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Following the Flâneur: The Methodological Possibilities and Applications of Flânerie in New Urban Spaces

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Abstract

This paper considers the historic concept of flânerie, the act of “strolling” through urban spaces, as an unconventional approach to gathering qualitative data. In adopting a flânerie identity, the researcher is able to critically analyze urban spaces and the relation of self to those spaces. Through a (re)conceptualization of the 19th century flâneur, we explicate the methodological possibilities and applications of flânerie, in particular, as suited to excavating new urban tropes, whilst giving expression to new urban subjectivities. The authors adopt a flânerie identity, engaging in a qualitative inquiry vis-à-vis two “strolls” occurring in Toronto, Canada. The strolls provide opportunities to interrogate subjectivities and perceptions of the authors in relation to the urban spaces they were traversing. In doing so, this paper emphasizes the legitimacy of adopting a flâneur identity as a valid source of qualitative inquiry; one that is able to bring meaning to spaces and places.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Urban, Flâneur, Identity, Spaces, Visual Sociology

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This paper considers the historic concept of flânerie, the act of “strolling” through urban spaces, as an unconventional approach to gathering qualitative data. In adopting a flânerie identity, the researcher is able to critically analyze urban spaces and the relation of self to those spaces. Through a (re)conceptualization of the 19th century flâneur, we explicate the methodological possibilities and applications of flânerie, in particular, as suited to excavating new urban tropes, whilst giving expression to new urban subjectivities. The authors adopt a flânerie identity, engaging in a qualitative inquiry vis-à-vis two “strolls” occurring in Toronto, Canada. The strolls provide opportunities to interrogate subjectivities and perceptions of the authors in relation to the urban spaces they were traversing. In doing so, this paper emphasizes the legitimacy of adopting a flâneur identity as a valid source of qualitative inquiry; one that is able to bring meaning to spaces and places. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Urban, Flâneur, Identity, Spaces, Visual Sociology

Introduction

Qualitative research in the 21st century demands alternative methodologies for inquiry. While the scope and breath of data collection has expanded over the last few decades, there has been relatively little written on the methodological approach considered in this paper: *flâneur methodology* (For previous work on flâneur-as-researcher, see scholars such as Frisby, 1994; Jenks, 1995; Jenks & Neves, 2000; Tester, 1994). Westernized urban areas have long undergone a number of structural and demographic changes, including the influx of immigrants, the reconfiguration of street transportation, and the advent of the Internet. As the line between urban and rural, public and private, or self and “other” becomes increasingly blurred, the familiar space for the flâneur has dissipated¹. In this context then, the question remains: is the flâneur rendered homeless? We think not. Rather, the flâneur was and continues to be part of modernity, or perhaps post-modernity for those who think we have reached this point. As a subject/object of modern urban spaces, the flâneur has morphed into the new construct of flâneur-as-researcher (Jenks & Neves, 2000; Stehle, 2008). Inspired by Beck and Sznaider (2010), Jenks and Neves (2000), and Stehle (2008), we suggest that flânerie provides “data” for analysis, which is uniquely fused in the “new urban” encounter among the researcher-self, scholarly conventions of research, and the public-private duality of all research processes. In this paper, we use the city of Toronto, Canada as our study for context, whilst taking up a flâneur inquiry as a methodological contribution to qualitative research. Through a (re)conceptualization of the 19th century flâneur/euse as researcher into the 21st century, we

¹ See discussion further down on *who* and *what* is the flâneur.

explicate the methodological possibilities and applications of *flânerie*, as peculiarly suited to excavating new urban tropes and giving expression to new urban subjectivities through our own narrative experiences. This is, as Caygill (1998) puts it, “making the lived moment into a citable moment” (p. 68).

A quick Google search of the word *flâneur* conjures up words such as: “stroller”; “idler” or “lounger”. It is no coincidence then, that *flâneur* derives from a French verb meaning to stroll. In a similar fashion, *flânerie* is defined as the act of strolling, accompanied by the process of exploration, detached observation, and indirect engagement. This methodological approach is characterized particularly within the Parisian streetscapes of the 19th century. The *flâneur* became the peripatetic stroller (Baudelaire, 1964); drawing out and documenting the richness, variety, and spectacles of city landscapes (as both a physical and social space) through the “art of *flânerie*” (Fournel, 1867). During this time, the *flâneur* emerged as a new sort of hero, the product of modernity, while at the same time as “heralding its advent” (Mazlish, 1994, p. 43). The *flâneur* has emerged out of modernity, is cognizant of the fluidity of life, and abandons the static dualisms of the 19th century. Sociologist Chris Jenks (1995) has defined the *flâneur* as:

...the spectator and depicter of modern life, most specifically in relation to contemporary art and the sights of the city. The *flâneur* moves through space and among the people with a viscosity that both enables and privileges vision. The *flâneur* possesses a power, it walks at will, freely and seemingly without purpose, but simultaneously with an inquisitive wonder and an infinite capacity to absorb the activities of the collective – often formulated as “the crowd” (p. 146).

Through this paper we attempt to adopt this 19th century concept of the *flâneur*, one who aimlessly wandered the city streets, as a qualitative methodology to bring meaning to both spaces and place. In particular, our paper focuses on the study of the self in relation to the urban through the *flâneur* method. Utilizing this unique research tool can help scholars take a step back and reflect on how individual experiences have shaped our past, present, and future selves. We begin by first outlining the historical origins of the *flâneur*, before presenting a practical application of this methodology through two personal narratives, or “strolls,” occurring in the Toronto area.

