominican Republic, Frank had grown up in the neighborhood and knew the birthday celebrants: they had attended the same schools, socialized together, and had collectively experienced the changes that had occurred in the neighborhood as it gentrified, beginning in the late 1990s. African American and Latinx tenants in the five-story apartment buildings lining the block had largely been replaced by students and young white professionals after the landlords made capital...
improvements, which allowed rents in the regulated buildings to be increased beyond the means of many longtime residents. High-end restaurants had replaced a laundromat, dry cleaner, grocery store, and a black-owned picture-framing business.

In this article, I take the birthday celebration as a point of departure for considering how responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have rearticulated public spaces in some areas of the city, introducing new and diverse spatial uses of public space and disrupting the symbolic economy and micropolitics of gentrification. These changes in the uses and users of public spaces during the pandemic have been driven by a variety of agents and interests: the efforts of public policy makers to arrest the spread of the virus; of restaurants, bars, and other private enterprises to readapt business models to the conditions of COVID-19 restrictions; and those of the public to safely maintain social relationships and a meaningful life in public. In the case of lower-income people of color—youth, in particular—the pandemic has provided opportunities to challenge their spatial exclusion and the underlying race- and class-inflected symbolic economy of gentrification. In short, the exigencies of the pandemic have made it possible and, indeed, desirable for marginalized groups to assert “ownership,” as Thorpe (2021, 76) puts it, over public and quasi-public spaces from which they are increasingly excluded, and to contest “understandings about rights, indicating who is (and who is not) able to feel ‘at home’ in particular places, with important consequences for agency, political voice and wider practices of civic engagement.”

The neighborhood that was the site of the party, variously known as West Harlem or Manhattanville, is on the northern border of Morningside Heights, a middle-class area known for its constellation of elite educational, cultural, and religious institutions, including Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary, Riverside Church, and the Manhattan School of Music. In the 1950s, Columbia and its allied institutions in Morningside Heights sponsored one of the city’s first urban renewal projects as part of a decades-long campaign to insulate the institutions of the “American Acropolis” from the postwar expansion of Harlem and in-migration of Puerto Ricans from the island. The urban renewal project led to the razing of the so-called LaSalle Street slum, a largely black and brown working-class community that was located within a stone’s throw of the birthday celebration. Some 2,000 households were evicted from their homes to build 984 units of middle-class, cooperative housing intended to buttress Morningside Heights’ racialized class border with Harlem and to provide housing for institutional employees. As required by the federal urban renewal legislation, the New York City Housing Authority also constructed two superblocks of public housing adjacent to the co-op development, which the project’s sponsors argued would serve to relocate the tenants evicted from the urban renewal site. Moreover, supporters of the project held that the close proximity of the low-income public housing to the private, middle-income co-ops, named Morningside Gardens, would promote racial integration. In fact, the construction of the adjacent developments only reinforced the racialized boundary between Harlem and Morningside.
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reporter, interviewed the

infiltrate suspected gang members’ profiles. The conspir-

ered data from surveillance cameras and social media,

resident of one raided apartment:

We originally hoped that by building Morningside Gar-

dens alongside General Grant Houses we could get

families to move into General Grant Houses and

make it an integrated community. We said to ourselves,

“This is near Columbia. It’s a section of the city that

should be very attractive. Let’s see if by putting it next
to the co-op, and by trying to develop interaction between

the co-op and the low-rent public housing, we can’t get

white families to move into this when it’s new.” But the

fact is today that there are only 3 percent of white fam-

ilies in General Grant Houses. (NCUP 1968, 470)

Starr’s naïve, if not disingenuous expectation of racial

integration and interaction by spatial proximity has been

further disproved over the decades as the General Grant

Houses and other public housing developments across the

city have become stigmatized as sites of black and brown

crime, welfare dependency, and dysfunctional households,

and subjected to intensive surveillance and policing. For

example, at 6 a.m. on June 4, 2014, hundreds of police in body

armor, with helicopters hovering overhead, raided the Gen-

eral Grant Houses and nearby Manhattanville Houses as

part of an effort dubbed Operation Crew Cut. Over 100 sus-
pected gang members—one-third of them minors—were

charged with offenses, ranging from attempted possession

of a gun to conspiracy to commit murder in the first degree.

Abigail Kramer (2015), a Politico reporter, interviewed the

resident of one raided apartment:

Shortly after dawn broke over a muggy morning last

June, a 49-year-old grandmother named Katherine Fort

woke up to the sound of someone moving in her living

room. Cell phone in hand, ready to call the police, she
tiptoed into the hall to find an assault rifle pointed at

her face. “Somebody yells, ‘Bitch, put your hands up,’

and I realize there’s about 20 cops in my living room

in full riot gear,” Fort recalled. “Vests, helmets, shields,
guns as long as my arm.” Thinking they must have

come through the wrong door, she put her hands over

her head and began repeating her apartment number,

but an officer shoved her against the wall and cuffed

her wrists behind her back, Fort said.

Under Operation Crew Cut, police investigators gath-
ered data from surveillance cameras and social media,

having created fake Facebook and YouTube accounts to

infiltrate suspected gang members’ profiles. The conspir-

acy provision allowed police to charge not only alleged gang

members who bragged about committing crimes on social

media, but also those in their electronic networks.

Over the past 20 years, I have encountered many pre-
dominantly white newcomers to the area who referred to

“the projects” and their inhabitants as the source of the

neighborhood’s problems. Some expressed the hope that

the Grant Houses would one day be privatized or, accord-
ing to one tenacious rumor, taken over by Columbia for

student dormitories. Until recently, few residents of the

Grant Houses and, more generally, people of color in West

Harlem patronized the row of restaurants and bars on

Broadway that, having opened in recent decades, catered

largely to white, middle-income professionals, students,

and, in lesser numbers, people of color associated with in-

stitutions in Morningside Heights. The avoidance of these

relatively upscale businesses by the neighborhood’s lower-
income black and brown residents had less to do with their

pricing than with what Ganti (2012) has described as an

“aesthetics of intimidation,” which privileges a normative

and racialized model of middle-class consumption and be-

longing (cf. Dávila 2016).

