

ROAD RUNNERS: RACE, SPACE AND IMMIGRANT MOBILITIES IN POST-1965

BROOKLYN

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

ROAD RUNNERS: RACE, SPACE AND IMMIGRANT MOBILITIES IN  
POST-1965 BROOKLYN

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This project looks at the emergence of the ‘dollar cab,’ an informal mode of transit similar to the minibuses and minivans of the Caribbean. This particular mode of transit allowed Caribbean people to “make the strange familiar” by bringing to the U.S. urban landscape a form of labor, a social space, and a vernacular common in the post-colonial world. Drawing on archival research and urban ethnography conducted with 20 residents and dollar van drivers in the Caribbean neighborhood of East Flatbush in Brooklyn, New York, as well as transit regulators the project maps geographies of postcolonial life and labor, and new forms of urbanity that emerge post-1965. Moving beyond narratives of urban decline, I argue that, within the place-making practices of black working class immigrants, we find a rich intellectual rubric for understanding shifting terrains of global capital and urbanization in U.S. cities. Interdisciplinary in nature, the work both draws on and complicates mobilities studies, post-colonial urban studies, and understandings of how the global city is mapped and produced.

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## Black/Urban/Life

Utica isn't fully awake yet. Brightly lettered signs sit above rolling steel doors and gray sidewalks. The van driver announces that he won't stop at Eastern Parkway. There are too many cops. So he stops a few blocks away and lets everyone off. I see a line formed outside of a small store marked "bakery" and "breakfast," a pocket really. There are no pastries in this bakery. But I know the smell. I don't know which one I feel first-- the aroma of the bakery at the tip of my nose or my stomach telling me that I'm hungry. Either way, I order bun and two fish (I am saddened that they seem to have just run out of salt fish but mackerel will suffice). This is the first time I've been able to get bun and fish outside of my travels to Barbados and Jamaica. I order a coconut water for good measure. It is the canned syrupy kind with chewy pulp but I am feeling nostalgic. They wrap my breakfast in parchment and stick it in a small, pink, unmarked plastic bag. I stuff the package in my purse and head towards Eastern Parkway. If I were any other place but here, I'd eat the first bun and save the second for later. But I hear my mother's voice questioning-- *you 'n got nah manners?* And even though I know it's a very fraught performance of class and black respectability, I also know that you don't eat in the streets, you eat before you leave home.

I arrive at the Parkway and see a bunch of Crown Vics with Philly and New York plates to the right. Their drivers, older men in Kangol hats and jackets leaned against the cars chatting. To my left I see a vans parked and waiting to collect passengers. I hear the sound of someone bellowing "UTICA! UTICA!"

How to comprehend all of this in the language of methods and paradigms?



## **Vernaculars/Geographies**

In the essay “Without Her,” Edwidge Danticat reflects on her experience revisiting East Flatbush, Brooklyn, walking along the borough's streets, tracing paths traversed so many times with her now deceased mother. “I wanted to revisit that stretch of Avenue D that she and I had sauntered, strolled and marched along together throughout much of my life,” she writes. Along “...the 15 or so blocks between the Newkirk Avenue station” and her parents home, and “that stretch of Avenue D,” Danticat finds her mother in grocery stores that sell breadfruit and mangoes, in East Flatbush's churches and chapels, its bus stops and subway stations and even in the dollar cabs dotted in between. If, as Ananya Roy posits, our urban experiences are shaped by a sort of nostalgia, then Danticat's relationship to Brooklyn is very much bound to the practice of walking, and more importantly walking with her mother. “Without Her,” is— in part — a “Black geographical narrative,” its own poetics of space that tells of East Flatbush as a Caribbean locality, a world of its own, and a story that illustrates how spatial knowledge is cultivated through movement, or passing through. I am struck reading Edwidge Danticat's “Without Her,” not only because it is incredibly poignant, but also because it feels so familiar to me.

Though I did not know it at the time, my project would start at the same intersection, the subway station at Newkirk and Avenue D. It is the closest station to my aunt's house, who had lived in East Flatbush for the past 30 years and in whose home I had spent many nights as a child. The streets, the Caribbean grocery stores, the dollar cabs, my aunt's house— all of these things reminded me of the way that I came to know and understand Brooklyn. The train stop at Flatbush Avenue/Brooklyn College, Eastern

Parkway and Utica, Kings Plaza, the brick building where my god mother lives on East 45th— these too are sites through which I know Brooklyn. Collectively, they form multiple points of departure from which to think not only about this city, but about different worlds. East Flatbush, however, isn't just a series of nodes, it is also a space in which to think about the relationship between time and place, history and geography.

My parents moved from Bed-Stuy to East Flatbush shortly after I was born. Like the rest of Brooklyn, within the realm of a very broadly construed urban studies, East Flatbush exists mostly in contradistinction to Manhattan. Unlike other parts of Brooklyn, there aren't yet enough industrial buildings, brownstones or train stops to make it particularly popular in the world of academic research. In urban sociology, if mentioned at all, it is mostly treated as geographically stable, stagnant: the terminus that most Caribbean immigrants settle but which the more "industrious" and "entrepreneurial" bring to life. It is an intellectual remainder. And yet, East Flatbush is a place that people live, a place that-- like other places-- has a history and an everyday life that is full of movement and complexity. It invites analysis, not just description.

Road Runners is about a small part of that everyday life. In its broadest sense, it is an analysis of Black mobilities and urbanisms-- specifically those "improvised and tenuous" sites of sociality and urban life that allow immigrants from post-colonies to make U.S. cities their own, and to be responsive to structures and flows of capital. In a more local sense, it is an interdisciplinary study of Caribbean informal economies and circuits of exchange-- a study of Brooklyn's dollar cabs that uses ethnography as a method of approach and the ritual of riding and walking as a way of reading and learning space. This mode of transport allowed my mother to live, to move between

home, work, relatives and friends, and allowed my father to work, albeit precariously; it allowed Caribbean people in post-1965 Brooklyn to “make the strange familiar” by bringing an environment, a set of practices, a form of labor, a social space common in the Caribbean to the U.S. urban landscape. In Haiti there are tap- taps, in Barbados minivans, in Jamaica robots in Trinidad and Tobago maxi taxis. Similar to the minibuses and minivans in the Caribbean, dollar cabs are a part of the everyday life, the street life of East Flatbush.

Dollar cabs tell of everyday life, vernaculars and geographies across the post-colonial world. In Ghana there is the tro-tro, the “bush taxi,” in Kenya the matatu, in South Africa the combi, in Nigeria the danfo. In Manila there is the jeepney-- a hold over from World War II, the jeepney was originally repurposed from military vehicles left behind by U.S. troops. And there are other iterations, whether in the form of bike-taxis or three-wheeled vehicles like tuk-tuks. These mobilities are a form of popular life in a large swath of the world. Rich aesthetic cultures have developed around these informalized modes of transit. But, in terms of how they operate, the premise is mostly the same. The driver picks up and drops off almost anywhere along a fixed route, blowing the horn to hustle for fares. In East Flatbush they pick up along on Avenue D, Utica, Church, Nostrand, Glenwood and Flatbush. Like the tro-tro the dollar van, or dollar cab, gets its name from the original fare. Set within this broader context, while I find the simultaneity of post-colonial urban life incredible, Brooklyn’s dollar cabs are somewhat unremarkable. They are ordinary. But there is something important about ordinary Black life.

In this project, I take the dollar cab as an object that allows post-colonial subjects to navigate, remap and interface with urban space in ways that have been largely under

theorized in North American urban studies. I note that there exists a wealth of research coming out of post-colonial urban studies, in particular on African cities, that well theorizes vernacular transit. The importance of this project is not that I discover or render visible forms of Black life that are new, understudied or under researched. This language around visibility and discovery that is so commonplace in the academic précis, in this context would be at best centrist and voyeuristic, and at worst colonial. Dollar cabs remain visible and relevant to people who live and work in Brooklyn regardless of whether academic researchers see them or decide to document them. They have their own sound and rhythm. They have their own social life. The contribution of this study, *Road Runners*, is that it insists that Black people across class strata have long been engaged in life and place making practices, that those practices can well be understood through a study of “roots and routes,” translation and transit, and that these practices give us an intellectual rubric for understanding life in the context of shifting terrains of global capital and urbanization in U.S. cities. Conversely, it illustrates how those shifts in global capital and urban space produce knowledges about race, ethnicity and difference.

### **Post-1965 Itineraries**

This project is about a form of urban life that emerged in a post-1965 “moment,” in the wake of what I have already described above as shifts in capital (both human and non-human). Typically “post-1965” is meant to reference the passage of liberalized immigration reform in the U.S. — the Hart Cellar Act— which created more channels for migration to the U.S. from parts of the Caribbean, the continent of Africa and countries of Southeast Asia. Additionally, post-1965 (as a frame) signals a discourse (both

popular and academic) around not only immigration but also urbanization, it ushers in a new wave of language around pending urban decline and ghettoization with which I struggled when first reading and researching for this project. In particular, the narratives that enshroud certain parts of Brooklyn, most notably places like Bed-Stuy and Bushwick, often describe urban life as being in a state of crisis. Revisiting post-1965 itineraries through a practice of disciplinary waywardness became a way for me to think differently about the ways in which the urban has been theorized in relation to black/migrant life.

For context I should note that, in revisiting the post-1965 moment and trying to understand my own relation to that body of scholarship, I was inspired by the work of Katherine McKittrick on the black creative texts as geographical knowledge. In her talk at the 2015 meeting of the American Studies Association (ASA) Katherine McKittrick offered a provocation in the form of new, or revised, schemas and methods for thinking about the complexities of Black life and Black geographies. Included in that revised methodological framework were three research and writing practices that are central to my project: the first is to re-imagine the black biologic as life-knowledge, as opposed to beginning with the violated oppressed black body, the second had to do with disciplinary disobedience and the third had to do with asking the groove, the poem, the creative text for theoretical insight.

