

# 6 Spatializing Culture

An Engaged Anthropological Approach to  
Space and Place (2014)

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## INTRODUCTION

Through long-term research and collaborative projects I have found that *spatializing culture*—i.e., studying culture and political economy through the lens of space and place—provides a powerful tool for uncovering material and representational injustice and forms of social exclusion. At the same time, it facilitates an important form of engagement, because such spatial analyses offer people and their communities a way to understand the everyday places where they live, work, shop, and socialize. I define *engaged anthropology* as those activities that grow out of a commitment to the participants and communities anthropologists work with and a values-based stance that anthropological research respect the dignity and rights of all people and have a beneficent effect on the promotion of social justice (Low and Merry 2010). It also provides them with a basis for fighting proposed changes that often destroy the centers of social life, erase cultural meanings, and restrict local participatory practices.

In this chapter I draw upon both my commitment to engaged anthropology and my experience with the effectiveness of spatializing culture for addressing inequality to frame this discussion. These domains are integrated through my contention that theories and methodologies of space and place can uncover systems of exclusion that are hidden or naturalized and thus rendered invisible to other approaches. The systems of sociospatial exclusion I am particularly interested in encompass a range of processes including

physical enclosure that limits who can enter or exit, such as fenced and gated spaces; surveillance strategies such as policing, private security and “city ambassadors,” and webcam and video cameras that discourage people of color from entering the space because of racial profiling; privatization of property, especially areas that surround public spaces and deny public access; legal and governance instruments that restrict entrance and use such as those found in Business Improvement Districts and condominiums and cooperative housing; and other related issues. All these systems of exclusion reference the underlying structural racism, sexism and classism that permeate contemporary neoliberal society.

In the same way that history sheds light on a cultural change that is incorrectly seen as timeless and therefore not an important object of study, the study of space, too, can direct attention to social and spatial arrangements that are presumed to be given and fixed, and therefore considered “natural” and simply “the way things should be.” Space and its arrangement and allocation are assumed to be transparent, but as Henri Lefebvre (1991) asserts, they never are. Instead when critically examined, space and spatial relations yield insights into unacknowledged biases, prejudices and inequalities that frequently go unexamined.

After reviewing the concept of spatializing culture as it has been developed within anthropology, I draw upon a fieldwork example to illustrate the value of the approach—Moore Street Market, an enclosed Latino food market in Brooklyn, New York—and claim this urban commercial space for a translocal and networked

set of social relations rather than a gentrified redevelopment project.

## SPATIALIZING CULTURE

Henri Lefebvre's foundational work on the social production of space adds that "space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning" (1991: 154). His well-known argument that space is never transparent, but must be queried through an analysis of spatial representations, spatial practices and spaces of representation is the basis of many anthropological analyses. Nancy Munn (1996) and Stuart Rokerfeller (2010) draw upon Lefebvre to link conceptual space to the tangible by arguing that social space is both a field of action and a basis for action. Margaret Rodman (2001) and Miles Richardson (1982), on the other hand, rely on phenomenology and theories of lived space to focus attention on how different actors construct, contest and ground their personal experience.

In my own ethnographic work, I initially proposed a dialogical process made up of the social production of space and the social construction of space to explain how culture is spatialized (Low 1996, 2000). In this analysis, the social production of space includes all those factors—social, economic, ideological, and technological—that result, or seek to result, in the physical creation of the material setting. Social construction, on the other hand, refers to spatial transformations through peoples' social interactions, conversations, memories, feelings, imaginings and use—or absences—into places, scenes and actions that convey particular meanings. Both processes are social in the sense that both the production and the construction of space are mediated by social processes, especially being contested and fought over for economic and ideological reasons. Understanding them can help us see how local conflicts over space can be used to uncover and illuminate larger issues.

Unfortunately this co-production model was limited by its two-dimensional structure. Adding *embodied space* to the social construction and social production of space solves much of this problem. The person as a mobile spatial field—a spatiotemporal unit with feelings, thoughts, preferences, and intentions as well as out-of-awareness cultural beliefs and practices—

who creates space as a potentiality for social relations, giving it meaning, form, and ultimately through the patterning of everyday movements, produces place and landscape (Low 2009; Munn 1996; Rokerfeller 2010). The social construction of space is accorded material expression as a person/spatiotemporal unit, while social production is understood as both the practices of the person/spatiotemporal unit and global and collective forces. Further, the addition of language and discourse theories expand the conceptualization of spatializing culture by examining how talk and media are deployed to transform the meaning of practices and spaces (Duranti 1992). For example, gated community residents' discourse of fear plays a critical role in sustaining the spatial preference for and cultural acceptance of walled and guarded developments. The concept of spatializing culture employed in this discussion, thus, encompasses these multiple processes—social production, social construction, embodiment, and discursive practices—to develop an anthropological analysis of space and place.