As Zukin (2010, 4) puts it,

The tastes behind these new spaces of consumption are

powerful because they move longtime residents out-

side their comfort zone, gradually shifting the places

that support their way of life to life supports for a
different cultural community. Bistros replace bodegas,
cocktail bars morph out of old-style saloons, and the
neighborhood as a whole creates a different kind of so-

ciability. Against the longtimers’ sense of origins new-
comers pose their own new beginnings.

For black and brown residents of communities such as

West Harlem, gentrification has resulted in much more

than undermining or displacing existing “comfort zones”

and community cultures, although this is important; it has

also resulted in escalating rents and evictions, increased

surveillance and policing, and “ontological placelessness,”
as Alves (2018) puts it, which has subtly and not so sub-
tly elided the presence of black and brown bodies in space;
that is to say, the symbolic violence of gentrification has
contributed to and exacerbated the “slow violence” (Nixon
2011) of racial dispossession. For example, with the excep-
tion of one family-owned Mexican restaurant, few of the
new bars and eateries on the block or in its environs reg-
ularly employed Latinx or African American servers, bar-
tenders, or managers. Nor were the restaurants prepared
equipped with highchairs and bathroom baby chang-
ing stations) to accommodate families with small chil-
dren who could not afford to pay babysitters. Moreover,
many of the new venues cultivated symbolic codes through
their decor, cuisine, and music—for example, Italian, Mid-

dle Eastern, or bohemian—that interpellated lifestyles and

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aesthetic sensibilities that longtime residents perceived as alienating, if not unwelcoming (Kern 2016; Sullivan and Shaw 2011). Equally important, given the history of newcomers’ animosity toward residents of the Grant Houses, in particular, and Harlem in general—an animosity often based on unfounded fears of crime (cf. Low 2001; Merry 1981)—it is unsurprising that longtime residents found the new venues uninviting, if not unappealing places to dine, drink, and socialize. By contrast, lower-income residents of the community did patronize a Yemeni-owned convenience store, an Ecuadoran-owned pizza shop, and a Chinese takeout venue on the block, and teenagers often congregated in front of these adjacent businesses to socialize and people watch. In the case of the convenience store, the young Yemeni workers were on friendly, first-name terms with many residents of the Grant Houses, and the store extended credit to patrons.

Frank, as well as others celebrating that night, had grown up in the General Grant Houses, located on the opposite side of Broadway. Before the “lockdown” and the construction of the outdoor dining areas, neither Frank nor most of those gathered that night frequented the restaurants or socialized on the block. As the festive spectacle wore on into the night, celebrants and newcomers to the area mingled, transgressing the spatialized logic and symbolic economy of gentrification. Black and brown teenagers and adults, not associated with the birthday celebration, gathered in groups along the sidewalk, attracted by the animated crowd, the music piped into the outdoor dining enclosures from restaurants, and the recent relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions. Some queued up in front of the takeout window at Toast to buy frozen margaritas—a popular amenity introduced during the pandemic, which the venue’s owner told me had helped them survive through the chaotic and deadly summer of 2020 (see Figure 2).

In short, the response to the pandemic disarticulated settled spatial meanings and relationships, blurring the boundary between public and private spaces, rearticulating and diversifying the uses of public space, and, in some cases, challenging the racial-cum-class geographies of exclusion associated with gentrification. The salutary and economic exigencies of the pandemic had made this block of Broadway, if only temporarily, a more inclusive and “stickier street” (Toderian 2014)—a multifunctional public space where people stopped, lingered, and related across racial, ethnic, and class differences.

This “democratization of the street” (Agyeman 2013) did not go unchallenged. For example, the increased activity on the sidewalk attracted panhandlers, some homeless people, and others, including the residents of a nearby group home. The ambiguous status of the outdoor dining areas as privately managed, public spaces made them more accessible, physically and symbolically, to panhandlers, unlicensed vendors, and other noncustomers, prompting restaurant staff to reassert their privateness by closely monitoring the curbside enclosures. On one occasion, I witnessed Mike (an Irish American handyman in his 60s, whose family had lived in the area for generations) contest the privateness of one of the curbside enclosures. Although Mike had a reputation for being cantankerous, he was on
friendly terms with many of the longtime residents of the block and Grant Houses. Mike took a seat at a table and, when the waiter came to take his order, flatly told him, “I don’t want nothin’.”

“Well, you can’t sit here if you’re not going to order anything,” the server replied.

“I don’t have to order nothin’. This is a fucking public street,” Mike replied, folding his arms in defiance.

The server persisted. “You’re going to have to order something. That’s the rule.”

“What rule? I lived in this neighborhood all my life. Don’t tell me about any fuckin’ rules. Who made the rules?” he asked, glaring at the server. Nonplussed, the young server withdrew. Mike sat at the table for another 10 minutes or so, eyeing his smartphone, and then left, cussing in the general direction of the indoor restaurant.