As an example and an experiment, against dystopic narratives of urban decay and deviance, I turned to *the groove* for a more nuanced archive of life under urban deprivation in the 1970s. The archives are filled with narratives of depression, socio-spatial death and pathologized ghetto archetypes. Instead, keeping in mind the groove I considered the dance *The Hustle itself* an archival text — and a particularly useful one for reading and

mapping black and brown life in the boroughs during this time period. If the state defined the hustle as deviance, theft and urban trickery, shuffling feet, acrobatic moves and the sensuality of *The Hustle* revealed at the time a different sort of knowing urban life outside of the presumed city center (Manhattan) and presents now an alternative way that the city might be told. It was within the context of structural deprivation that a dance mostly associated with a later whitewashed disco emerged, not picked up but *created by* black and Latino working class and working poor youth in Brooklyn and the Bronx years before there was a ditty for it.<sup>1</sup> The fact of the dance emerging and being practiced in places like Brooklyn and not Manhattan is an important point because it remaps the where of viable cultural production in the 1970s.

As Katherine McKittrick observes, “in sharing and grooving to music, histories are renarrated, kinships are reimagined, and a different mode of representation is



Image Credit: Jimmy G in the Middle of the Pack- Everybody Hustle (circa 1977) courtesy of HB Barber/DJ Chips

<sup>1</sup> Peter Shapiro Turn the Beat Around

performed, heard, repeated, enjoyed: this is a very different kind of initiation into humanness than a normative model that requires racial violence.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, *The Hustle* represents an instance where “one grooves out of the logics of antiblackness and into black life.”<sup>3</sup> Through the dance, dispossessed black and brown youth inhabited the city in ways not often available to them and not often captured by traditional archives. The discotheque, as one example, was not somewhere in Manhattan or a cab ride from it, for black and brown folks (in addition to ‘undergrounds’ clubs) it was part of the everyday city, sometimes mobile and public, popping up on streets and in parks. Block parties where folks held ‘hustle’ contests emerged throughout places like Bed-Stuy for example; youth considered ‘degenerate’ hustled on the rooftops of a Bronx imagined through the language of ruin, turning public spaces into sites of black pleasure, collaboration, improvisation and invention through bodily movement. Thus, this is not a question of replacing narratives around urban decay but taking an approach that is more topographical in nature.

This experiment with creative text was and is instructive in so far as it compels us to think about archives and the way that black urban life was experienced *in relation to* structural deprivation. It compels us to think about the possibilities contained in approaching other post-historical framings from the vantage point of (black) life-knowledge. The rhythm was a reflection of a certain possibility, even a certain desire on the part of the dancers and the audience to inhabit the city differently, perhaps even to be cosmopolitan. I turn here to a conversation with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, in

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<sup>2</sup> Katherine McKittrick 2016 *Rebellion/Invention/Groove* Small Axe 49 p.90

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p. 89

which Moten notes of emerging (black) aesthetic traditions, "...The point is that it's more than just a device. It's more than just a trope [...] It didn't come from nowhere. If it came from nowhere, if it came from nothing, it is basically trying to let you know that you need a new theory of nothing and a new theory of nowhere."<sup>4</sup> In other words, this is not about being idyllic or ahistorical—in some parts of Brooklyn and the Bronx racialized groups lived material deprivation daily. But the dance was a query for a new theory of 'nothing' and of 'nowhere,' of well-worn tropes of blight and decay associated with the boroughs, and with black and brown life.

And so it would seem that this is a bit of a departure—a section on disco in a dissertation about mobilities and informal transport. But this section was about turning towards the ordinary in order to understand how people lived and improvised urban space in a particular historical context so that I was able to think more capaciously about life in post-1965 New York, and in the boroughs more specifically. It was about introducing new ways of thinking about urban composition and thinking in the breaks and in terms of the excess. It came from a set of rehearsals—combing through post-war urban histories that, while robust, rehearsed a set of dystopic narratives that led to black ghettoization (realities of redlining and housing segregation, the erosion of black residential communities through the expansion of freeway systems and other urban forms, the defunding of social services and so on) but did not necessarily speak to black life under structural deprivation. Instead, I posed the question—what if we were to revisit the post-1965 'moment' through frames of improvisation?

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<sup>4</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney *The Undercommons*



## **Black Urbanism as Method**

Ananya Roy writes that “our urban experiences are always forged in relation to those we consider our ancestors...To walk the city is to trace their footsteps...Such a relationship is not only a historical one but also a pedagogical one.” It is also ethnographic. Supplemented by archival research, ethnography was a means of approaching this work. It was my way of returning to Brooklyn, a way of placing myself into the context of the city as a researcher, a way of seeing the city. It is also my way of writing. A legacy of black ethnography—in particular, black women’s ethnographic experiments—very much guides the way that I approach questions of the “field,” research “subjects,” and what it means to write. From John Gwaltney’s *Drylongso: A Self Portrait of Black America* to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse* and *Mules and Men* to more recent ethnographic studies, I learned how to theorize the ordinary. I learned that it is within the ordinary that the fullness of black knowledge is contained.

Also, there’s something particular about the ways in which “work,” for example, is figured within the space of black ethnography and expressive texts. It is a particularity that both coincides with, and grates against the tenor of, other academic approaches to thinking and writing about black working-class labor. In this project I was very interested in ways of talking and writing about work that both accounted for the racialization of informal labor and its performative, affective aspects. In Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, Hurston records a folktale titled “De Reason Why Niggers is Working So Hard.”

The story goes as follows:

God let down two bundles 'bout five miles down de road. So de white man and de nigger raced to see who would git there first. Well, de nigger out-run de white man

and grabbed de biggest bundle. He was so skeered de the man would git it away from him he fell on top of de bundle and hollered back: "Oh, Ah got here first and dis biggest bundle is mine."

De white man says: "All right, Ah'll take yo' leavings," and picked up de li'l tee-ninchy bundle layin' in de road. When de nigger opened up his bundle he found a

pick and shovel and a hoe and a plow and chop-axe and then de white man opened up his bundle and found a writin-pen and ink. So ever since then de nigger been out in de hot sun, usin' his tools and de white man been sittin' up figgerin', ought's a ought, figger's a figger; all for de white man, none for de nigger.

The element of folklore and black labor is an important one. If folklore is defined not by the stories that are told but the ways that they are transmitted then what I learn from Hurston is that the way that black people talk about labor is something that must be listened to and understood in the vernacular. Thus, starting in 2013, I interviewed 20 dollar cab drivers, neighborhoods residents and transit representatives and regulators.

But I ultimately came to think of my overarching method in this project as black/urban/life, or black urbanism. Black urbanism as a critical method of engagement, as a way to do the work of critical urban study, has been well articulated by scholars like Paul Goodwin AbdouMaliq Simone. I include a bit of Simone's précis on black urbanism, as it is worth including at length here. He writes:

Blackness here is a tactical maneuver and not a means of sociological explanation.

Blackness does not constitute a particular kind of urbanism, but rather tries to bring into consideration certain dimensions of urban life that are too often not given their due.

The key dimension to black urbanism is to put blackness to work as a device for affirming and engaging forms of articulation amongst different urban cities and urban experiences that otherwise would have no readily available means of conceptualization. It is thus an 'inventive methodology' in that it relies on the rhetorical force of a constellation of historical and political experiences inherent in black urban experiences to bring into existence a transurban domain that both includes and goes beyond the prevalent notions of the black diaspora. Yet it also

attempts to account for the intensified urbanization and spreading out of the Diaspora as an important event in and of itself and as a means of elaborating new forms of urban livelihood.<sup>5</sup>

Black urbanism is about the very complex relationship between blackness (as a social and political location) and cities. For me, that complex relationship is held within the space of the ordinary. It allows for both a consideration of possibility and precarity. South African thinker Mpho Matsipa asks: How do we attend to urban practices of emergence? As a frame for thinking about popular, street life, post-colonial movements and flows, this question is a useful one. Black urbanism asks what it means to approach the study of black urban life from a framework of emergence, improvisation. In many ways this approach reorients the way that I approach the “field,” so that I am not studying Caribbean Brooklyn as much as I am drawing on Caribbean Brooklyn to ask questions of the fields of urban geography and American Studies.

In some instances, black urbanism demonstrates the refusal of blackness to serve as the object of study. By its very nature, forms of subaltern/black urbanism, are difficult to ascertain through social scientific and archival frames and yet vital to producing scholarly work. Indeed, blackness sometimes refuses research. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us that, “*Research* is a dirty word among many Native communities [...], and arguably, also among ghettoized [...], Orientalized [...] and other communities of overstudied Others.”<sup>6</sup> Given this, Tuck and Yang treat refusal as a “generative orientation” towards the task of research.<sup>7</sup> They say that “refusal is not just a ‘no,’ but a

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<sup>5</sup> AbdouMaliq Simone 2010 *City Life From Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads*

<sup>6</sup> *R-words: Refusing Research* p. 223

<sup>7</sup> *R-words: Refusing Research* p.238

redirection to ideas otherwise unacknowledged or unquestioned. Unlike a settler colonial confirmation of knowledge that is petulantly exasperated and resentful of limits, a methodology of refusal regards limits on knowledge as productive, as indeed a good thing.”<sup>8</sup> My project is very much informed by moments of refusal, the refusal to have ordinary life recorded or entered in larger discourses or even articulated in particular ways.