Historical Origins of the Flâneur

The concept of the *flâneur* is enigmatic and eludes precise definition. The *flâneur* can be thought of as a metaphoric figure, one that represents attempts of individuals living within a newly emergent bourgeois class in 19th century Europe to interpret and internalize the new social relations that had significantly reshaped their world (Gluck, 2003; Jenks, 1995; Serlin, 2006). The *flâneur* is a product of modernity, and as a result, there are as many representations of the *flâneur* as there are conceptions of modernity (Gluck, 2003). In order to analyze the *flâneur* conceptually, it is vital to trace the origins, as the *flâneur* was molded by his/her cosmopolitan surroundings.

To begin to theorize about the *flâneur*, one must carry out a cursory familiarization with 19th century Western European history, as this is where the *flâneur* was born². It was a period of rapid change and social unrest that had radically altered Western European societies. One of the major shifts was the growing influence of capitalism and the commodification of life that manifested itself in the Industrial Revolution. The social transformation most pertinent to the

² This is important, for *flâneur* is now being re-conceptualized into Western qualitative research practices.

flâneur, was that of urbanization, as the 19th century saw a tremendous growth in urban centers. Individuals who had previously resided in rural areas flocked to the cities in search of work within the industrial sectors and factories (Fergusson, 1994).

Metropolitan life in urban spaces was the foundation on which the flâneur was created. Modern cities were teeming with activity, and were often sites of conflict, crisis, violence, and revolution. Urban living had collapsed previous notions of physical and social space, and crowds of strangers now characterized cities. Previously, individuals likely knew others who lived near them, and this locality correlated to a social class standing. Cities blurred this distinction, and anonymity began to exemplify urban life. The attentive and lucid existence of flâneurs within the disorientating and agoraphobic spaces of the cities represented an attempt to rationalize the fleeting and fragmentary experiences of urban life (Arnold, 2009; Clarke, 1997). Flâneurs would read the public, the streets, buildings, and commodities as signifiers of a new type of existence. Although flânerie was not confined to Parisian arcades, it is here that the traditional concept of the flâneur began to be established. Arcades were narrow passages encased in glass, and were primarily designed as shopping destinations (Sæter, 2011). They were a type of interiorized street, where crowds could stroll freely, while being protected from the elements. The arcades were sites of voyeuristic pleasure, where one could gaze easily at the masses, while hiding under a veil of obscurity (Arnold, 2009). Through these practices of viewing, the cities themselves began to be perceived as sites of spectacle.

The 19th century saw the emergence of the intellectual flâneur who began to question and problematize modern existence, and the conventional bourgeois definitions of contemporary life (Gluck, 2003). By becoming an outsider within a crowd, the flâneur attempted to take a more inquisitive stance, and to seek the meaning of modernity. Unlike the common observer, the flâneur was thought of as having a keen perceptual sense that allowed him/her to invest meaning into the fleeting moments of urban life that went unnoticed by the masses. What the intellectual flâneur was able to accomplish was to render legible the incomprehensible and bewildering state of urban life (Gluck, 2003). The intellectual flâneurs presented the city as a text, and “re-wrote” urban spaces to sites where ideas about the modern life could be defined and articulated (Lauster, 2007).

Contemporary Flânerie: A Methodology for Qualitative Inquiry

As mentioned previously, the Western urban landscape, which had once served as the flâneur's roaming grounds, has undergone a number of significant technological, structural, and demographic transformations. Stated otherwise, there has since been a rise of neoliberalization (Boudreau, Keil, & Young, 2009). A manifestation of these changes can be conceived as the shrinking of the “private space,” as we have become thrust into the lives and spaces of others over time.

These shifts require us to rearticulate the meaning of the flâneur within the contemporary context. As a subject/object of modern urban spaces, the Parisian flâneur has evolved into a new construct of flâneur-as-researcher (Stehle, 2008). As Jenks and Neves (2000) highlight, “the *flâneur* is treated as an instructive metaphor for the [researcher's] relationship with modernity and urban life, and therefore, as providing insight into the social, historical, and theoretical contexts for the analysis of the world today” (p. 1, emphasis in original). What this suggests (other than the connection to the practice of qualitative research) is that the act of flânerie must be rethought of as a methodology of studying the self in relation to the urban. In fact, the urban, is an important part of the spacialization of the post-industrial society (Boudreau et al., 2009). Thus, the contemporary flâneur, both a creation and a fixture within urban spaces, remains an individual with a lust for new experiences and understandings. The city and the thronging crowds that populate it are the “data” for the flâneur, and the act of

flânerie becomes a method of data collection. The contemporary *flâneur*-as-researcher maintains his/her enigmatic persona and chameleon-like nature, of “seeing without being caught looking,” as described by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2015). In fact, he argues that the art the flâneur masters is just that—to see without being seen (Bauman, 2015). Therefore, the flâneur does not attempt to partake within the activities he or she is observing, rather choosing to remain on the fringes of the social interactions being examined. Through this act, the flâneur is able to be an insider looking out, or an outsider looking in as the situation demands.

In this conception, the flânerie methodology provides an unconventional approach to qualitative research. This methodology resists hegemonic relations of knowledge production (Foucault, 1980). It does so through the use of atypical data gathering methods, in particular the capturing and presentation of visual images. This is a fundamental component of flânerie research. Through the visual images, the reader is able to join the flâneur on a “stroll,” and simultaneously understand how the researcher engages with a specific setting. However, “the [flâneur’s] experiences are not given privilege over other forms of knowing and learning” (Dlamini, 2002; as cited in Stehle, 2008, p. 3), and a flâneur’s analysis is not solely found in interpreting how s/he interacts with the environment. Rather, the process of *empirical inquiry*, which in part, defines qualitative research, attempts to uncover both individual and shared meanings and constructions held within and about spaces (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Flânerie maintains the hermeneutic, where meaning is drawn from several insights; insights that will vary depending on *who* the stroller is.