A more dramatic example of this pushback against the new uses and users of these public and quasi-public spaces occurred a few days after the birthday celebration. A young black man was sitting on the steps of an apartment building while waiting for a takeout order from the restaurant next door. A white woman exited the building and rebuked the man for “blocking the steps.” An animated argument ensued, after which the woman called the police. By the time the police arrived, the young man had gone, but on their way back to the squad car, the two policemen accosted three men—two African American and one Puerto Rican—who were drinking beer in front of another building, reprimanding them for public drinking. “Now, why you gonna mess with us like that?” one man asked. “You know that’s not against the law now,” he added, pointing at the customers of a nearby dining enclosure, drinking alcohol. In fact, “open container drinking” was still technically illegal, but the law was not being enforced during the pandemic in most areas of the city. The black man’s retort thus exposed a racialized double standard in policing. Miffed, one cop, raising his voice, declared that he was “tired of getting fucking calls” about the men, loitering, drinking in public, blocking the building’s doorway, and harassing tenants. A small crowd gathered around the escalating fray, and a young woman began recording the confrontation on a smartphone. Soon after, the police relented and left the scene, vowing to return and take action.

The three men, all in their 60s, were fixtures on the block—“eyes on the street,” who were well known to most people who lived on or frequented the Broadway block. On more than one occasion, I witnessed the men mediate a dispute or help an elderly person haul groceries up the stairs of an apartment building. When COVID-19 vaccines became available, the man who had quarreled with the police took it upon himself to encourage people whom he encountered on the sidewalk to get vaccinated at a nearby Walgreens pharmacy. “You see, people just don’t know,” he told me. “There’s so much disinformation going around that people don’t know the true facts. This thing will kill you, man.”

Such confrontations, although not at all new, have only increased as public spaces have become unsettled and increasingly disputed during the pandemic, intensifying conflicts over who belongs, and who does not, in gentrifying areas of the city. These conflicts over public space instantiate the contradiction between what Lefebvre (1991) terms “abstract space” and “social space.” Whereas abstract space, like geometric space, can be mapped, measured (e.g., through the imposition of the grid plan or development of “redlining maps” by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation), and given an exchange value, social or “lived space” is produced through the sedimented acts and experiences of people who occupy and consume space and assign it use values and meanings (cf. Logan and Molotch 1987). As Kinkaid (2020, 169) puts it, “The production of abstract space operates as a reduction, one which normalizes particular bodies and practices while rendering others ‘different.’” For example, while gentrification has produced marketable, homogenizing, and oftentimes themed symbolic economies of space (Markley and Sharma 2016; Sorkin 1992; Zukin 1996), the practices of the birthday celebrants, “eyes-on-the-street men,” and Mike—“first and always historical-social-spatial beings,” as Soja (1996, 73) puts it—generated heterogeneous, unruly, and deeply historical spatial practices, meanings, and narratives. Just as the pandemic has exposed glaring inequalities in access to health care services, information, and other resources, so too has it revealed and rendered vulnerable the symbolic order and violence of gentrification—doxa, which “goes without saying because it comes without saying” (Bourdieu 1977, 167).

To be sure, these modifications of and contests over public space are tentative, uneven, and relatively inconsequential given the power of the structural economic and political forces that drive gentrification and maintain racial and economic segregation. Moreover, the sociospatial changes that have made some public spaces more inclusive pale in importance to the deadly and economically ruinous impact that the pandemic has had on underserved African American and Latinx communities in the city and elsewhere (Hardy 2020; Sandset 2021; Wei et al. 2021). Moreover, as Dávila (2016, 171) has cautioned, reducing the definition of public space to consumption and leisure risks obscuring its key importance as a space for social activism: “The answer may lie in placing less emphasis on ‘feel good’ public spaces, or its quality and number of visitors, and more on the rights of people to access public space for social and political uses or to ensure their economic well-being.” My focus, then, is on how black and brown residents of West Harlem have encountered, negotiated, and contested the spatio-symbolic exclusions associated with gentrification through quotidian infrapolitical actions and, in the process,
demanded and exercised their “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1996).

“Thirdspace”: Rethinking Jane Jacobs and urban diversity in the time of COVID-19

From the perspective of Jane Jacobs, Block 01993 was a relatively diverse and vibrant one even before the pandemic. The block consisted of eight five-story apartment buildings constructed in the early 20th century, each having one or two storefronts on the ground floor. The businesses constituted a diversity of mixed primary uses, which attracted people to the block for a variety of purposes and at different times of the day and night. These businesses included a liquor store, bodega, nail salon and spa, sports bar, convenience store, and a Starbucks café. In addition, the block face hosted a variety of eateries, including a Chinese dumpling house; pizzeria; American-style eatery; Italian, Mexican, and Middle Eastern restaurants; and takeout venues selling Chinese food, Indian chapatis, and freshly squeezed juices. The restaurants offered foods at varied prices, ranging from the pricey and well-appointed Italian restaurant to the “no frills” and less expensive Chinese takeout venue. This variety in foods offered, costs, and degrees of formality, taken together with the block’s residential and other commercial uses, attracted consumers of varying needs, tastes, and disposable incomes, resulting in a diverse presence of users on the block and an “intricate sidewalk ballet” (Jacobs 1961, 50).

Adding to this diversity of uses and users on Block 01993 were other factors that contributed to the mixed “pools of uses” that Jacobs (1961, 181) considered critical to generating urban diversity. Notably, the area west of Broadway departed from the 1811 grid plan, which, in many areas of the Upper West Side, has resulted in long, “self-isolating blocks” between avenues by offering few opportunities “to turn corners,” as Jacobs put it. Taking the example of West 88th Street, a long block between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue, Jacobs (1961, 180) invited the reader to imagine an alternative:

Let us consider, instead, the situation if these long east-west blocks had an extra street cut across them—not a sterile “promenade” of the kind in which super-block projects abound, but a street containing buildings where things could start up and grow at spots economically viable: places for buying, eating, seeing things, getting a drink. With the extra street, the Eighty-Eighth Street man would no longer have to walk a monotonous, always-the-same path to a given point. He would have various alternative routes to use. The neighborhood would literally have opened up to him.