### **Interdisciplinary Engagements**

This project is not as interested in the pragmatics of informal transportation or turning an ethnographic eye on marginality and working-class life as it is in the way that Black people live, and because of this I try to pay attention to the rhythm of everyday immigrant life in East Flatbush. The act of mapping black and brown people's everyday participation in circulatory relationships of accumulation does not simply turn us toward interdisciplinary logics and methods, it requires the practice of disciplinary waywardness. Therefore, this project engages across a number of fields (performance studies, mobilities studies, critical race studies, urban studies and so on), not all of which I can gloss here but a few of which are particularly important to the architecture of the project and to which I see Road Runners contributing in a meaningful way.

I was led to black urbanism through an engagement with post-colonial urban theory. In researching Caribbean urban life in the U.S. I found it useful to think about how studies of the urban tend to center Western cities as models from which we can generate urban theory and post-colonial— or ‘Third World’ cities as always in a moment

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid p. 239

of crisis, a model for problem solving. Here, I draw on the work of scholars like Ananya Roy and her call for “new geographies of theory,” in addition to the work of Ash Amin, Jennifer Robinson, Achille Mbembe, and the aforementioned work of AbdouMalik Simone. Post-colonial urban theory acknowledges that black and migrant groups come from specific urban contexts— and makes room to approach the relationship between globalization and cities differently by de-provincializing the way that we think about post-colonial migrants.

Within this body of literature I find a robust exploration of informal geographies and urban informality as both a mode of producing space, and as a way to think about a particular relationship to the state. Ananya Roy, for example, writes that “...informality is not an unregulated domain but rather is structured through various forms of extra-legal, social, and discursive regulation. Second, informality is much more than an economic sector; it is a ‘mode’ of the production of space.” Whereas it is commonplace to understand the informal economy as “underground,” in the “shadows,” “unregulated,” operating outside of formal institutions, and simply a condition or reflection of black and migrant urban poverty— in other words peripheral— post colonial urban theory defines informality as central rather than peripheral to planetary urbanism— or as some have put it, as a “resource” for planetary urbanism.

Post-colonial urban study also offers a complex understanding how global shifts create unique experiences of the urban. In the U.S., 1965 brought the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act, also referred to as the Hart-Cellar Act. Hart-Cellar amended per-country quota limits installed in the passage of the 1924 Johnson Reed Act. While there are debates about whether or not 1965 drastically changed the colors of

“immigrant America,” it is mostly agreed that Hart-Cellar made possible the emigration of larger numbers of people from countries outside of Northwestern Europe-- countries of the Caribbean, of Africa, of Asia, of Latin America and Mexico. Still, in terms of the generations of immigrants that entered and made life in the U.S. post-1965, colonialism was a very present consideration. The former colonies of Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica gained their independence in 1962, just three years before the passage of Hart-Cellar, Barbados and Guyana would gain their independence in 1966, Grenada the following decade in 1974, Saint Lucia in 1979, in 1985 the Washington Post published article titled “Independence Movement Stirring in Guadeloupe.” Of course, these citations are not meant to be exhaustive, they are meant as a gesture. Urbanization happening elsewhere took shape in the context of an ongoing process of decolonization — at that matters.

At the intersection of globalization, changes in immigration policies and decolonization movements, some U.S. cities saw major demographic shifts in the 1970’s and 1980’s. It is precisely because of an influx of post-colonial Caribbean migrants that Brooklyn becomes a key city through which to analyze black and migrant urbanism. Black migrants did not enter New York without a sense of the urban and the emerging forms of the urban that we find in places like Brooklyn— such as these informal taxis that I study— come out of an encounter between different contexts, it comes out of the movement of black spatial knowledge into a U.S. urban context. In other words, what we find in post-1965 Brooklyn are post-colonial geographies. Caribbean migrants in 1980’s and 1990’s Brooklyn improvised the city in ways that were familiar— shared taxi rides

already popular in the Caribbean and other post-colonial regions— and in doing so they produced a new version of Brooklyn.

In her introductory essay to *Worlding Cities*, Aihwa Ong refers to “the city as a site of experimentation” and takes urban study as an opportunity to “integrate qualities of fluidity...and interactivity that crystallize the possibilities within which we imagine, remake, and reexperience urban conditions and the notion of the urban itself.”<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this project I find great utility in a theory of the urban that is situated, that looks at the world (or the global) as always unfolding, and that thinks about people enacting urban “experiments that have different possibilities of success and failure”<sup>10</sup> in the everyday, and that moves beyond rhetorics of agency. Additionally, I appreciate that worlding can accommodate a certain amount of messiness when it comes to “class, political, or cultural divides.” Thus, in this work, Brooklyn can be understood as a city where Black people, in particular immigrants from post-colonial territories, across class and cultural strata experiment with urban forms and with what it means to be global in ways that are complex, contingent, mobile, incomplete and at times neoliberal. It also means that Afro-Caribbean people in Brooklyn may be modeling urban practices that do not reference urban life *as they know it* in the Northern U.S. in order to navigate urban terrains *as they experience them* in the Northern U.S.

In Brooklyn, dollar cabs came about at least in part because there wasn’t sufficient transit in certain neighborhoods of Brooklyn and, in my research, I find that there is a relationship between a lack of transit access and the where of black, working class life. By

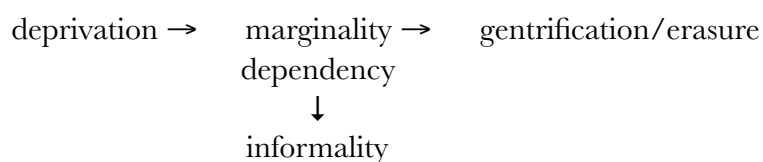
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<sup>9</sup> Ong, *Worlding Cities*, p. 10

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, preface

creating their own transport, black and migrant workers and residents were responding to a particular mode of urban planning that didn't include them. Instead of incorporating this form of community transit—as has been done in many cities in the Caribbean—the city of Brooklyn responded with hyper-regulation, creating conditions that would render this form of transportation as informal and outside of dominant frameworks of how to do life in U.S. cities. I draw on post-colonial urban studies to understand these dynamics.

How I approach cities is also reflected in my engagement with the field of black geographies. There remains, I think, a common intellectual practice of telling Black urban life in the U.S. through analytically stalled histories (and other disciplinary narratives) that link what Katherine McKittrick refers to as “white survival” to Black possession and dispossession through linear deterministic schemas. Narratives of ‘white flight’ that conclude in the production of dead and dying black neighborhoods are one example of such a schema. I include in this equation the twinned discourses of marginality and dependency that overwhelm both social scientific and historical approaches to studying the daily lives of Black im/migrants.



This is a delimited equation. This, for me, is why (in addition to post-colonial urban theory) Black geographical analyses have been so incredibly important. Realizing that this equation consigns Black life to inevitable erasure or marginality, Black geography works to create a new calculus.

Black Geography presents a possibility of shifting away from framing black urban life always in relation to marginality, urban decline, and urban crisis and to think in more



capacious terms about blackness and its relationship to place, while also understanding how spatial control and structural deprivation work. I am thinking here of the work of Ruthie Gilmore, Katherine McKittrick, Clyde Woods, Simone Browne and others. By the mid- and certainly late-1980s there were parts of Brooklyn that were largely understood as ghettos, and many Caribbean communities were ghettoized—in particular working-class Haitian immigrants. To end there, at documenting black ghettoization, immigrant slums and transit deprivation is to reproduce a naturalized and very fraught way of thinking about black urban life, or about the relationship between people and place. It is a problem for how we generate urban theory, for how we understand who and what produces space. As McKittrick explains, “the condemned and ‘without’ apparently have nothing to contribute to our broader intellectual project of ethically re-imagining our ecocidal and genocidal world...it seems eerily natural that those rendered less than human are also deemed too destroyed or too subjugated or too poor to write, imagine, want, or have a new lease on life.” Black geography insists that a study of blackness and cities must include a structural analysis, alongside life and alternative place-making practices.

Bridging post-colonial curban theory and black geographies Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall, Edgar Pieterse and several others have engaged the improvisational as a way of thinking about everyday life against dominant theories of the urban.<sup>11</sup> In their work, improvisation is not a synonym for spontaneity, but rather a way to look at the production of space in the everyday. Studies on black aesthetics by Paul Gilroy, Robin

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Nuttall and Mbembe’s work on *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* and Edgar Pieterse’s *Rogue Urbanism*

D.G. Kelley and Paul Goodwin, which have provided an intellectual genealogy for tracing black urbanism through the provisional and makeshift, have also influenced my approach and thinking in this chapter.<sup>12</sup> In my travels, I found myriad instances and performances of improvisation— from remixing the vehicle itself (which I discussed in a previous chapter), to unplanned route changes, to the varied uses of and relationships to time that can be found within the dollar cab economy. These moments were all tied to hustling, or sustaining life through this particular type of informal work, as well as sustaining the working lives of others who live in and around East Flatbush. For some, the lens of improvisation (or fluidity as it is named in some urban theory) “runs the risk of overlooking the disparities the mobility of capital and labour, the powerful and the weak and between relationality and territoriality.”<sup>13</sup> But improvisation is never divorced from political economy, it is often a study of it. This I learned from the work of scholars like Fred Moten who draws on improvisation as epistemology in his study of the black radical imagination.<sup>14</sup>

Brooklyn in the late 1970s throughout the 1990s is often represented as an urban ghetto, a space out of which very little was produced besides black music. Many neighborhoods were devastated by New York’s 1975 fiscal crisis and the violence caused by histories of racialized spatial control. In my project, I look to the structural reasons for this— for example, that year, New York almost declared bankruptcy. In an effort to course correct there were massive spending cuts to social services. Black and by extension other

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<sup>12</sup> See for example, Paul Goodwin’s *Re-Visioning Black Urbanism*

<sup>13</sup> Tim Edensor and Mark Jayne *Urban Theory Beyond the West: A World of Cities* p.18

<sup>14</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break*

migrant groups very much experienced the violence of structural deprivation. In my project, I argue that informal taxis are one example of how black migrants found familiar ways to navigate the urban landscape of Brooklyn, New York and to move between sites of leisure and labor. In other words, within the context of structural deprivation, forms of urban life emerged that allowed black migrants to persist. For me, improvisation provides a useful way to think about the relationship between ideas like refusals and pauses, alternative definitions of infrastructure, pleasure and precarity, work and time and their relationship to definitions and studies of urbanity in order to help better analyze ways that black people sustain their livelihoods under deprivation. Therefore, while a turn towards the improvisational may not be ‘new,’ it is perhaps necessary in the context of U.S. urban study.