While the flâneur originates and is steeped in modernity, s/he never loses sight of his/her own past experiences, as well as the historical underpinnings, which shape the perceptions of interpretations of current phenomena. In fact, the flâneur is always cognizant of how past experiences continuously shape and mold new ones. Memories are an integral part of the flânerie methodology, as they remain embedded in our conceptions of social spaces, despite the physical transformations that these spaces undergo. Our memories become internalized and are extracted through the subconscious when triggered by a certain experience (Jenks & Neves, 2000). In a rapidly globalizing world, and in a bustling metropolitan area such as Toronto, Canada, change occurs so quickly that we rarely slow to down to pay attention to it. Change becomes a daily part of life, and we are often incognizant of its motivations, repercussions, and intricacies. Micallef (2010) indirectly encourages the flâneur to slow down, process the various sensory stimuli being experienced, evoke memory and imagined communities, and accept surprises.

Although modern cities are characterized by the close proximity in which we live and interact with strangers, urbanities nevertheless have difficulty familiarizing the strange. Being surrounded by strangers can evoke feelings of aloneness and loneliness, however, these feelings do not dissuade the flâneur from engaging with the urban environment. Whenever confronted with unfamiliar or uncomfortable spaces, the flâneur can utilize his/her imagination in order to create private or imagined enclaves within the public spaces. Through the use of imagination, the flâneur can bring both the private and public into an equilibrium, being able to enjoy both the real and imagined privacy and/or togetherness that s/he may be experiencing. Researchers adapting a flâneur methodology are encouraged “to make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange” (Elliot, 1950, p. 259), and to embrace both the insider and outsider roles. This is what we sought to document.

Application of the Flâneur Methodology: Strolling as a Form of Qualitative Research

This paper arose out of a Master of Education class at York University, located in Toronto, Ontario. The task at hand was simple: after learning about the history of the 19th

century flâneur, it was time for us, as graduate students, to adopt a flâneur identity and wander the streets of our city with this new lens in mind. The excitement and overall enthusiasm that arose out of sharing our “strolls,” coupled with the budding need for new qualitative inquiry, led us to collaborate our journeys as flâneur-as-researchers.

Our work situates flâneur methodology within sociological literature; making the case that within this discipline, little attention has been paid to this rather unconventional method of data collection—photographs and visual narratives as a legitimized source of knowledge. Harper (1988) once wrote that, “sociology, it is clear, needs visual tools” (p. 68), and although photography and sociology have co-existed for a number of years, the use of visual sociology is largely underdeveloped and “largely peripheral to the discipline as a whole” (p. 54). Scholars such as Berger (1972) have also stated that “every image does embody a way of seeing” for the way we see things is “affected by what we know or what we believe” (p. 8). In recent years, there has been more of a visual turn in the social sciences, as scholars such as Pauwels (2000) have argued that an increasing use of visual methods is finding its way to empirically-grounded research (see also Emmel & Clark, 2011). However, it is clear that more research into “the visual as a data source” is needed for “capturing, processing, and expressing social scientific knowledge”, as it continues to “challenge current scholarship” (Pauwels, 2010, p. 575). Such explicit and transparent methodologies may help “visual research to gradually enter the realm of widely accepted options in the study of society” (Pauwels, 2010, p. 575). Throughout this paper, we continue to reimagine what qualitative research may look like in the 21st century. In particular, the study of the self in relation to the urban through the flâneur methodology.

Because of the relatively innovative nature of data collection, it is important here we discuss in greater detail the flâneur methodology. Putting on the mask of the flâneur for starters, allows the researcher to maintain a sense of uniqueness, and presents a space for the individual's voice to be acknowledged and preserved. Just who is/can be a flâneur? The flâneur, most often, is an insider to the urban space, aware of the historic significance to the street he or she walks; one who shifts into an outsider lens when becoming a researcher. However, a flâneur may enter an unknown space and interpret the unfamiliar through an insider lens. Thus, the flâneur can be both an insider looking out, and an outsider looking in. Most importantly, the flâneur is one who ambles without any apparent purpose but to experience the streets (see White, 2001). This is an important characteristic of qualitative research, as it provides an opportunity for the researcher's subjective experience to be analyzed by the reader, rather than the presentation of the researcher as an objective observer. The flâneur's interpretations of the urban space and the inner thought processes are thus laid bare for the reader to explore, thereby resisting the objective/subjective duality common in much research. Through the flânerie methodology, the subjective and the objective become fused, and shape our perception and understanding of spaces. As highlighted by Jenks and Neves (2000), “the image of the city formed by the flâneur should part of his/her reflexivity, as it hermeneutically reveals both modernity and the projections, inhibitions, repressions, and prejudices of the *flâneur*” (p. 9, emphasis in the original).

What constitutes as “data” depends on the individual adopting the flâneur identity. For instance, either one of us (Jessica or Anton; or even you, the reader) may walk down the same street, yet leave with a different set of feelings depending on multiple factors, including but not limited to—gender, age, sex, background, previous experiences, memories and so forth. Thus, a flower shop may not be just a flower shop, but perhaps a symbol of the gentrification of one's neighborhood; an old building may be just concrete to one person, but for another, conjure up memories of their past. As the flâneur methodology is largely bound to the space being studied, and is grounded within the flâneur's subjective experience of a particular place, what is considered data largely has to do with the individual observing the space.