This is precisely what occurred in the area west of Block 01993. The long blocks between Broadway and Riverside Drive, from Tiemann Place south to West 116th Street, are bisected by Claremont Avenue, which amplifies the foot traffic to and around Block 01993 and supports a high population density in the neighborhood. Finally, the block is located one street south of the 125th Street Station of the elevated IRT subway, which adds to the foot traffic along this vibrant and densely populated stretch of Broadway (see Figure 3).

Nevertheless, as I noted above, the private businesses and public spaces along the Broadway block face have become increasingly de facto segregated with respect to race and class as the area has undergone rapid gentrification—sociospatial inequalities that Jacobs (1961, 150) neglected to address in her analysis of “the conditions that generate city diversity.” Under such circumstances, the “eyes on the street” that Jacobs believed to be essential to ensuring safe streets and promoting a collective sense of responsibility could, as in the case above, be interpreted by newcomers and police alike as loiterers, potential criminals, and threats to the neighborhood’s “quality of life”; as a result, they could be subjected to surveillance, harassment, and violence, as was tragically demonstrated in the killing of Eric Garner at the hands of police while he was allegedly selling cigarettes on a public street. In short, the urban diversity that Jacobs celebrated and believed could be achieved through high density, a mixture of primary uses, short blocks, a mix of old and new buildings, and so on are necessary but insufficient conditions for achieving diversity and an equal right to the city across racial, economic, and other social divisions. This is not to suggest that Jacobs did not address racism and racial segregation in her work; rather, it is to point out that, in her critique of modernist urban planning, Jacobs did not attend to how the built environment and the structuring of its constituent spatio-symbolic forms—sidewalks, roadways, public and quasi-public spaces, parklands, and so on—can alternatively promote or suppress racial, class, gender, and other embodiments of sociocultural diversity.

For example, as Gurian (2005) has shown, museums might reduce the “threshold fears” that discourage working-class people and subaltern groups from visiting them, fears that, as a result, sustain a narrow and typically affluent, educated, and race-cum–culturally dominant demographic. Gurian (2005, 203) writes,

The thresholds in question may be actual physical barriers—design ingredients that add to resistance—and other, more subtle elements such as architectural style and its meaning to the potential visitor, wayfinding language, and complicated and unfamiliar entrance sequences. . . . My thesis is that when museum management becomes interested in the identification, isolation, and reduction of each of these thresholds, they will be rewarded over time by an
increased and broadened pattern of use, though the reduction of these thresholds is not sufficient by itself.

Gurian proposes strategies for achieving a more diverse population of museum users—hiring staff from various cultures; introducing more seating, toilets, and other visitor amenities; minimizing intrusive security; and so on. But these do not apply to all public and quasi-public spaces and institutions. Nonetheless, her stress on the importance of taking into account and eliminating, wherever possible, these physical and more subtle symbolic thresholds adds a critical dimension to Jacobs’s pioneering analysis of the conditions that generate diversity. As noted by Claire Weisz, one of the founders of WXY, an architectural and urban design studio that has been addressing the diversification of the city’s public spaces, “Shared streets need to be designed and curated so that everyone knows they have a right to use the street and feel comfortable” (Russell 2020).

For example, in the case of the dining enclosures discussed above, the construction of the curbside structures blurred the boundaries between public space and the privately owned bars and restaurants that lined the block, weakening the threshold antagonisms that confronted lower-income people of color on entering the indoor restaurants worked largely by a white staff and catering to a predominantly white, middle-income clientele. For adults with young children, the less confining and socially distanced outdoor seating areas provided more space and flexibility for strollers and baby carriages, as well as for toddlers to move about, than the indoor restaurants. During the COVID pandemic, women of color often gathered in small groups with their children in the enclosures to dine and socialize. In this and other respects, the pandemic has also disclosed deeply gendered inequalities, vulnerabilities, and needs, particularly among low-income and working-class women of color.

During an informal conversation in the curbside enclosure of Toast, I asked Daryll, an African American security guard and resident of the Grant Houses, why he had begun to socialize at Toast during the pandemic when he had never done so in the past. Daryll was seated at a table with Frank and two other men in their 30s drinking a bottle of rosé. “Out here, it’s more relaxed,” he replied. “There’s more going on,” he added, sweeping his arm in an arc across the lively sidewalk tableau. Seated at a nearby table were three Latinx women with toddlers perched in strollers, chatting with two young men sitting on mopeds. Other tables were occupied by a motley assortment of students,
neighborhood residents, and workers from a nearby construction site. “You see,” Frank explained, “this is more like a block party. You have more freedom to move around out here . . . to hang out with your friends.” Other people of color with whom I spoke described the curbside enclosures and their environs as having more of “a community feeling” and, in the words of one African American woman, “more kid-friendly and open” (see Figure 4).

Although the men did not speak directly to the contrast between the interior and exterior, to race- and class-inflected cultures of sociability, or to forms of cultural capital, their descriptions of the enclosures and environs as “more relaxed” and as offering “more freedom to move around,” like at a block party, suggest that they experienced or, more to the point, produced these outdoor spaces as inclusive, flexible, and generative of diverse meanings, spatial uses, and users—a “thirdspace” characterized by hybridity and transgressive and unpredictable movements across fixed boundaries, symbolic fields, and social identities (Soja 1996; cf. Bhabha 1994). Indeed, it was this relaxed “freedom of movement” across threshold antagonisms that Daryll, Frank, and others captured in their comments. Equally important, thirdsapce are sites of sociospatial disruption and resistance. As Soja (1996, 56) observed,

Thirdspace is a meeting point, a hybrid place, where one can move beyond the existing borders. It is also a place of the marginal women and men, where old connections can be disturbed and new ones emerge. A Thirdspace consciousness is the precondition to building a community of resistance to all forms of hegemonic power.