In this project, I work through the politics of movement and stasis and understand movement as a way to think about and a way to map place-making. My project proceeds from the idea that daily mobility, as well as other scales of movement are key to understanding black urbanism. I put black geographies and post-colonial urban studies in conversation with mobilities, which seeks to understand how people, information, capital and material objects move on a large scale and also within more localized contexts across time and space. I am thinking here of the work coming out of sociology by Mimi Sheller and the late John Urry, also by geographers like Tim Cresswell and even Doreen Massey’s work in which she argues that: “Different social groups have distinct relationships to... movement: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don’t; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.” Rather than thinking of efficiencies as you might in

transportation planning, mobilities studies highlights the relationship between movement, place and power. In the context of the U.S. there is a unique culture around driving—driving is equated with freedom and power despite the fact the driver’s license is a primary point of contact between people and government— it’s a regulated practice. There is also a relationship between citizenship and daily mobility— here, we can think of the debates around whether or not undocumented immigrants should have driver’s licenses. In Brooklyn, tracing the movement of informal taxis tells a different narrative of place.

In order to comprehend black immigrant mobilities in the U.S. urban context means not only problematizing place as an “anchor” or stage for movement, it requires a sustained theoretical engagement with the ways in which physical and social spaces are produced by everyday movement across space and time. This is perhaps why I am most drawn to the field of mobilities studies-- it offers a way to think about immigration, geopolitics, place making and the social outside of fraught rubrics of “assimilation” and “integration” that have been so popular in sociology. As a paradigm, mobilities seeks to understand how people, information, capital and material objects move on a large scale and also within more localized contexts. Instead of arguing from a shift away from analyses of place and territory, nation-states and cities, mobilities turns our attention to the connectedness, flows and “contact-zones,” between and within these institutions.

## **Chapter Summary**

I start with a consideration of the city because to conceive of black immigrant mobilities in the U.S. requires us to think critically about the relationship between

movement, race and place, to think critically about how cities inhibit or engender the movement of people, goods and capital and the production of difference. As socially produced spaces of capital, cities have been sites of rigorous interrogation across a number of disciplines. It is imperative to attend to the city as a scaffolding for structures of power that shape the lifeworlds of the people that inhabit them. It is perhaps well understood by now that cities are spaces of fragmentation and relationality, that relationships between place and power are made abundantly clear by theorizing from the city's periphery, rather than its core, and that cities across "worlds" have been (re)defined by globalization. I think--in long form-- about Brooklyn as a city, as a space of fragmentation and relationality, in Chapter 1. Inspired by the work of black geographical study and the possibilities of black urbanism, I engage alternative ways of knowing, alternative sources for writing and urban history of Brooklyn. I see this chapter as an experiment in excavation and attempt to work through the multiple layers of history that impact upon black lives in the present and shaped black im/migrant life post-1965. I draw on a range of sources to read the development of Brooklyn as a city from the plantation to the 'slums,' sources that might fall outside of traditional ways of doing geographical or urban study.

Following this, in Chapter 2, "Babylon," I look at how black mobilities shed light on broader structures of surveillance. Mobilities scholars have remained attentive to the problems inherent in romanticizing movement and flow, recognizing that "mobilities...are caught up in power geometries of everyday life." In doing so, thinkers of mobility have opened up an opportunity and an invitation to think productively about how movement in itself produces specific and overlapping assemblages of power-- in particular class,

gender, and nation. The work on race and mobilities is just beginning to take hold.

Throughout this project I return to the term Black mobilities to make room for a critical study of Blackness, race and post-colonial life within the broader field of mobilities studies. In this chapter I map the hyper-regulatory practices that scaffold the political economy of dollar cabs in Brooklyn. Because dollar cabs occupy that space between the legitimate and illegitimate, because they are a precarious mode of labor and mobility, dollar cabs and the people who operate them are subject to heightened police surveillance by the city.

Chapter 3, “Does She Even Exist?,” focuses on masculinities and gendered performances of labor in this informal street economy. It was originally intended to be a very different sort of chapter. Originally titled “Hustling,” a vernacular reference for informal labors and accumulation strategies of various sorts, this chapter was structured around a discussion of how vernacular labor disrupts dominant ideas around work, life and time. However, even scant attention to hustling, street economies and the dollar cab economy shows that black men are overwhelming represented in this sector, making the dollar cab and its surrounding geographies interesting spaces in which to think about how masculinities are understood and performed in relation to labor and place.

The conclusory chapter is comprised of multiple endings. In the first ending, I bring various strands of my dissertation together by posing relevant questions about what happens to black articulation, sites of black sociality, informal geographies, when the city becomes increasingly commodified and told through narrations of power. But those questions do not fully represent the imperatives of the project, or the lived experiences of the people with whom I lived and traveled over the course of my fieldwork. In some ways

the second conclusion disrupts any claims around finality because it highlights the parts of the project that are incomplete. I present some initial thoughts on radio and pirate mobilities, which I see as an area for future research. The third ending is about what falls outside of discussions of erasures and commodification. The third ending is a digression, or maybe it is about writing digressions as a method. In it, I revisit the post-1965 moment through aesthetic practices and urban life in the excesses. I show how rereading the past made me listen for and to the present differently. This, alongside a discussion of the realities of gentrification, displacement and narratives of power, takes us part of the way there. In yet a fourth version of a conclusion, I think about futures and planning, moved by the intersection of afro-futurism and urbanism, by the afro-futurist city.

### **Cursory Thoughts On Gentrification and Brooklyn's Futures**

Before moving into the next chapter, a history of Brooklyn, I turn towards some thoughts on the city's futures and the impact of this most recent wave of gentrification not only on the landscape but on my thinking. Focusing on the development of the Barclay's Center at the same intersection of Flatbush and Atlantic, I am interested here in how the city seeks to remake itself through new geographies of development and gentrification. Mpho Matsipa describes post-apartheid Johannesburg as a city "wrestling with its own emerging form."<sup>15</sup> In many ways, this is useful language to articulate what is happening in the city-space of Brooklyn. In the current moment, I do not know if there is anything that illustrates this friction more clearly than the assemblage of gentrification which has imposed on this project in ways that I did not originally anticipate. I returned

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<sup>15</sup> See Matsipa "The Order of Appearances"

to a Brooklyn of Uber and Applebee's. Gentrification continues to change the context and material landscape of Brooklyn. The Barclays project demonstrates this perfectly.

In Frederic Jameson's oft referenced discussion of post-modern aesthetics and late-capitalism, he reads— as a sort of quintessential post-modern text— the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup> Jameson describes the Bonaventure as a sort of “total space,” or totalizing space, a space of enclosure that “does not wish to to be a part of the city but rather its equivalent and replacement or substitute.” This “diagnosis,” he says, is evidenced by the building's obscured entryways and “reflective glass skin” which effectively “repels the city outside.” Barclays arena is the Bonaventure Hotel of Brooklyn.

Designed by ShoP Architects Barclays was supposedly designed to foster “a healthy, interactive dialogue with the surrounding streets and neighborhood” and to create a “grand civic space.”<sup>17</sup> Introduced in 2003 as part of the \$4.9 billion Atlantic Yards Project funded and implemented by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the City, real estate development firms Empire State Development and Forest City Ratner, and Russian billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov the \$2.5 billion arena is more of an imposition, or interruption, than a dialogue. A New York Times op-ed titled “An Arena as Tough as Brooklyn. But Street Smart?” announced the arrival of the outer-worldly indoor sports arena that is Barclays just two years before I returned to Brooklyn to start my fieldwork. Describing the arena as “a hunkered-down, hunchbacked, brooding sight at the intersection of Flatbush and Atlantic Avenue” the author writes that “At first blush it's a shocker, which is one its virtues... the panels swoop and curl lengthwise around

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<sup>16</sup> Jameson, Frederic. 1991. *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.shoparc.com/projects/275/>



the building, ancient chains binding a giant Gulliver.” Like the Bonaventure, a space of enclosure, the op-ed notes that “They leave openings here and there for ribbons of windows that provide peekaboo views out from and into the interior.” The New Yorker describes the arena as an “alien presence.”

Beyond its physical form, plans for the larger Atlantic Yards Project (of which Barclays is a central component) include 16 mixed-use mostly high rise buildings. Spread over 22 acres, the blueprints for the project were etched over several residential buildings and small businesses on Dean Street, Pacific Street and 6th Avenue, prompting the rise of quasi anti-development protests and lawsuits against the proposed development. I employ the word quasi because, even as they fought the razing of surrounding homes and the onslaught of unsightly and unnecessary high rise condominiums, most community organizers who lived in surrounding areas were not necessarily in protest of the type of restructuring that would increase the value of their own properties. Though not all of them, some of these organizers were very much invested in the possibilities of development. Barclays became the aesthetic object around which frustrations over the project would coalesce.