How does one collect data? Simple; by taking a “stroll.” Walk down a familiar neighborhood, through an old corridor, a busy supermarket, a foreign city. During the stroll, the flâneur is encouraged to investigate his/her thoughts in relation to the space being observed. Pay attention to the way people move, the paint on the buildings, the little intricacies one may miss on just an average day. Using a camera, or phone to collect photographic evidence of what was witnessed on the stroll is a major component of the data gathering process. This, in large part, is your data; one that allows you to revisit your “stroll” and engage and reengage with the photos. Flâneurs may also consider taking either audio or written field notes to accompany the photographs, as these can be used as aids in recollecting thoughts and impressions of the space under observation. Afterwards, a flâneur-as-researcher can return to the photos collected, with the supplementary notes and begin an analysis. What do these photos evoke? What do they mean to you? How can we make sense of them relative to their location? In doing so, an individual adopting a flâneur identity may root the data in theory as way to solidify and make sense of what one observes and experiences. It is through a discussion of personal subjectivities rooted in relevant academic literature that an analysis can be made.

What follows is an application of the flâneur methodology to two separate “strolls,” or narratives that occurred in Toronto, Canada. Toronto is Canada’s largest city; home to a diverse population of around 2.8 million people. It is known to be a global center for business, finance, arts and culture, and considered a multicultural hub. We claim that using flâneur methodology can be considered a legitimate form of research. We now turn to the exploration of our two strolls.

On the Outside Looking In: A Suburban-Urban Experience (Jessica’ Stroll)

“*All of the lights... all of the lights, turn up the lights in here baby, extra bright I want ya’ll to see this*”—the famous Kanye West song was on repeat in the mind of a young, contemporary flâneuse (JR) exploring the intriguing and creative event, *Nuit Blanche*—a free, all-night contemporary art event that occurs every October in Toronto, Ontario.

Bright lights in Downtown Toronto during Nuit Blanche

During this event, Toronto becomes transformed by contemporary art projects that are created by hundreds of artists from sunset to sunrise³. Although hearing *Nuit Blanche* tends to conjure up images of a dark, black night, I was quite taken aback by what I experienced during my stroll. There was no darkness to be found within this urban space—but instead, bright lights,

³ For more information visit, <http://www.scotiabanknuitblanche.ca/>.

movement of people, the hustle and bustle of a downtown city, as referenced in the lyrics above. The overwhelming crowds, artistic expressions, and “urban-ness” of the downtown Toronto area subjected me to an identity process of fitting “in.” The contrast of suburbia and the urban downtown sphere presents itself clearly, as I, a suburban resident (Mississauga⁴), navigated through an urban space full of obvious contrasts. The excitement; the adventure; the crowds; the diversity and the creativity the city has to offer were fully exposed and embraced.

But what did it mean to be a suburbanite in the middle of downtown Toronto? I found myself questioning my own identity and those around me. Does being an “outsider” make one more inclined to see Toronto as spectacular and magical? What was it about leaving your “home” and coming into a foreign space that allows you to be built up with excitement? Do local residents in big cities such as Toronto feel this thrilled to attend events such as Nuit Blanche? As early on as the subway ride into Toronto, I found myself leaving my suburban persona and adopting a new identity—that of a flâneuse alongside a Torontonian one. Meaning, I was now observant to things I may not have been on any other night. I was aware, my eyes wide open, with no sense of direction, no map, no idea of where to begin, I was intrigued by two young men on the subway with a map of Nuit Blanche and a big circle over Yonge and Dundas⁵. “It will be so crazy,” they said; and so, I decided that I would join these young men and also make Yonge and Dundas my starting point.

The subway ride was initially quiet, not as many people as I had expected to see; but I spoke too soon, for as soon as I transferred subway lines (From East to South), it placed me right smack in the middle of a swarm of people. There were people drinking, smoking marijuana, screaming, laughing, pushing—for someone who had taken the subway perhaps once or twice in her life, I was in utter shock. What kind of subway ride was this? Why was nobody stopping this from happening? I was sure that the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) had rules and regulations regarding appropriate conduct on public transportation, yet there was nobody trying to enforce such rules. People were pushing their way through the small subway car and then subsequently through the stations. I could already feel that this was going to be a night like no other; for would this kind of behaviour be seen as acceptable on any other given night?

The crowded subway station at Yonge and Dundas

⁴ Mississauga is a suburb of Toronto.

⁵ Yonge and Dundas is located in downtown Toronto, Ontario. It is known for its “square” which features many events, akin to Times Square in New York City. It is considered to be the “centre” of Toronto.

As I exited in the subway, and began to walk on the streets of Toronto during Nuit Blanche, I felt as though I had been transposed into some alternate universe where laws, rules, and what we would call “acceptable behaviour” were non-existent. Walking in the middle of the road where cars usually pass were young intoxicated teenagers, staggering about as if they owned the place. It seemed as if it was one big outdoor party, where people were free to come and go as they pleased. There was an unconventional band playing in the middle of the road, where people crowded all around them, bobbing their heads up and down as the music blared. It was interesting to see people utilize this urban space in such a way. I could not help but wonder what the motive was for people to attend this event? Was it to party? To take in the art? Or to just wander aimlessly around the downtown?