## MOORE STREET MARKET, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

At lunchtime, Moore Street market is bustling, housed in a squat, white cement building that looks more like a bunker than an enclosed food market with its barred windows and painted metal doors. The deserted street in the shadow of the looming housing projects seems oddly quiet for a busy Monday morning. Upon entering, however, carefully stacked displays of fresh fruit, yucca and coriander, passageways lined with cases of water and soda, and high ceilings with vestiges of the original 1940s architecture of wooden stalls, bright panels, and ceiling fans reveal another world. Puerto Rican salsa music emanating from the video store competes with Dominican cumbia blaring from a radio inside the glass-enclosed counter of a narrow restaurant stall where rice, beans, *empanadas*, and *arroz con pollo* glistening with oil and rubbed red spice are arrayed (see Figure 1). The smell of fried plantains fills the air conditioned space as Puerto Rican pensioners gather at the round red metal tables with red and white striped umbrellas open to offer intimate places to sit and talk. A young boy in a Yankees t-shirt orders lunch for his Colombian

mother who is hesitant to pass the security guard perched at the entrance who she thinks might ask for her immigration papers. She remains outside in the already-blazing Brooklyn sun searching for a spot to sell flavored ices on the crowded sidewalk near the subway entrance.

Moore Street Market vendors are made up of Latinos from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico and Nicaragua. The Puerto Ricans immigrated to New York in the 1940s, while Dominicans, Mexicans, and Nicaraguans immigrated mostly in the 1980s. Their national and cultural identities are spatially inscribed with Puerto Rican vendors located at the market's social and economic heart, a central area near the café that sells Caribbean food and plays *salsa* music, while the relatively new Nicaraguans and Mexican vendors are located in stalls along the periphery. These first generation immigrants keep ties to their homeland alive through music, food, family relationships and visits home. Many travel back and forth from their native countries bringing goods for sale and carrying gifts and merchandise to families living in Latin America.

One of the vendors, Doña Alba, shuts her metal screened stall, locking away her Seven Saints' oil, plastic flowers, and white first communion dresses. She tells me about her most recent trip to Latin America and success at obtaining the special orders and medicinal potions for her regular customers. As a young girl from Mexico she worked her way up from cleaning for white middle-class families who at that time still lived in the neighborhood and selling fruit at a street stand to leasing her own retail space. The recent threat of eviction by the New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC), however, has slowed what little business there has been during the economic recession, and she worries about her future and the enterprise that she is so proud of and has so painstakingly built.

Moore Street Market, built in 1941 and located in East Williamsburg/Bushwick, Brooklyn, is one of nine enclosed markets constructed to relocate the pushcart vendors and open air markets and supply modernizing New York City with safe and affordable food. During the 1940s and 1950s, it was a thriving Irish, Jewish and Italian immigrant market. Although the neighborhood had a significant Puerto Rican population by 1960, as late as the early 1970s some of the original residents and

market vendors remained. But the market and the neighborhood physically deteriorated with urban disinvestment during the 1970s and 1980s. Despite an architectural renovation in 1995, its tenuous commercial viability due to a decreasing number of vendors and shoppers was exacerbated in March 2007 when the New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC) announced it would be closed to make way for affordable housing.

With the threat of closure, the Public Space Research Group (PSRG), a team of CUNY faculty and graduate students, joined the remaining vendors and the Project for Public Spaces to help formulate a community-based response to EDC's closure. *The New York Times* reporters also supported the Moore Street market vendors, stating that "the 70-year old Moore Street market was always more than just a place to do business ... [but] part of the fabric of Williamsburg life, with periodic cultural events and tiny shops and stalls that hearken back to the days before glitzy shopping malls and sterile big-box stores" (Gonzalez 2007). New York City officials and private developers who would benefit from building affordable housing argued instead that the market was not supporting itself and was "tired" and "rundown." The media coverage and heated community meetings drew political attention from US Representative Nydia Velazquez and State Assemblyman Vito Lopez who ultimately secured \$3.2 million in federal funding to keep Moore Street Market open.