In 2004, as a prelude to the numerous lawsuits, appeals, petitions, and rallies through which residents responded to the Atlantic Yards Project, Daniel Goldstein, spokesperson for Develop Don’t Destroy (Brooklyn), wrote a letter to Assemblyman Richard Gottfried arguing that: “The citizens of Brooklyn and New York City are under threat of a massive development proposal for Prospect Heights, Brooklyn bypassing all city review and oversight, with an end-run around ULURP (Uniform Land Use Review Procedure). The project...proposes to demap three blocks of city streets.” The letter was

co-signed by a number of community organizations, including members of the Pratt Area Community Council, Fort Greene Association, and Prospect Heights Action Coalition, themselves “neighborhoods” that had been radically altered, produced, “revitalized,” “restored,” by the arrival of predominantly white-collar professionals and displacement of “Old Brooklyn’s” Black and Brown residents in the 1960s and 1970s.

In his work on gentrification in post-war Brooklyn, Suleman Osman traces the fabrication of that collection of sites that he refers to as “Brownstone Brooklyn.” Osman maps places like Fort Greene, Boerum Hill, Prospect Heights and Park Slope, as they were manufactured into “authentic” and historically rich Brooklyn “neighborhoods” by a cadre of real estate developers and predominantly white, white-collar, middle class professionals seeking “an alternative to the postwar modern landscape.” As Osman has well illustrated, developers and community organizers, new entrants to the area, created neighborhood boundaries, place names and a sense of place by drawing from a host of unlikely archives — old pastoral maps linked to the cities planation geographies.

In the same vein the development of this area of Brooklyn follows plantation logics as the plantation boundaries became neighborhood boundaries, signage from ethnic restaurants became scaffolding for nouveaux studios and eateries, diversity was measured by the new emigres’ very proximity to non-white bodies. It becomes a palimpsest— a text, a document, something on which the original script has been erased to make room for new glyphs. Traces always remain. But, as Neil Smith observed, this stage of gentrification is different from others. If, as Smith argued, there was a second wave gentrification in the 1970s and 1980s that “became increasingly entwined with wider processes of urban and economic restructuring,” then the Barclay’s Arena project

signaled gentrification's most recent wave as "a crucial urban strategy for city governments to consort with private capital."<sup>18</sup>

Thus, I am writing *Road Runners* at a time when neoliberal urbanisms are the predominant mode through which urban space is not only planned, studied and experienced but articulated in idioms like the "sharing economy" and "smart cities." However, through this work, I want to take seriously the ways in which Black people's life- and place-making practices are being eroded by these "new" urbanisms both intellectually and in the material world. At the core of my scholarship is the argument that black urbanism— as a method of approaching urban geography, urban planning and urban futures— is essentially about the right of black and migrant populations to imagine, create, remake and inhabit the urban in ways that are logical to themselves. This, I think, is the relevance of *Road Runners* in the current moment, when develop and displace logics are creating new movements and mobilities.

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<sup>18</sup> Smith New Globalism, New Urbanism *Antipode*

**A Different Way of Knowing**

Image Credit: photo taken via iPhone by Jaime Rojo, courtesy of Brooklyn Street Art, used by permission

In the spring of 2014, artist Kara Walker's *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* opened at the Domino Sugar Factory in Williamsburg. The massive installation featured a sugar-coated “sphinx-turned-mammy” followed by a “procession of black boys” carrying bananas and baskets made of resin that serve as her “attendants.” In his description of *Sugar Baby*, curator Nato Thompson writes:

She has the head of a kerchief-wearing black female, referencing the mythic caretaker of the domestic needs of white families, especially the raising and care of their children, but her body is a veritable caricature of the overly sexualized black woman, with prominent breasts, enormous buttocks, and protruding vulva that is quite visible from the back.

Walker's gigantic temporary sugar-sculpture speaks of power, race, bodies, women, sexuality, slavery, sugar refining, sugar consumption, wealth inequity, and industrial might that uses the human body to get what it needs no matter the cost to life and limb. Looming over a plant whose entire history was one of sweetening tastes and aggregating wealth, of refining sweetness from dark to white, she stands

mute, a riddle so wrapped up in the history of power and its sensual appeal that one can only stare stupefied, unable to answer.<sup>19</sup>

A discomfiting sensual experience on multiple levels, Kara Walker's *Sugar Baby* is marvelous indeed. She rests in what Neil Smith might call “deep space,” the “space of everyday life in all its scales from the global, the local, to the architectural, in which... different layers of life and social landscape are sedimented onto and into each other.”<sup>20</sup> She does not speak, but the gleaming whiteness of *Sugar Baby* illuminates the dank factory-space— itself sedimented with layers of molasses and other byproducts of decay. As heat and humidity melt the figure, her body would eventually become part of the

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<sup>19</sup> Nato Thompson “Creative Time Presents Kara Walker: Curatorial Statement” <http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/curatorial-statement/>

<sup>20</sup> Neil Smith *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* University of Georgia Press p. 214

material landscape. The decay causes her spectators to describe the smell of the space as “acid,” a mixture of “old sugar...urine and corroding iron.”<sup>21</sup>



Image Credit: photo taken via iPhone by Jaime Rojo, courtesy of Brooklyn Street Art, used by permission

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<sup>21</sup> Valérie Loichot July 8 2014 “Kara Walker’s Blood Sugar: *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*” *Southern Spaces* <https://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby>

In *Demonic Grounds* Katherine McKittrick draws on M. Nourbese Philip's [use] of bodymemory as a site of spatial knowledge. According to McKittrick, "Philip allows silence and invisible body histories to be seeable, spatial and ontological."<sup>22</sup> I understand Walker's installation similarly. *Sugar Baby* disrupts temporalities that neatly link urbanization to industrialization and sever slavery from both histories and futures of the urban, truncating urban studies. Her confection-coated ass, breasts, and "hot pussy"<sup>23</sup> make it impossible to avoid the centrality of both Black women and sugar to the modes of colonial trade, industrial and post-industrial labor that [made] Brooklyn. According to historian Craig Wilder, "by the end of the 17th century more than 40% of Kings County's freeholders owned Africans in spite of the prohibitive cost of bondspeople."<sup>24</sup> Since Brooklyn served as a nodal point in the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved Africans were also trafficked from Brooklyn's shores to the Caribbean, parts of Africa and the southern United States making Brooklyn a major exporter of human and non-human capital.<sup>25</sup> Brooklyn's function as a port city and its proximity to Manhattan, allowed Brooklyn to grow into a viable commercial node and "sugar grown in the unfree and semi-feudal plantation South and Caribbean transformed daily life in Kings County."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 49.

<sup>23</sup> bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End Press, 61-78.

<sup>24</sup> According to Mark Boonshoft, by 1790 61% of Kings County families owned enslaved people and about 33% of the population of Kings County was enslaved. See Mark Boonshoft, "The Material Realities of Slavery in New York," *NYPL Blog: Library Voices*, April 12, 2016, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/04/12/slavery-early-nyc>.

<sup>25</sup> Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 33-35.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 58

Brooklyn's Atlantic Docks were primary storage sites for tobacco and other commodities of colonial trade. Even after slavery was ostensibly abolished in 19th century New York, the city's future remained tied to the plantation. Wilder explains that, "the commercial revolution in Brooklyn required participation in a social system that fastened black labor in the South and addressed the labor needs of the industrializing North with European immigrant workers."<sup>27</sup>

Her body marks the factory and its surroundings as important sites of memory. The Domino Sugar Factory opened in 1856. Leigh Radford notes that "by 1870, it was processing more than half of the sugar consumed in the United States."<sup>28</sup> It was a site of precarious racialized labor and dis/ease. Of his many years as an employee of the sugar factory, Robert Shelton re/members that "Most people who worked in that building have some form of cancer—you're dealing with acid, lime, particle dust that is so fine."<sup>29</sup> He recalls, too, his employee number— a metric, he says, that will remain imprinted upon his memory: 2737-42.<sup>30</sup> The refinery closed in January 2004, a decade before *Sugar Baby* was on display. *Sugar Baby* was commissioned to mark the demolition of a refinery that once employed 3,000 workers, and what would eventually become the site of the longest labor strike in New York City.<sup>31</sup> But Kara Walker wanted to pay "homage to the unpaid

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Leigh Radford and Robin Hayes, "Remembering the Workers of the Domino Sugar Factory," *The Atlantic*, July 3, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/07/remembering-the-workers-of-the-domino-sugar-factory/373930/>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> See Winifred Curran, "Gentrification and the Nature of Work: Exploring the Links in Williamsburg, Brooklyn," *Environment and Planning A* 2004, Vol. 36, 1243-1258, doi:10.1068/a36240.



and overworked artisans who have refined our sweet tastes from the cane fields to the kitchens of the new worlds.” Thus, even as she is built as a remark upon confluences of the past, *Sugar Baby* is at work at the very moment of her unveiling.

I open with Kara Walker’s installation for several reasons. The first, as I mention, has to do with disrupting how urbanization is often linked to industrialization, but detached from histories of the plantation. Sitting mute, exposed, and continually dissipating *Sugar Baby* manages both a real and symbolic “interruption.”<sup>32</sup> She challenges what seems to me the absencing of black geographies from the historical and present life of the city. The second, and perhaps more important reason is that— Brooklyn is in a moment of re-envisioning itself, imagining its own futures. Perhaps cities are constantly reimagining themselves and planning for futures, but as Brooklyn now seeks to reimagine and reconstruct itself through development logics and regimes (gentrification), *Sugar Baby* reminds us that the connection between slavery, taste, violence and place is not a metaphor. Third, *Sugar Baby*, as an ephemeral form of black spatial knowledge, suggests a “different way of knowing”<sup>33</sup> and a different method of approach for studying Brooklyn’s urban landscape. In its magnitude the installation is incredibly powerful, but it also works through the acts of sedimentation and disintegration. *Sugar Baby* asks us to do the work of excavation. While my overarching focus in this project is Caribbean place-making practices and the emergence of informal modes of black mobility, the inherited urban landscapes, diacritics and modes of spatial management are incredibly important to understanding the city’s present. Ultimately, focusing on the movement of black urban

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid 19

<sup>33</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiv.

residents sheds light practices of place-annihilation, on dominant modes of urban surveillance, policing and boundary maintenance. If, as Katherine McKittrick argues, “the plantation provides the future through which contemporary racial geographies and violences make themselves known,” then new ontologies and methods for understanding black urbanism are all the more useful.