A crowd of people listening to a band play in the middle of the street

Perhaps, the most noteworthy moment of my stroll was what I witnessed in front of the Old City Hall Toronto Courthouse. There, right in front of the historic and iconic Toronto Courthouse, were crowds and crowds of people, not just dancing, but *raving* to a DJ playing—glow sticks and all. It was an interesting juxtaposition between what is usually considered a place of order, and the freedom that this night had to offer. What was it about this evening that made these people act in such a way? Were they acting, or “preforming” in a certain way because they could? There were no police officers, no security guards, no authority in sight; nobody at all to regulate this kind of behavior. It was interesting to see the courthouse be used in such a way during Nuit Blanche in comparison to its daily use. The transformation of space in urban environments was most evident here.

A group of people raving in front of the Old Toronto Courthouse at night

As a methodological tool, using the flâneur-as-researcher identity to stroll Toronto during Nuit Blanche had a certain effect on the negotiation of my own identity—who was I that night? Was I still that suburban girl? Was there a place for me to “fit in” in Toronto? Were participants of this night negotiating their identities as well? Did other people leave their identities behind in place for one that was contextual? Walking through spectacles such as the courthouse led me to continually wonder about whether it was my suburban-ness that made me feel like an outsider, and whether it was the effects of Nuit Blanche itself that led people to adopt a different identity.

On the Inside Looking Out: Reflections on the Urban (Anton’s Stroll)

For my flâneur experience, I (AB) decided to stroll through my own neighborhood, one that I had resided in for over a decade. I made this decision as it has been going through a number of fundamental changes, as old, low-income, governmentally subsidized housing projects were demolished to make room for mixed-income housing, and a general process of gentrification was taking place in the area.

Park in Cabbagetown

I entered Cabbagetown, a small, wealthy enclave within the downtown core of the city. The streets were empty and I found myself shrouded with a secluded feeling of privacy. It created a sense of being totally isolated from the outside world. The only charge against the illusion was the ceaseless drone of the highway that is a constant reminder that I was still within the center of the city. I began to notice the subtle signs of the affluence that this neighborhood had. I saw lawn signs that proclaimed support for the Riverdale Farm, an urban oddity, providing a “country” experience within the confines of a large metropolitan city. The yards were all kempt, with the only blemishes being some old Halloween decorations. However, these decorations gave the neighborhood a relaxed feeling, as well as the aura that children are an integral part of the community. While I have traversed these streets countless times, it is only with the focused gaze of the flâneur that the commonplace sights that I would normally pass without examination, began to stand out, thus encouraging a more inquisitive interaction with the urban space.

As I came closer to the fringes of the neighborhood I began to see drastic changes in the landscape. Once outside of Cabbagetown one is almost overwhelmed by the stimuli that you are confronted with. There is heavy traffic and numerous people are walking along the sidewalk. Gone is the feeling of isolation and privacy; instead, you are thrust into the hustle and bustle of the downtown core. I was reminded that Cabbagetown is one of the wealthiest enclaves in the city, and this affluence affords the residents a “suburban” feel, while living directly in the city center.

In front of me stood one of the remaining Regent Park apartments, which are dwarfed by the new high-rise towers that are slowly replacing the old governmental housing. At an instant, the pedestrian traffic becomes diverse. Whereas I only saw whites in Cabbagetown, in Regent Park, there is a plethora of various individuals.

New developments being constructed in Regent Park

I began to walk through the remnants of North Regent, as it is commonly known, an area that used to be comprised of numerous three and four-story apartments, with courtyards and community centers being mixed within. It was known to be a fairly dangerous area, due to the high levels of drug use, crime, and violence. It is not a space to traverse unless one has a reason to do so. An outsider must be constantly aware of his/her surroundings and never let their guard down. However, I realized that I have become so used to these spaces that their reputation, and the real or perceived possibility of violence does not particularly cross my mind.

I could still see the multiple surveillance cameras that are spread throughout the housing complex, an example of the never-ending quest to surveil the impoverished sectors of urban centers. However, over the years of massive gentrification projects, the neighborhood is an empty shell of its former self. Construction sites have replaced the tight courtyards, and the cleared land that is awaiting new development now provided a sense of empty space. I wondered how the remaining inhabitants of Regent Park feel about being confronted with the fact that their dwellings will be torn down in the near future. It must contribute an enormous amount of stress to people who already have difficult lives. It is here, in the role of the flâneur, that I was given the time to pause, and reflect on the changes occurring around my neighborhood. In downtown Toronto, change happens so quickly and frequently that I usually

do not notice it on more than superficial level, without any examinations of the motivations and implications of urban redevelopment.

I began to head west and was reminded that as much as the neighborhood was changing, some things are very much like they have been before. The corner of Queen and Sherbourne Street is awake twenty-four hours a day, and considered to be one of the most violent street corners in the entire city. There is a constant flux of people coming, going, and mingling on the street corner. Some are attracted by a couple of affordable bars, others by the availability of drugs. The hot meals served by the Salvation Army bring in many individuals at certain times of day, yet for many it simply appears to be a place where they can be with friends. I suppose when one has little and no place to go, camaraderie is the only thing left that lets one feel a sense of ownership and belonging.