This hybridization of public space was not lost on newcomers to the area. In an interview with Brian, a white, 42-year-old audiovisual technician for PBS, I asked about changes on the block and in the community that he had witnessed during the pandemic. Brian had been raised in a small town in Indiana, which he had earlier described to me as all white and “pretty damn bigoted.” He moved to Harlem from Seattle in 2013.

“Well, now everything’s moved outdoors,” he began. “There’s more street life all over the city. It’s like the city has turned inside out.” He went on to excitedly recount his walk the day before along Amsterdam Avenue, a nearby roadway that had been closed to traffic under the Open Streets Project, a city-sponsored program that closed sections of streets to vehicular traffic during certain hours of the day. Brian praised the outdoor music, eateries, and overall festive atmosphere. “It was like Mardi Gras in New Orleans,” he added.

“Well, if you take this block and the restaurants,” I continued, “they look very different now than before the pandemic. They’re more socially diverse, for example.”

“I don’t know,” he replied, in a skeptical tone. “The whole neighborhood’s diverse! It’s not totally gentrified . . . because of the projects. You see, before the pandemic, most of the people who hung out at Toast and other places on the block were regulars—the same people all the time. But here, it’s a different kind of space. It’s more of a community space.”
Here, as in the case above, “community” serves as a euphemism for racial diversity and other socioeconomic differences not represented among the regulars—“the same people all the time.” Residents of the area, both white and nonwhite, typically used race-evasive language when discussing the COVID-related changes in public space and culture, opting instead for language that evoked commonality and a lack of social barriers, such as being “relaxed” and “open” and having more “freedom to move around” and “a community feeling.” As an imagined social space, “community” evoked social leveling, spatial hybridity, and a historical temporality that exceeded the homogenizing spatio-symbolic order and truncated temporality of the commodified social spaces of gentrification (Kern 2016). The conversations of longtime residents were often peppered with references to people, events, and places in the past that insistently rehistoricized the rapidly changing neighborhood. For example, in a conversation with a middle-aged Puerto Rican woman in front of El Porton, a Mexican restaurant and bar, she began asking me whether I remembered this or that long-gone business, which led us to reconstruct the genealogies of the block’s storefronts going back 20 or so years.

This “‘thirding’ of the spatial imagination” (Soja 1996, 11), resulting in more freedom of movement across spatio-symbolic thresholds, has not been confined to the curbside dining enclosures. As I noted above, the heterogeneous sociality of the outdoor enclosures has spurred what Jacobs called “secondary uses,” such as panhandling, vending, performances, and impromptu gatherings, like the birthday celebration. For example, in the fall of 2020, a group of five Latinx teenagers, lugging a huge boom box, planted themselves in the space between two outdoor enclosures and played a homemade recording of a song that they had composed. Dancing in a circle around the boom box, they mouthed the lyrics of the rhythmic song: “How you gonna get, tell me how you gonna get the Corona virus? Co-ro-naah . . . Co-ro-naah.” After 10 minutes or so, the teenagers packed up and carried their performance further along the street to the applause of diners and others gathered on the sidewalk. The teenagers did not solicit donations, but at a time when vaccines were not yet in sight, they gave cultural expression to fears and anxieties felt by all—a performance of social solidarity or, better, communitas, like the nightly pot banging from windows to show appreciation for health care and other essential workers during the summer of 2020 (Turner 1969). Equally significant, the “pop-up” performance of the teenage bards decidedly asserted their right to public space and the legitimacy of their voices as cultural interpreters of the collective experiences of society at large.

In fact, urban planners, nonprofit groups, and others have pointed to the need for “pop-up infrastructure” when creating more equitable postpandemic cities; that is, public spaces and structures that are multipurpose, flexible, and sometimes temporary, such as bike lanes, community gardens, performance spaces, health clinics, and modular buildings. Pop-up infrastructure, they argue, can be rapidly deployed to address changing needs, as during a pandemic or natural disaster, as well as empower residents and community-based organizations to play more prominent roles in making sustainable, small-scale, and socially inclusive land-use decisions (Jobanputra and Jennnings 2021; Thorpe 2021). In a feasibility study report, the Delta Family Resource Center, a Toronto-based nonprofit that addresses urban planning and other community service issues, underscored the role that pop-up infrastructure can play in achieving more just cities:

Pop-Up Infrastructure encompasses a set of alternative spatial and socio-economic strategies and practices that respond to some increasingly common urban conditions. These include the growing unaffordability of urban space and the disparity between urban neighbourhoods resulting from uneven investment and displacement driven by gentrification. These conditions are symptomatic of a broader social and economic context characterized by austerity, precarity and ensuing built environment challenges. (DFRC 2017, 3)

Needless to say, pop-up land-use interventions by residents of low-income and working-class communities are by no means new, as demonstrated by community gardens and squatters’ movements, as well as by the building of casitas on abandoned properties by residents of the South Bronx—small buildings constructed using Puerto Rican vernacular architectural styles that often served as musical performance spaces, community meeting places, and anchored community gardens (Sciorra and Cooper 1990). Such pop-up land-use actions, like those of the Latinx teens and birthday celebrants in the time of COVID, suggest the importance of this more flexible and community-based infrastructure—or, what Webb (2018) has termed “tactical urbanism”—to achieving more inclusive and just cities.