Reading alongside and against historical narratives of Brooklyn, this chapter explores geographies of black urban life in Brooklyn. My goals are to understand the co-production of blackness and the urban in Brooklyn. In this chapter I begin not with a post-1965 ‘moment.’ Rather, I begin with imperatives of post-1965 in order to illuminate the lived experiences of coloniality, and to understand how post-1965 cartographies shed light on legacies of black place-making and place annihilation. It is important to note that, although they developed differently, each producing their own ideas around urban habitus, both ‘the Caribbean’ and Brooklyn are born of colonial intervention. Brooklyn was founded under regimes of settler colonialism, crafted through the labor of enslaved Africans and the erosion of indigenous populations. Originally a village, Brooklyn was established as the Dutch colony of Breuckelen in 1623. On the other hand, it can be argued, the Caribbean has been urban since its inception. As Rivke Jaffe and others posit, urbanization in the Caribbean is directly linked to colonial conquest— “from the beginning, Caribbean cities operated as a loci of mediation and control, forming the link between the plantation” and what they refer to as “the motherland.”<sup>34</sup> Though ‘the Caribbean’ is an imaginary that inherently holds multiple and diverse possibilities, “cities

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<sup>34</sup> Rivke Jaffe, Ad de Bruijne, and Aart Schalkwijk, “The Caribbean City: An Introduction,” *The Caribbean City*, ed. Rivke Jaffe, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2008), 6.

throughout the region display striking similarities in urban form, which find their origin in a common past of colonialism.”<sup>35</sup> Unlike other urban ontologies, Jaffe and others argue that a recognizable urban preceded the rural in the context of Caribbean settler colonialism and that as Caribbean cities developed the lines between the urban and rural were porous. The grid, a central instrument of rationalization and control, was preemptively imposed on colonized indigenous land, in most instances some decades before it would be imposed in North American cities.<sup>36</sup> If we take Brooklyn as a point of comparison— at its inception, at least cartographically, the city was largely divided into plots, distributed amongst elite landowning families. The grid came some years later.

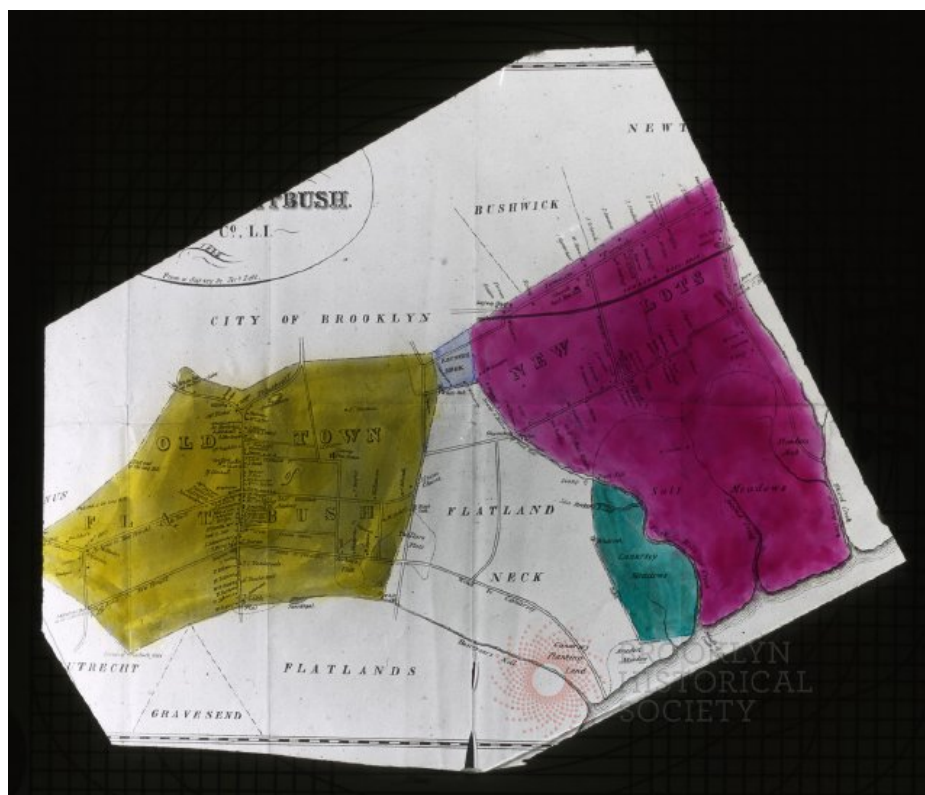


Image Credit: Map of Flatbush and New Lots, Ralph Irving Lloyd lantern slides, Brooklyn Historical Society

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 3

<sup>36</sup> This is not to say that every urban context is defined by Westernized models of space and spatial discipline; rather, I am suggesting that the grid is a important tool through which colonialist urban forms were produced, recognized and managed.

Because of these differently situated histories, instead of narrating the post-colonial experience as the meeting of migrant with ‘the metropole,’ what I think post-colonial and black geographical perspectives offer is the possibility of thinking about urban praxis relationally, perhaps in a less linear fashion. Put another way, when we talk about the post-colonial, we aren’t only talking about a certain periodization, or historical moment, but about colonial inheritances. Here, I draw on sites of memory, places that we can understand as both geographic (concrete, manifest) and ungeographic (eroded, subaltern). These sites are not meant to represent Brooklyn as whole and coherent. Instead, following the definition of the city as a space of fragmentation, this chapter is a study in reading Brooklyn’s Black lives not at its margins but in its interstices. With few exceptions, this history centers places like Flatbush, Crown Heights and Bed-Stuy. I excavate sites of memory and black place-making to re-read popular urban geometries—from lines and intersections to corners and edges.

## **Monuments**

Thinking about the work of excavation led me to Nona Faustine’s “White Shoes.” The photo-performance series bridges performance art and photography, mapping New York’s plantation geographies through the naked body of Faustine, a black woman artist. In each piece of the photo series we see “body becoming text”<sup>37</sup> as the artist turns the lens simultaneously on herself and on New York’s past. Faustine’s “Isabelle,” for example, maps one Brooklyn plantation, not through the surname with which it is associated but

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<sup>37</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 49.

through the name of an enslaved woman. In this image, the artist stands baring her breasts, wearing a flowing white skirt and holding what appears to be a cast iron pan, as she stands in front of Lefferts House, a historic site located on Flatbush Avenue in what is now Prospect Park. A haunting sight, “Isabelle” is an intervention that both begs the question of what exactly is being preserved in this museum and insists that the sexual-reproductive labor of enslaved black women are integral to the way that the city is produced and its history told.<sup>38</sup> In another image, “Like a Pregnant Corpse The Ship Expelled Her Into the Patriarchy,” Faustine lays naked on the jagged, moss covered rocks along Brooklyn’s Atlantic shores, marking yet another contour of the link between the production of the city and the plantation.

Faustine’s “White Shoes” brought me back to Flatbush, back to an intersection that I passed daily while doing research for this project— Church and Flatbush — often thinking that there is nothing exceptional about that part of the city, except maybe its fullness and flows, its continuous traffic. But, at that intersection, nestled amongst Chase and Citi banks and discount clothing stores, you will find the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church and a cemetery. Part of the “White Shoes” series, “Of My Body I Will Make Monuments in Your Honor,” is comprised of three cardboard cutouts. Each cutout represents the photographic image of Faustine’s nude body standing in high heeled white shoes. The monuments are assembled in the cemetery of Brooklyn’s Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, where three slaves are buried among Brooklyn’s early settlers. This

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<sup>38</sup> The composition of “Isabelle” is reminiscent of Louis Agassiz’s “Delia,” a portrait of an enslaved woman in Columbia, South Carolina taken in 1850. Delia sits with bare breasts, dress draped around her waist looking into the lens of the camera. However, unlike Delia who is removed from any knowable geographical context, Isabella is firmly in place, marking the site of her enslavement; See Stassa Edwards’ (2015) *Nona Faustine's Nude Self Portraits Expose New York's History of Slavery in Vice*.

intersection, then, is somewhat exceptional as it would have been unusual (disallowed in most instances) for the enslaved to be buried in the same space as white people. The names of the city's most prominent Dutch settler families, marked on the existing headstones of the burial ground— Lefferts, Cortelyou, Ditmas— are also encoded into Brooklyn's landscape as street names. These street signs are more than just symbols, inscribing histories of enslavement onto and into the city, they are commemorative. In who and what the city chooses to commemorate, there is a dual process of remembering and forgetting. Faustine's monuments begin to undo this process.