The ethnographic descriptions and vendor life histories collected are being used to reinstate the market as a Latino social center and to offer an alternative to the gentrification project that "saved" Essex Street Market, a boutique food market in Manhattan's Lower East Side. While the revitalization of the market is still in process, one of the members of the PSRG, Babette Audant, continues to attend community meetings and collaborate with stakeholders. This advocacy effort, though, requires a more embodied spatial analysis focused not only on the social production of this historic market, but also on the everyday practices and agency of the vendors, shoppers and neighbors who value it. By embodied spatial analysis I mean the theoretical premise that individuals as mobile spatiotemporal fields realize space, and the importance of bodily movement and mobility in the creation of locality and translocality. While

Moore Street Market began as a collaborative advocacy project, it also generated scholarly insights into a translocal and community-based public space through the mobilities, emotions and meanings of the people who work, shop and hang out there.

Analytically the ethnography of Moore Street Market reveals how urban public space links the body in space, the global/local power relations embedded in space, the role of language and discursive transformations of space, and the material and metaphorical importance of architecture and urban design. It is through this embodied space that the global is integrated into the spaces of everyday urban life and becomes a site of translocal, transnational, as well as personal experience. Moore Street Market can be understood as a place where people spend the day listening to music from their homeland, eating lunch and working at stalls where they make their livelihoods. Simultaneously they are enmeshed in networks of relationships, transnational circuits and ways of being that extend from the built environment of the market to the towns from which they migrated, and where, in many cases, the products that they sell as well as other family members remain, supported from the profits of their commercial endeavors.

It is the movement of these vendors, shoppers, pensioners, and visitors—differentiated by gender, age, class, ethnicity, and national identity—and their everyday activities: conversations, purchases, listening to music, eating homemade food, that makes the market space what it is. And it is through the embodied spaces of their social relationships that the market is simultaneously a local and translocal place.

That is not to say that the market as socially produced by the political machinations of New York City institutions and officials does not continue to play a role in its physical condition and architectural form, and pose a challenge to the market's continued existence. Nor that the meanings of the market are not socially constructed differently by the African American residents who live nearby, the tourists who visit, the officials who want to close it, the newspeople who want a story, and the regulars who see it as their place. Even the language and metaphors of state officials and the media, as well as the "talk" of visitors and neighbors contribute to a series of characterizations of the space as "the center of

the Latino community" to a place that is "forlorn, decaying and deteriorating." But these contradictory discourses come into dialogue within one another through the space of the market and the people who use it. In this sense, the market is a form of spatialized culture that encompasses multiple publics and conflicting meanings, contestations, and negotiations. In this case, the engaged practice of community collaboration and activism to preserve the market from gentrification also generated a better understanding of translocality and its role in creating and maintaining a culturally diverse urban public space.

## CONCLUSION

Moore Street Market illustrates how engagement and spatialization enhanced the breadth and scope of the research and advocacy project. The market ethnography project was engaged from its inception, incorporating a collaborative place ethnography to assist the local community and vendors in retaining the market for local use. The spatial analysis helped residents to see the social centrality of the market in the neighborhood. It also produced a better way to think about translocality as embodied by users' and residents' circuits of exchange and social networks. Thus, spatial analysis led to engaged practice, and advocacy and application generated spatial and theoretical insights. I believe that one of the strengths of anthropology lies in this close relationship, its theoretical grounding in practice.

My second point is derived from this view of engagement and suggests that anthropologists have an advantage with regard to theorizing space because we begin our conceptualizations in the field. Regardless of whether it is an ethnographic multi-sited study, a survey of human bone locations, or an archeological dig, there is an encounter with the inherent materiality and human subjectivity of fieldwork that situates the anthropologist at their interface. Theories of space that emerge from the sediment of anthropological research draw on the strengths of studying people in situ, producing rich and nuanced sociospatial understandings. Further, when spatial analyses are employed, they offer the engaged anthropologist a powerful tool for uncovering social injustice because so much of contemporary

inequality is imposed through the spatial relations of the environment and the discourse that mystifies its material effects. Therefore, anthropological approaches to the study of space, such as the social production and construction of space embodied translocal spatiality, and discursive elements of Moore Street Market suggest ways to improve the lives of those who live, work, or hang out there. In this sense, spatializing culture can be a first or last step toward engagement, and one that anthropologists can uniquely employ.

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