A similar spatial expression of a more inclusive, indeed, political sense of solidarity occurred in July 2020 at the height of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, following the murder of George Floyd by police. Late one afternoon, hundreds of BLM bicycle protesters surged down Broadway, blocking traffic on the major roadway. Black and brown teenagers and adults along the sidewalk and many sitting in the dining enclosures cheered and raised fists as the 15-minute-long procession passed by. The bike protesters responded with raised fists, chanting “Black Lives Matter . . . ter!” Like the performance of the Latinx teens, the bike protest triggered, or better, intensified the affect and experience of communitas, that is, the social leveling and feeling of solidarity that are catalyzed by the suspension of sociostructural divisions tied to kinship, class, race, gender, and other societal divisions. Turner’s (1969, 128) description...
of the dialectical relationship between “communitas” and “structure” captures well some of the emergent sociospatial transformations in, and conflicts over the meanings, uses, and users of public space during the pandemic:

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or “holy,” possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency.

From this perspective, the curbside enclosures and sidewalks had become liminal spaces, not unlike the kafu, or ritual huts used for the installation of Ndembu senior chiefs, described by Turner (1969)—zones of “anti-structure,” where ascriptive social identities, the iron logic of the market, and normalizing spatio-symbolic structures are undermined, disordered, and contested. To recall Mike’s words, “Don’t tell me about any fuckin’ rules. Who made the rules?” Other rules and norms were also bent, broken, or suspended during the pandemic. Unlicensed vendors appeared on Broadway and throughout the city selling COVID masks, flowers, beverages, and food. For example, one day a Mexican woman and child appeared on Block 01993 selling tamales from a shopping cart cooler. In June 2020, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the Police Department would no longer enforce street-vendor regulations and that, for the first time in 40 years, the city would increase the number of permits issued to vendors (Nierenberg and Wharton 2020). On Broadway and in other areas of the city it became common to see people riding electric scooters and other “micro-mobility devices” on the sidewalk, often stopping to socialize with friends on the block—a potentially dangerous nuisance that was tolerated by the police (cf. Abend 2019). The curbside enclosures and closing of streets to traffic also blurred the boundary between roadways and sidewalks, as in the bike protest, rendering both much more than mere passages from one place to another.

Moreover, the very nature of the pandemic and its consequences—the disruption of networks of sociality, routines, and temporalities of everyday life, and affective balance and well-being—have created, as Genevieve Bell (2021) suggests, an atmosphere of liminality that has generated affect and experiences not unlike those described by Van Gennep and Turner during the liminal phase of rites of passage. Gerbaudo (2020) has argued that this suspension of normality has given rise to and augmented forms of protests—for example, BLM demonstrations, health care workers’ protests against low pay and inadequate resources, and anti-masking “flash mobs.” These are often spontaneous, localized, and acephalous, not unlike premodern acts of resistance and social movements.

Gerbaudo (2020, 71) writes,

While pandemic protests comprise very different phenomena, what they share in common is their reflection of the suspension of normality that is the defining character of the pandemic condition, and the way in which it carries a number of effects in terms of the revelation, the manifestation, and the intensification of either radically new or pre-existing grievances. Pandemics result in severe economic effects and political chaos that make the lives of those at society’s bottom even more precarious.

With the exception of the BLM bicycle protest, the everyday acts of spatio-symbolic transgression, occupation, and production—like the Latinx teens’ performance, Mike’s rule breaking, and pushback from the “eyes-on-the-street men” against police harassment—are best viewed as forms of infrapolitics, a type of vernacular politics that may be discounted as “political” yet push against the policed, spatio-symbolic order of neoliberal gentrification.

For example, in the summer of 2021, Toast hired Kamalé, a 20-something Afro–Puerto Rican server who quickly became popular among the new black and brown customers and the restaurant’s “regulars.” High-spirited, affable, and stylish, Kamalé began to play her iPhone playlists over the eatery’s sound system, breaking the “sonic color line,” as Stoever (2016) puts it, by introducing—for the first time—African American and Latinx popular music genres, such as hip-hop, reggaeton, salsa, and Dominican bachata to the restaurant’s musical repertoire. Like similar racialized thresholds, “the sonic color line,” Stoever (2016, 7) writes, “describes the process of racializing sound—how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds—and its product, the hierarchical division sounded between ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness.’”

This diversification of Toast’s soundscape, or what Feld (1996) has called the “acoustemology of place,” to include Latinx and African American popular music genres, not only emplaced brown and black musical tastes and identities but also produced place-based experiences, knowledges, histories, and affect, not unlike the “pop-up” performance of the Latinx bards or the listening practices of the birthday celebrants.

The owner of the restaurant, however, was displeased with Kamalé’s playlist, its manager and others told me. One afternoon, I spoke with Kamalé before the beginning of her shift and remarked that her music had changed the vibe at the venue. To my surprise, Kamalé told me that she was thinking about quitting because of the owner’s “attitude.” I asked her to explain.

“One night, I was playing my music and [the owner] came over and turned it off,” she said. “I asked him why he did that, and he said to me, ‘This isn’t Spanish Harlem. This
is American Harlem.’ I mean, bachata is all about love. How could he say that? And I’m Puerto Rican!”

Nevertheless, since the owner was seldom at the restaurant, Kamalé continued to play her music, and a second server, a Jamaican American student hired in the summer of 2021, added to the restaurant’s acoustemology with his playlist, which included reggae and “Afrowave”—a fusion of hip-hop, Jamaican dancehall, and West African Afrobeat. Other venues also diversified their repertoires. The Craftsman, a popular sports bar that typically played rock and roll, sponsored live jazz outdoors on weekends during the pandemic, which attracted patrons of color and clusters of noncustomers, adding to the “stickiness” of the street. Feld’s portmanteau, wedding “acoustics” to “epistemology,” stresses the potency of acoustic ways of knowing, experiencing, and interpreting place and provides a critical lens with which to view the infrapolitics of gentrification (see Figures 5 and 6).