Each of the new monuments stands in contrast to its three dimensional surroundings and even to itself. In these monuments I see multiple crossings at work. As geographer Susan Mains writes, "Bodies cross borders between public and private space."<sup>39</sup> Of the entire installation Faustine observes that, in posing at each site, "You feel



Image Credit: Nona Faustine, "White Shoes," 2014 <http://nonafaustine.virb.com>

<sup>39</sup>Susan Mains, "Monumentally Caribbean: Borders, Bodies, and Redemptive City Spaces" *Small Axe* Number 16 (Volume 8, Number 2), September 2004 *Project MUSE*, [muse.jhu.edu/article/175265](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/175265).

the residual fallout from the history. You're in between two worlds, in a way, when you go to these sites— the present, real city, and the city of the past.”<sup>40</sup> On another scale, this intersection borders East Flatbush and expanding territories of gentrification like the Flatbush-Ditmas area and Prospect Park. And at yet another scale, in each image, Faustine’s body stands in excess— of dominant and heteronormative definitions of appropriate bodies, of the cemetery itself. Looking at her body/bodies I think of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s work— “Whom do we mean when we say ‘there’s nothing wrong with us?’? The fat ones. The ones who are all out of compass however precisely they are located.”<sup>41</sup> I think of Faustine’s monuments in that way— out of compass and yet precisely located. And yet, each image— representing a body that is black, woman and fat— is also incomplete. Faustine’s face has been removed from two of the bodies, her head from the other. I am intrigued by this, tempted to read these absences as somehow mimicking other monuments, parts of which are missing because they have been lost over time— they are worn, they have traveled and so on. On the other hand, the composition of the monuments, both in their lack of certain body parts and in their flatness, and in their excess, form a reminder of the continual erasures and flattening of Brooklyn’s colonial past, histories of enslavement, and the humanness of the enslaved.

There is a way that the routine and busyness of everyday life makes the signs and symbols of the city illegible, somewhat of a blur. In our daily travels we often begin to memorize, or rehearse, the sign posts and languages given over to us by the past. But these diacritics are important to the ways that cities are told, and have implications for

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<sup>40</sup> Nona Faustine, “Artist Statement,” accessed June 11, 2017, [nonafaustine.virb.com/about](http://nonafaustine.virb.com/about).

<sup>41</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 52.

understanding both infrastructure and movement. Faustine’s ‘monuments,’ then, function as an optic, a way of seeing the city and bringing the plantation and the centrality of Flatbush to the city’s broader history into sharp focus.

### **Buried in the Line**

In this section, I turn towards the Citizens Union Cemetery in what was once Weeksville as a point of entry to discuss the expansion of the urban and the disciplining of the Brooklyn’s landscape through the grid. By 1834, instead of farm lines associated with household names, Brooklyn had been divided into wards, or electoral units. In the city’s Bedford area, the 9th Ward, one could find Weeksville and Carrsville. Both were free Black settlements, [and politically bounded group of people], established in the antebellum era in resistance to white supremacy and spatial domination. In the context of New York urban study, the grid is often discussed as part of a broader conversation around [19th century] urban planning and the growth of Manhattan.<sup>42</sup> In this chapter, I place Weeksville into this broader conversation about planning. Archivally, Weeksville’s visionaries didn’t leave behind a physical plan but the settlement was certainly an example of what Moten and Harney call “fugitive planning.” As Moten and Harney explain, “planning is self-sufficiency at the social level, and it reproduces in its experiment not just what it needs, but what it wants, life in difference.”<sup>43</sup> Continuing with this work of excavation, this section is a way of counter-mapping, of thinking about the grid as a

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<sup>42</sup> See for example Peter Marcuse “The Grid as City Plan”

<sup>43</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons*, 76.



colonial tool, of writing about how colonial era urban expansion must be thought in relation to the twinned projects of Black place making and Black place-annihilation.

Founded in 1838 by James Weeks, Weeksville sustained a diversity of Black life. Having been excavated by a group of urban archaeologists in 1968 what remains of Weeksville has since become a historically preserved neighborhood, and a museum that archives what remains of the once thriving black enclave. Weeksville is sometimes described in popular history as being ‘outside’ of what would have been Brooklyn’s urban center. However, this rhetorical mapping of Weeksville as outside of rather than central to Brooklyn gives me pause. To mark Weeksville as existing at Brooklyn’s edges is to read it through a traditional geographic lens; which is to say, Weeksville is both located on the margins (or what McKittrick refers to as out of place) and exceptional in its placement (free standing). But Weeksville was very much enmeshed within Brooklyn’s larger terrain. And beyond this, its planning remarked upon (1) the centrality of enslavement to the very production of the urban in Brooklyn, and (2) the fact of black spatial logics or alternative visions of place.

Historian Judith Wellman describes Weeksville’s residents as “a cosmopolitan group,” hailing from different cities and rural areas in the Northeast, the Carolinas and the Caribbean.<sup>44</sup> It was complete with a school (Colored School No.2), churches, farm land, an orphanage and a number of businesses. Weeksville had its own baseball team, aptly called the Unknowns.<sup>45</sup> While some of Weeksville’s property owners lived in

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<sup>44</sup> Judith Wellman, *The Free Black Community of Weeksville, New York*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 31.

<sup>45</sup> Later called the Mutual Base Ball Club. Ryan Whirty, “Brooklyn’s African-American baseball tradition didn’t start with Jackie Robinson,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 15, 2014, <http://www.brooklyneagle.com/articles/2014/4/15/brooklyn’s-african-american-baseball-tradition-didn’t-start-jackie-robinson>.

downtown Brooklyn, according to Wellman's study of the settlement, its founders specifically advertised land 'for sale to colored people' and property was priced 'low, to suit purchasers.'<sup>46</sup> In other words, there was a politics of inclusion around building sites of leisure and labor for black people. In 1851, several members of Weeksville's community purchased nearly 30 acres of land for a burial ground adjacent to Weeksville, the Citizens Union Cemetery. In mapping Weeksville, scholars understandably tend to focus on the transparent space (the school, homes and other infrastructure). But what kind of space is a burial ground? What black spatial knowledges does it reveal? What kinds of desires *can* it reveal?

In terms of the archive, Weeksville gets a bit more attention in part because of the excavation efforts that happened around it and the fact that three of its homes somehow remain physically intact. While I do not wish to underestimate the significance of understanding the multiplicity of Black lives under regimes of enslavement and Jim Crow, Weeksville as an archeology of blackness and project of preservation ends up figuring the lives of Black people through objects, possessions. Skeletal features of old structures in the form of corroded nails, glass & scrap metal, privies, shovel heads, clam shells, buttons, jewelry, coins, gilt-ed tea cups and other personal objects washed, catalogued, enumerated and archived.<sup>47</sup> In a strange turn Weeksville has been "recovered" as part of Bedford-Stuyvesant's valiant past-- something like proof of life. Complete with the nearby Weeksville Heritage Center, what was once, and perhaps still is, a thoroughly pathologized geography not only of abject Blackness and dispossession, but also fraught conceptions of

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<sup>46</sup> Wellman, *Brooklyn's Promised Land*, 2, 31.

<sup>47</sup> Joan H. Geismar, *Archaeology at the Hunterfly Road Houses (Weeksville) 1978-1982 and 2000-2003 Brooklyn, New York*, (2009), 5

Blackness and ownership, Bedford Stuyvesant exists as yet another Brooklyn based laboratory for understanding the violent calculus of race and speculation.<sup>48</sup>

But in this graveyard that no longer exists, which I map here as a site of memory, I see desires over black place making and alternative visioning of black habitation more clearly than in the remnants of Weeksville's physical structures. A partial description in the *Brooklyn City and County Record* reads:

It was designed more particularly as a burial place for the colored, upon whom is placed the ban of the white man, debarring them from political and social equity in life, and forbidding the commingling of their dust in death [...]  
The Trustees with a commendable liberality proffer ground for a burial FREE to the poor; the only charges made being the opening and closing of the grave [...]  
The Trustees of this cemetery have no rule which excludes any person from sepulture within its borders, on account of complexion, and they cordially invite all who are without prejudice to inspect the grounds [...]<sup>49</sup>

The Citizens Union Cemetery was planned perhaps not as a site of black death but as a site of black self-possession. It was a challenge to practices that rendered black bodies otherwise disposable. In their intentional undoing of rules around the exclusion of the black deceased from Brooklyn's other cemeteries, its trustees highlighted both how race was codified geographically, and how black place making resists the dehumanizing tendencies of racialization because it is about inhabiting humanness and upending those traditional geographies.

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<sup>48</sup> As Katherine McKittrick argues in *Demonic Grounds*, "One of the many ways violence operates [...] is through multiscale discourses of ownership: having 'things,' owning lands [...] This reward system repetitively turns us to the body, black subjecthood, and the where of blackness, not just as it is owned, but as black subjects participate in ownership."

<sup>49</sup> William H Smith, *The Brooklyn City and Kings County Record: A Budget of General Information*, (Brooklyn: W. H. Smith, 1855), 166-167.

Saidiya Hartman observed that like “monuments [...] graves are intended to preserve the dead and suspend the past.”<sup>50</sup> No such stillness or preservation existed for Weeksville’s dead. In 1870, in extending an artery that ran through the cemetery (Douglass Street) and attempting to level the area, the city began to unearth the human remains of burial ground. Prior to the street work, the city issued public notices asking that the remains be relocated to an alternate site. However, of the contractors hired to perform the removals of the cemetery and complete the street work, the article reported that “It would seem that the contractors are performing their work in such a manner as to cause a most horrible sacrilege of the dead. It is agreed by all with whom he conversed that large quantities of bones find their way to the dump...” I found this note in an article published by The Brooklyn Eagle titled “Paving the Sidewalk of Buffalo Avenue with Human Bones” 1872, after Citizens Union later became Mount Pleasant Cemetery association.

Rendering both the enclave and the graveyard ungeographic, the writer of the article noted that the Mount Pleasant Cemetery association owed the city back taxes, referred to Weeksville as “Crow Hill” and queried whether the nearly 30 acre site (of which 12 acres were specifically dedicated for burial) could even be called a burial ground at all.<sup>51</sup> This marked, for me, the beginning of its archival erasure, its subalterity. Encountering this description in the Eagle, I am reminded that, as Katherine McKittrick writes, “Black self-possession and self-entitlement cannot quite be read as feasible geographic processes in the terms laid out by traditional geographies because the close

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<sup>50</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 70.