Walking through the crowd I was reminded of the many unspoken codes of the neighborhood that I had internalized as an insider to such a degree as to render them invisible. One does not look someone else directly in the eye, as this can be often interpreted as a sign of hostility or challenge, especially between men. For the most part, people look down on the ground or overtly away from the people they are passing. I realized that as a six foot, two-hundred-pound white man, many people may have certain assumptions about me. One of which is that I am a police officer, which is one of the reasons why I tended to refrain from taking pictures while in the area. Although I have grown up here and consider it to be relatively safe, you still do not want to send the impression that you are a police officer. Another expectation is that since I was fairly well dressed, and wore a black leather jacket with a black hooded sweater, I am a drug dealer. Everyone in this neighborhood knows that you do not approach or hassle drug dealers, as they are the ones who are the most likely to be violent. So, for the most part people tended to shy away from me. I had never noticed before how the crowds would part as I would walk through, with people generally looking down or staring me in the eye in an act of defiance. The faces that I saw projected the hard years that they have had to endure. It is a difficult life, one rife with pain, disillusionment and struggle. Yet, I still saw people laughing and interacting and was reminded of the incredible resiliency that humans have built into their systems. Thus, through the cognizant application of *flânerie* the *flâneur* is able to distance themselves from their insider role within the urban context, and interpret the space and the relation of self to said space from an outsider perspective. Through this thought process the underlying assumptions one makes about urban spaces become apparent not only to the *flâneur*, but to the reader as well.

As I began to head back towards Cabbagetown I realized that income levels segregate the area. The invisible boundaries are only made apparent by the intermingling and cohabitation that occurs on the major streets that are the arteries of the neighborhood. Outside of these common spaces the different classes, with their imbued racial and ethnic undertones, live in separate spheres. They do not walk through the other's territory, and there is an odd sense of territorial integrity that both sides abide by. It is only on the major streets where I saw both classes of people in the same setting. I saw people heading north from the poorer area to shop at discount stores, while those from Cabbagetown were headed to a trendy spot for a bite to eat, or a quick coffee at the always-fashionable Starbucks. It is on the major streets where the two classes cohabitate.

Once I became aware of these invisible boundaries they became noticeable to me throughout my entire walk. When leaving Cabbagetown, I crossed a literal set of tracks⁶, and was immediately transplanted from an affluent area to one of economic depravity. The instantaneous disparity in income is almost incomprehensible. Yet, Toronto is seeing a shift, where the inner core of the city is being claimed by the affluent at the expense of the

⁶ Streetcar tracks that is.

marginalized. Nowhere is this more apparent than in what was, and is, happening in Regent Park. It seems that coexistence, no matter how mutually isolated, is no longer suitable enough, and the market demand for inner city land has become high enough to displace a large number of low-income people. The fact that those who were moved did not have a legal right to their land highlights the neoliberal forces that are evident underneath the surface of our everyday world.

Discussion of our Narratives

How can we conceptualize the events of these two strolls? To begin with, we both utilized the *flâneur-as-research* methodology documented earlier in this paper. Cellphones were used in both our cases to capture the images we took during our strolls—which could have, in theory, taken place anywhere. For example, in Jessica’s case, *Nuit Blanche* had coincided with the assignment, and as someone who enjoys any excuse to venture into the city, this was it! At the time, Jessica had only been to Toronto on a few occasions—shopping malls, and a few restaurants. For the most part, people were “normal” during her few experiences downtown—waiting on a cross light, walking down the streets in an orderly fashion, no obvious signs of alcohol or drug abuse. It was safe to say that there was an air of “normalcy” that was absent during *Nuit Blanche*.

For Anton, a walk down his own neighborhood seemed like a fitting task—one that could give him the opportunity to reevaluate and understand the dynamics of his surroundings. Having been part of that community for so long had given Anton a unique set of eyes and previous schema in order to better appreciate the ongoing changes that were apparent. Ultimately, it would seem that we both chose to “stroll” in places that we felt connected to. All that was needed for our *flâneur* inquiry was to have a device to take photos and/or video recordings, and a willingness to want to step outside of our normal ways of seeing. As we captured images, we made brief field notes as descriptors of what the images provoked and how we felt in that given moment. As soon as our strolls came to an end, we wrote a more detailed synopsis as to what we experienced. Afterwards, we both went back and tried to ground our findings in some sort of academic literature and theory to help make sense of our strolls in the larger sense, a discussion to which we now turn to.

Throughout the first stroll, it became clear to Jessica that one of the most interesting aspects of participating in an event such as *Nuit Blanche*, was how the identity of people (hers included) can change. The ways in which individuals acted in relation to the city was most certainly altered. People were most likely performing their identity in different ways than they would have on any other given night. Upon reflection, Jessica realized that the concept of “performance” was key to what she had witnessed. The notion of performativity was originally termed in 1990 by Butler, in which she argues that people continue to act out identities that are dictated by dominant discourses. According to Butler, we continually act out dominant discourses because we have internalized these actions and oftentimes, unconsciously repeat them. Watching individuals wander the streets of Toronto after midnight illuminated the ways people “preformed” certain identities throughout the evening. Stated differently, it could very well be that individuals were acting out an identity that perhaps would be non-existent in a different geographical context, or in other facets of their lives, such as school, work, or home. Nelson (1999) for instance highlights how:

...geographers are in a position to theorize the historical and geographical embeddedness of human subjects who “perform” a wide variety of identities in relation to various spaces over their life course. Locating these performances in

time and space, as well as theorizing how situated, knowing subjects do identity, depends our intellectual project (p. 351).

One could then argue that the identity of people as spectators/participants occurred vis-à-vis Nuit Blanche. Thus, individuals can act out identities under certain circumstances. In fact, we could argue that people were not performing their identity “unconsciously,” but rather, quite the opposite was true—it was *because* it was Nuit Blanche, that many people were aware that they could get away with this defiant identity, and use it to their advantage. Nelson (1999) writes that people are not always unreflexive in performing identity, in fact:

as these geographers recognize, if we reduce concrete subjects to compelled, unreflexive performers of dominant discourse(s) we miss the how and the why of human subjects doing identity, a process directly tied to their lived personal history, intersubjective relationships, and their embeddedness in particular historical moments and places (p. 349).