Summers (2021, 33), addressing black resistance to gentrification and dispossession in Washington, DC, has referred to the role that music plays in contesting spatial inequalities and displacements as “reclamation aesthetics”:

Reclamation aesthetics operate as a means through which Black residents navigate spatial inequities and reclaim the spaces from which they have been displaced. Culture and aesthetics have long been locations for encounters entangled with political, economic, and spatial inequities. Such encounters reveal questions about identity and the conditions under which people are able to remain in the city. Reclamation aesthetics, then, reflect possibility at the intersection of the aesthetic and the political, sound and race, the affective (sensual) and the critical.

More broadly, the increased presence of black and brown customers in and around the outdoor enclosures and, not long after, inside some of the restaurants on Block 01993 introduced other elements of working-class African American and Latinx cultures, such as linguistic, sartorial, and gestural styles that are often viewed as déclassé and stigmatized by the dominant society as “ghetto culture.” Kelley (1996, 165), writing of the infrapolitical style of the wartime, black and brown “zoot suiters,” addresses the oppositional significance of working-class styles and cultural practices: “While the suit itself was not meant as a direct political statement, the social context in which it was created and worn rendered it so. The language and culture of zoot suiters represented a subversive refusal to be subservient.” So too the increased cultural presence of black and brown, low-income, and working-class people in public and quasi-public spaces on Block 01993 and elsewhere in the city constituted a refusal to be excluded from the neoliberal landscape of gentrification and an affirmation of their fundamental right to the city.

Conclusion: In the wake of the pandemic?

Although Governor Andrew Cuomo announced the lifting of all indoor dining restrictions as of June 15, 2021,
residents continued to patronize the outdoor seating areas on Block 01993 and elsewhere in the city, some out of safety concerns over new COVID-19 variants and “breakthrough infections,” others out of a preference for socializing outdoors and in public. The NYC Department of Transformation, which managed the Open Restaurants Program, authorizing dining enclosures in public spaces, announced that, owing to its success, the program would become permanent, pending modifications in zoning and other local laws. In May 2021, Mayor de Blasio signed a bill into law that also made permanent the Open Streets Program, affecting 83 miles of the city’s roadways. In a press statement de Blasio declared,

Open Streets transformed our city and changed the way we came together as communities. Now, a Recovery for All of Us is coming alive in our streets and our urban landscape will forever play host to joyful gatherings of families, pedestrians, cyclists, and small businesses. COVID-19 is temporary but getting the most out of life in New York City is permanent. Open Streets are here to stay! (Office of the Mayor 2021)

Although the Open Restaurants and Open Streets programs, as well as the creative actions and adjustments of the city’s residents to life in the time of COVID-19, increased the amount of public space and diversified, to varying degrees, its uses and users, it is not at all certain that these spaces will retain their transgressive and “liminal” qualities, particularly with respect to racialized class and gender differences. The return to a new normality—to “structure,” as Turner puts it—might result in the more intensive policing of public spaces (Honey-Rosés et al. 2020), and an intensified, more organized private-sector imposition of control over quasi-public spaces, as has been observed in gated communities and business improvement districts (Chesluk 2008; Low 2006; cf. Peterson 2006)—technologies of surveillance and spatio-symbolic exclusion that were disrupted, suspended, and, in some cases, simply untenable in the time of COVID-19. “Will the pandemic deepen inequities regarding fear of surveillance, control, and violence?” ask Honey-Rosés et al. (2020). “In the US, the recent murder of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd remind African Americans yet again that streets and green spaces are not safe spaces for them.” Anguelovski et al. (2020, 1760), noting the lack of attention in greening scholarship to subaltern communities that are excluded from public spaces, stress the importance of addressing racial, gender, and class-based inequities in green planning for the “de-confinement phase” of the pandemic: “Creating emancipatory and intersectional recreational spaces for socioeconomically diverse groups implies the recognition of the needs and imaginaries of different groups and the historical presence and distribution of these groups over space and time.”

One hopeful sign is that, in the case of the permanent Open Streets Program, the city’s Department of Transportation has been designated to partner with community-based groups, which will be permitted to sponsor, manage, and maintain open street locations—including outdoor dining areas—with support from the city. Such partnerships might
serve as a brake on the market-driven privatization of public space by giving community-based actors and their interests greater influence in planning and curating the design and uses of the city’s public spaces. Indeed, community-based organizations and advocacy groups had played a key role in shaping the city’s Open Streets Program. For example, in March 2021, the Open Streets Coalition, an alliance of 63 community-based organizations, released an open letter to Mayor de Blasio that proposed specific recommendations for expanding the program and making it more inclusive, including providing funding to low-income communities to develop and maintain open streets; providing benches, planters, improved traffic barriers, and other amenities; and, wherever possible, extending the program to full-time, 24/7 operation. The open letter noted,

Open Streets allowed us to rethink how we use our streets, not just as space for transportation and storage of vehicles, but as space to meet our neighbors and stroll, socialize, dance, and relax safely. Prioritization for motor vehicles in our public space has resulted in thousands of senseless deaths and injuries caused by traffic violence, and respiratory illness caused by carbon pollution. By prioritizing people, our streets can instead serve as playgrounds for children, a reprieve for parents looking for fresh air, and a place for local businesses to attract customers. (Transportation Alternatives 2021)

Notably, the coalition included organizations working on a variety of urban issues at different spatial scales, including tenant and community associations, environmental justice groups, and health care, cycling, and community gardening advocacy organizations. Seen in this light, the exigencies of the pandemic have also galvanized new alliances, linked diverse social issues and constituencies, and politicized the built environment and its public spaces. Equally, if not more important, African American and Latinx residents of gentrifying neighborhoods of the city, will, no doubt, continue to assert their right to the city through infrapolitical spatial and cultural practices, as well as through more organized and overtly political social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, tenants’ associations, and others.