Thus, for some, this was a moment of self-awareness: that this kind of identity could only be unleashed for this night, and this night only.

The concept of identity was also quite evident during Anton’s walk, albeit from a predominantly internalized lens. Growing up in the community that he strolled through, Anton had to rationally attempt to analyze his own subjectivity as an insider, or as participant in the daily activities of this urban space. As noted previously, Anton had to negotiate how his own identity would shape his perceptions of the space, and likewise, drive his behavioral patterns. The performance aspect of his identity was situated in the unwritten codes of behavior within his neighborhood. These modes of acting were largely made invisible to him through the repetition of living within this urban space. Likewise, the people that Anton encountered were also aware of the “proper” way of behaving in this area, as there was an unspoken code of conduct that effectively regulated peoples’ behavior.

Many of the individuals whom Jessica encountered on her journey throughout the streets of Toronto even had a certain “look” about them. In particular, Jessica wrote in her field notes about the dress and demeanor of a certain individual participating in this spectacle, outside of the Eaton Centre⁷. “He was wearing multicolored clothing, layered in odd ways, with a very large hat on his head. He was listening to a boom box radio, and dancing about without a care in the world.” Jessica recalls that she could not “stop staring,” as if coming to Toronto would warrant a certain type of crowd. This man stood as almost a symbol for Toronto—for, would she have expected to see such characters in Mississauga? Probably not. Again, this led Jessica to consider how people may perform their identities as “Torontonians.” Likewise, in Anton’s stroll, he reflected on how his dress of black clothing could represent him as a plainclothes police officer and a drug dealer simultaneously. While the choice of Anton’s clothing was unintentional, or at least unconscious, it nevertheless highlights how certain geographical spaces can emplace certain meanings to clothing. In this case, a black leather coat inferred police and crime, both of which are connected to hostility and fear within the area that Anton traversed. Nelson (1999) writes that it is, “... through acts, gestures, and clothes, that we construct or fabricate an identity that is manufactured” (p. 344). For the purpose of Nuit Blanche, people might have “put on” this alter identity, but do Torontonians perform this identity on a daily basis? Did Anton subconsciously put on an identity that is meant to represent power? Nelson (1999) again argues that:

⁷ The Eaton Centre is a shopping mall and office complex in downtown Toronto, Ontario, Canada. <https://www.cfshops.com/toronto-eaton-centre.html>

how individual and collective subjects negotiate multiple and contradictory discourses, how they *do* identity, is an inherently unstable and partial process. Moreover, although this negotiation, acceptance, or struggle may be conscious, it is never transparent because it is always inflected by the unconscious, by repressed desire and difference (p. 348, emphasis in original).

Thus, the unconscious forms our identity—but how much of the identity we perform are we really aware of? How much of our identity is played out due to these dominant discourses? Nuit Blanche, and its rules of spectacle forced Jessica, embodied in the persona of a *flâneuse*, to become hyperconscious of her own identity and how the boundary of suburban/urban became permeable during her Nuit Blanche performative. Whereas Anton, in the persona of the *flâneur*, became visibly conscious of an identity he assumes whenever he leaves his residence.

This concept of identity also leads us to consider another important theme in both strolls—the idea of “fitting in.” Kathleen Kirby (1996) writes on the concept of difference, that it occurs “through older hierarchal models, framed between a closed circle and an external unbounded plane” (p. 4). What this creates is a binary between the “insiders” and “outsiders,” which generates meaning for the subject. This was clearly evident through the first stroll; between navigating into the City of Toronto, the “urban,” and residing in a suburban neighborhood. At one point during Jessica’s stroll, she asked herself, “does living in a big city compared to visiting as an ‘outsider’ affect how we experience it?” She was expecting difference in a place that was unfamiliar to herself. Her experience on the “inside” made her feel different than she was when she entered the “urban.” As she recalls, “I thought to myself, I only realize how ‘suburban’ I really am until I am placed in an ‘urban’ setting. I wonder if people who have lived or do live in Toronto are indifferent to this? Is it because of my own experience within the suburban that I see the urban in this way?” Despite the fact that Jessica took part in the “urban” and became an “insider” for the evening, she still felt somewhat of an outsider. Anton’s experience was quite the contrary, as he was a resident in the area where he strolled and could arguably be considered an “insider.” It this urban indifference to social stimuli that Jessica referred to, which became apparent during Anton’s walk. Being immersed in an urban setting had made Anton largely unaware of the social structures and codes of conduct that regulated the space. It was through the act of *flanerie* that he was able to pause, and suspend his preconceived notions and expectations, and truly attempt to see the urban space as an “outsider.” Through this critical suspension and examination of his identity in relation to the space, Anton was able to consider how his daily life was impacted and created by his environment. Both Jessica and Anton’s strolls are what we consider to be effective examples of how spaces can not only evoke identities, but negotiate identities in terms of what it means to be an “insider” and an “outsider.” We both had to reconsider our own interpretations of the spaces that we had traversed and how our identities may have influenced our perceptions.

We extend this argument even further, positing that we also struggled to come to terms with what it meant to be part of the “urban.” As part of the first stroll, Jessica’s identity shifts for the moment based on her surroundings. She documented in her field notes that “deciding to engage in a stroll outside of my city, or comfort zone, meant I was directly immersing myself in the unfamiliar.” Jessica assumed that in order to be part of the “urban,” she must have what she thought she lacked—the familiarity and experience that comes with being part of the “urban.” However, Yon (2000) would argue that urban-ness is contextualized based on identity formation, and is influenced by particular surroundings. Nuit Blanche is but one example of how identity can be discursively constituted through space. Anton on the other hand, had to critically analyze his own identification as an ingrained member of the “urban.” Whereas

Jessica, coming as a “suburban outsider” had preconceived notions of what it meant to be “urban,” Anton was largely unaware of this label, as it was his habitation. However, we both had to reconsider what we thought “urban-ness” meant, albeit from an outsider and insider perspectives.

Lastly, throughout both strolls, we suggest that there is considerable evidence to contemplate how the effects of being in a public space can make people feel connected to one another. Through Shields’ (1996) concept of social centrality, which characterizes public spaces that encourage “the gather-together-ness” in a world that is constantly focused on the individual, we can begin to see how identities not only are constructed, but grow in relation to being in a public event. Shields (1996) for instance, argues that public spaces, and ultimately, the urban as a whole, is defined by this sense of social centrality. Consider again the event of Nuit Blanche, where Jessica documented numerous times, that in relation to public spaces, “when a large number of people gather together at one place, they tend to feel a sense of happiness.” The experience of Nuit Blanche, and the effects of people coming together, can increase the emotions that one feels in such a public space, and can foster a greater communal identity⁸. Anton’s stroll presented a different sense of communal identity, one that was predominantly shaped by social class. The wealthy area of Cabbagetown expressed its own identity through supporting an urban farm, and creating a safe and quiet ambiance within the confines of an often chaotic urban center. The less affluent districts Anton passed were, for the most part, brought together in the fight against poverty and basic human survival. The fact that the two neighborhoods, while being in extreme proximity to one another, did not cohabitate or interact highlights the often fragmented aura of urban spaces.

Overall it would seem that identity was negotiated in many different ways in the urban space. Let us not forget that urban spaces tend to evoke a sense of memory and relation. As Stehle (2008) reminds us in discussing psychogeography, environments can have an effect on us, whether we are conscious of this or not. Many times, throughout both strolls, we would conjure up memories associated with certain landmarks. Strolling through Toronto’s landmarks caused Jessica to associate such geographical spaces with previous memories; lending her to conceive Toronto as spectacular and magical⁹. Likewise, for Anton, his memories of the area he strolled through likely shaped his perceptions of them and how he interacted with the space. In particular, the memories of the now dismantled Regent Park brought Anton to a critical point of reflection on the process of gentrification that many inner cities are currently undergoing. In sum, though seemingly simple strolls, both Jessica and Anton engaged in an in-depth analysis of their experience, through using the flâneur technique as a legitimate source of data and methodological inquiry.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have attempted to legitimize the flâneur methodology as a substantive qualitative methodology for researchers. The flâneur is grounded in everyday life, and can and *should* be considered a narrative tool towards producing knowledge in a social environment. The flâneur is the “spectator” of the modern world, as it manifests itself in the capitalist metropolises, “strolling its streets and lovingly regarding his own image in the class of the arcades and the new department stores” (Mazlish, 1994, p. 44). As Jenks (1995) has argued:

⁸ Much like Durkheims (1965) notion of “collective effervescence”

⁹ This most likely also has to do with the authors own construction of Toronto as magical, relative to being a resident of suburban Mississauga.

The artist flâneur should be understood based on the commodity culture that surrounds him. The flâneur is a multilayered palimpsest that enables us to move from real products of modernity, like commodification and leisured patriarchy, through the practical organization of space its negotiation by inhabitants of a city, to a critical appreciation of the state of modernity and its erosion into the post-and onwards to a reflexive understanding of the function, and purpose, of realist as opposed to hermeneutic epistemologies in the appreciation of those previous formations (p. 167).

Through both of our narratives, we have demonstrated the power of a flâneur methodology in understanding ourselves relative to our physical spaces. In both of our strolls, we considered what it meant to be an outsider looking in (as a native of Mississauga venturing to Toronto), and an insider looking out (as a resident of Toronto taking a second look at a familiar city). Thus, the power of the flâneur methodology lies in the ability of the individual to transform the everyday, ordinary space, into a qualitative observational ground. Thus, the conceptualization of the flâneur-as-researcher presents an unconventional and unique method with which to approach qualitative inquiry. Our encounters with the flânerie methodology provided a number of theoretical and practical insights, or in the world of qualitative inquiry "fruitful data," pertaining to the relationship between the self, and/or other in urban spaces.

In summary, the new urban spaces are the nexus of the strange and obscure. Cities are places where old spaces are continuously transformed, and new spaces are imagined. The peripheries and margins which the flâneur traversed and identified with have become incorporated into the new urban setting, or hover in the space of in-between-ness. The flâneur exists in fragments, as s/he weaves together various stimuli into a bricolage, an attempt to create continuity and meaning within a splintered environment. The flâneur has thus been used to explain the modern, urban experience (Tester, 1994). With careful attention, and an enhanced awareness of urban spaces and the interactions inherent within them, the fragmentary and fleeting experiences can be molded into a meaning making endeavor. The flâneur-as-researcher can adopt to the unfamiliar, while also being able to critically analyze the societal and internal constraints embedded within urban spaces. We can use the flâneur methodology in our own way. Whether it is to analyze how spaces are organized and controlled, to reacquaint ourselves with familiar spaces, or traverse into the strange, researchers can employ the flâneur methodology to help us understand who we were, who we are, and who we will become.

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