"Do you think," I asked Frank, not long after the birthday celebration, "that things will go back to the way that they were on the block once COVID’s over?"

"No, no, no," he replied, shaking his head. "People like this . . . the street life. There’s more community. This is Harlem."

Although my focus has been on one “micro-ethnographic” context that is not at all representative of the city or neighborhood as a whole, it does suggest some of the tensions, infrapolitical practices of resistance, and possibilities for reimagining more inclusive public spaces that have been disclosed perforce by the COVID-19 pandemic and by the responses of government officials, business owners, and diverse publics to the exigencies of the crisis. Beyond the curbside restaurant enclosures, other policies and practices contributed to the diversification of public life and culture during the pandemic, such as the closing of streets to vehicular traffic, the enhancement of bicycle lanes, and, in some cases, the relaxation of “zero tolerance” policing practices that targeted misdemeanor offenses (e.g., unlicensed vending, loitering, and noise violations), which have been disproportionately enforced against people of color, frequently for little more than being black or brown in public. Seen in this light, the reorganization of public space to promote diversity is inextricably linked to reforms in policing and the criminal justice system (Summers 2020).

Finally, attending to the racialized infrapolitics of exclusion and resistance also focuses needed attention on how longtime residents of gentrifying neighborhoods, such as Harlem, encounter, negotiate, and contest not only residential displacement but also the everyday spatial practices, structures of exclusion, and forms of symbolic violence that are associated with neoliberal redevelopment and dispossession (cf. Freeman 2006). How Frank, Daryll, Kamalé, and cantankerous Mike think about public space and “community” can teach us much about making and sustaining more racially, ethnically, and economically diverse neighborhoods where all have a right to the city. After all, “who made the rules?”

Notes

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1. The label “black and brown” refers to the diverse racialized communities in this study, which include African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and other Latinx and Caribbean groups. The term black is lowercased throughout the text in keeping with the author’s original use; it refers to a larger pan nationality and ethnicity that includes African Americans as well as black Latinxs, who may be Puerto Rican or Dominican. Other identifiers refer more specifically to the intraracial and ethnic community-making central to the interactions in the study. It is also important to note that Gregory, as an African American man and native New Yorker who grew up in highly diverse communities in Brooklyn and who lived for 20 years in Harlem, considered himself part of the community discussed in this work. He frequented Toast, the restaurant that is the mainstay of this study, and he considered many of its regulars and staff to be friends and neighborly acquaintances. It is this positionalty and sustained experience with the street landscape that motivated him to document the growing instances of creative pushback from local residents to race and class-based spatio-symbolic exclusions.

2. The policy of allowing restaurants and bars to sell takeout alcohol, supported by 78 percent of New Yorkers, was abruptly ended by New York State governor Andrew M. Cuomo on June 24, 2021,
after he announced the end of the COVID-19 emergency (Slotnik and Levin 2021).

3. A disturbing example of this thematization of gentrified space (in this case, the urban aesthetic that Zukin [2010] has termed “edgy”) occurred in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. A restaurant owned by a corporate tax attorney from Toronto featured fake bullet holes in its walls and advertised wine sold in 40-ounce bottles (to mimic bottles of malt liquor) and served in paper bags, presumably to simulate “thug culture” (Helmore 2017).

4. On July 14, 2017, plainclothes officers of the NYC Police Department accosted Eric Garner, a 43-year-old African American man, in Staten Island for allegedly selling “loosies,” or individual cigarettes from packs without tax stamps. When Garner protested and pulled away from officer Daniel Pantaleo, the latter put him in an illegal choke hold, and the officers wrestled him to the ground. Garner repeated “I can’t breathe” 11 times before losing consciousness. He was pronounced dead one hour later at a local hospital.

5. For example, in The Death and Rebirth of Great American Cities, Jacobs (1961, 72) rightly asserts that urban planning and design cannot, on their own, overcome segregation and discrimination, but notes,

Considering the amount of prejudice and fear that accompany discrimination and bolster it, overcoming residential discrimination is just that much harder if people feel unsafe on their sidewalks anyway. Overcoming residential discrimination comes hard where people have no means of keeping a civilized public life on a basically dignified public footing, and their private lives on a private footing.

Jacobs here suggests that a sense of public safety can mitigate white prejudices toward people of color by reducing white fears of crime and disorder. The logic of this argument not only presupposes that these white fears are rational—that is, based on lived experience—but also that the threats to sidewalk safety, real or imagined, are black and brown people. Following this line of argument, one would then expect to find less racial prejudice and residential segregation in neighborhoods that are relatively safe, such as middle-class, gated communities (cf. Low 2001).

6. Toast and other restaurants and bars on Block 01993, or, for that matter, in other gentrifying areas of the city, typically avoid playing popular African American and Latinx music genres, opting instead for black and brown genres that are disassociated in the minds of consumers from the present, such as bossa nova or rhythm and blues (e.g., Chuck Berry, Chubby Checker, Ike and Tina Turner, and Motown performers). As Kern (2016, 450) points out, this temporal displacement of the present through the cultivation of a “vintage timespace” excludes, in this case, popular black and brown music genres and their audiences: “This combination of consumption and performance generates an ‘authentic’ urban everyday by gesturing to an imagined historic social space and bringing it into the present by asking consumers and event-goers to actively and artfully participate in its recreation. This vintage timespace may also generate symbolic exclusion as only selected aspects of the ‘authentic’ past are recuperated for the project.”

7. To be sure, Gregory would argue that New York is not the only city where subaltern groups resist the efforts of business and government elites to create and sustain exclusivist landscapes. Indeed, his own research on capitalist development in the Dominican Republic represents another highly localized example of global processes in which privatizing logics intrude into public spaces—with considerable degrees of contestation by resident populations.

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