<sup>51</sup> “Paving the Sidewalk of Buffalo Avenue With Human Bones,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 26, 1872

ties between the body and the landscape around those bodies (the traces of history) refuse such a reading.”<sup>52</sup> But I pause reading a particular exchange documented in the same piece—the following conversation between the newspaper’s field reporter and a groundskeeper (referred to only as “Laborer”):

Reporter— Did you find any remains of people BURIED IN THE LINE of the street?

Laborer— We were digging them up all the time [...]

Reporter— Are these bones still under the sidewalk?

Laborer— Oh yes, and they will stay there. You may depend when folks come to grade off these lots to the street they will find any number of coffins that have never been dug out[...]

The sidewalk referred to is the eastern one along Buffalo avenue, between Douglass street and the Boulevard.

Buried in the line. According to the reportage, street contractors sometimes buried bodies below the sidewalks on the same line of the streets that would eventually become part of Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights. As the grid expanded, it was quite literally paved with the overflow of Weeksville’s dead. Here again we see what Kara Walker would later illustrate through the making of *Sugar Baby*: the sedimentation of black life onto and into the city. How to contend with this as a fact of city planning and planning history?

Scholars usually owe the erosion of the Black settlements of Weeksville and Carrsville first to the expansion of the grid and, second, to the construction of Eastern Parkway, which eventually demolished what would have been left of The Citizens Union Cemetery.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the urbanization of Brooklyn both required Black labor (and other forms of Black capital such as property taxes) and erasure of Black life from the sources

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<sup>52</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 4

<sup>53</sup> According to the Brooklyn Eagle, regarding the development of Eastern Parkway, there was some conflict over the rights to the land but by 1911, the rights to the six block of land that once comprised the burial grounds (valued by the city at a quarter of a million dollars) were no longer in dispute.

through which we imagine traditional geographies— the map, the archive, the ledger, and the like. What you see now— physical and traditional geographic arrangements— alongside what has been preserved of Weeksville are the parkway and the streets of Crown Heights and Bed-Stuy. But what we can also think of something that was once material now written here as memory, the site of what was once a burial ground, an alternative geography and a contested terrain.

### **Street/Corners**

Bajan author Paule Marshall's oft cited novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* opens with Selina, the novel's narrator, describing "the unbroken line of brown stone houses" that "resembled an army amassed at attention," "all one uniform red-brown stone."<sup>54</sup> For Selina, the symmetry of Bed-Stuy's brownstones almost reflected "a train of mirrors," though as she passes each home she finds something unique, "some touch that was Gothic, Romanesque baroque or Greek."<sup>55</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s many of Brooklyn's Caribbean emigres found themselves able to move to places like Bed-Stuy. In other parts of the borough-city, the presence of black-migrants and U.S. born black people is sometimes difficult to trace. In this section on street/corners I turn again towards East Flatbush, which would become a major enclave for the next 'wave' of Caribbean immigrants after 1965.

I find myself sifting through things like census ledgers, tract maps, seemingly candid images, newspaper wedding announcements, real estate ads, community event

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<sup>54</sup> Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, (New York: Random House, 1959), 1

<sup>55</sup> Ibid 1

pages trying to understand East Flatbush's past, trying to make legible the historical relationship between this neighborhood and the rest of Brooklyn. I create a catalogue. Mrs. Thomas Broderick of Clarendon Road is the former Miss Adele D' Agnostin of Avenue D, the Mothers Guild of Little Flower Parochial School is having a bridge card party, the Lincoln Republican Club has planned an upcoming meeting on Utica, some event or another is taking place at the East Flatbush Jewish Community Center on Linden. (The East Flatbush Jewish Community Center seems to be a fixture of early 1940's life in this part of the city.) At the time, it appears, East Flatbush was the more suburban counterpart to a more exciting and seemingly cosmopolitan Flatbush.

Eventually I come across the *New York City Guide* published in 1939 by the Federal Writers' Project, a program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In it, the authors detail almost exhaustively the collection of neighborhoods and "points of interest" that comprised New York's five boroughs. Eager to find something that can tell of East Flatbush and its history, I rifle quickly through the guide. I find the following description, caught unawares by what seem to be acute registers of suburban malaise:

East Flatbush, formerly known as Rugby, is a suburban residential district lying south of East New York Avenue between Kings Highway and Nostrand Avenue. It contains chiefly one- and two-family houses. Along the southern fringe are open lots and occasional truck gardens. East Flatbush was developed in the 1920's, and its growth continued through the depression of the 1930's. It was populated largely by the overflow from neighboring localities. The corner of Rutland Road and East Ninety-fifth Street, in the eastern part, is locally known as the 'slave market,' because Negro domestic workers gather here daily on the sidewalk and offer their services at hourly rates.

According to the guide East Flatbush has only these three points of interest: the first, Kings County Hospital; the second, the Brooklyn State Hospital; and the third the aforementioned "slave market" where Black domestic workers are shopped for their labor.

I pause at the fleeting mention of the aforementioned market and the way in which its presence seems almost prosaic.

Mid-century urban ‘slave marts’ left no physical traces— they were ephemeral, staged on the streets. Nor do they mark the present landscape in any discernible way. If you went to the intersection of Rutland and East Ninety-fifth today you’d find West Indian grocery stores on either corner, a few black hair salons and barbershops, a Chinese take-out spot, a 99¢ store, a larger budget supermarket, and self-service laundromats. There is a “religious store” that, according to its facade, sells oils, herbs, candles and spices. And then there are those places that can’t exist outside of immigrant neighborhoods— there is a shipping store for cargo, likely for the barrels of cheaply bought ‘American’ things that people send “home” every year. Rutland is lined with discount shops, and East 95th lined with a nearly seamless strip of symmetrical red brick buildings and small stoops. I wonder if, like other parts of Brooklyn, these streets will be broken down into a mosaic of newly planned neighborhoods with idyllic names that connote a pastoral past, if Brooklyn’s newest residents will talk about how they live in Rugby, or even Truck Gardens, if the storefront churches and block lettered facades will color the imagined ‘revitalized’ neighborhood...

A year before the arrival of the *New York City Guide*, the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) created “residential security maps.” These color-coded property appraisal maps ranked neighborhoods in terms of perceived risk of investment and bourgeoisie desirability. While the HOLC maps were not widely circulated, and may have far more utility in the present than they did in the past, they effectively codified patterns of racial housing segregation and extant bias on the part of realtors, proprietors



and mortgage lenders.<sup>56</sup> As they mapped spaces of desire, HOLC maps can be thought of as futurist projects rather than as cartographic representations of contemporary life. HOLC mapmakers translated meanings of race, class and space into green, blue, yellow and red, with corresponding grades of A, B, C, and D— with green and blue representing most *desirable* spaces and yellow and red representing otherwise. Whereas the neighboring areas of Brownsville, largely occupied by Eastern European Jewish immigrants, and Italian occupied Canarsie are covered in red, the HOLC graded more than half of East Flatbush “B,” decent or desirable, using the color blue. Some blocks, a much smaller area occupied mostly by Italian immigrants, were coded yellow. This is likely due to the fact that, against the mosaic of Black people and foreign-born European immigrants that made up other neighborhoods of Brooklyn, East Flatbush remained overwhelmingly white and Jewish, it had a substantial U.S. born population and the everyday life of the place was somewhat generic.

I would argue that, mid-century, the city and its attendant suburbs were increasingly constituted through street geographies and landscapes of black and immigrant (in)formal labor. In some ways, HOLC maps suggest hardened lines and a lack of movement and exchange between Brooklyn’s neighborhoods. However, household

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<sup>56</sup> While the 1938 HOLC residential security maps are often referred to as “redlining” maps I do not refer to them as such here. I take into account that there are some important scholarly debates around the utility of the HOLC residential security maps in redlining practices. For example, in her analysis of the relationship between mapping and mortgage lending patterns in Philadelphia in the *Journal of Urban History* Amy Hillier (2003) challenges urban historiographies that directly link HOLC maps, discriminatory lending and urban divestment, unintentionally obscuring other archives that speak to how redlining actually occurred such as maps created by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Federal Home Loan Bank Board (FHLBB). Hillier ascribes this to a continued misreading of Kenneth Jackson’s seminal work *Crabgrass Frontier*. According to Hillier, “Whether or not it used maps with red lines, FHA [rather than the HOLC] did more to institutionalize redlining than any other agency by categorizing mortgages according to their risk level and encouraging private lenders who wanted insurance for their mortgages to do the same.”

work tied sub/urban Brooklyn to Black life in other parts of the city and in other parts of the borough.<sup>57</sup> The aforementioned slave markets were hallmarks of borough life in mid-century suburban Brooklyn. A 1938 clipping details the plight of Hattie Jones, who travels from Harlem to Brighton Beach's slave market, in South Brooklyn. A 1950 article in *Compass Magazine* mentions another in what was then the predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Brownsville. Much of the scholarship on New York's urban slave markets focuses on black women, but black men were also employed through domestic labor and found work through the street corner sites.

Additionally, reading archival fragments suggests that these corners and subways stations where black men and women waited for work were also sites of Black sociality and knowledge production. Documenting the borough's day labor markets, one journalist referred to them as similar to 'fraternities.' While, there was a concerted effort on the part of labor activists and others to eradicate these markets through the creation of more legitimating job agencies, there were also those who pushed back against these efforts to formalize household labor. Approached by a journalist and photographer while waiting at one corner, a group of black women "suspicious" of these researchers, walked away, denying that they were waiting for domestic work at all and instead responding to the journalists' prodding with sarcasm: "We're not working [...] we're just restin' in the sun." These women were skeptical of the fees charged by the agencies, fees that nullified their daily earnings and, having communicated these concerns amongst themselves, they were skeptical of being studied, disinterested in any efforts that would foreclose on this place in which they could find employment.

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<sup>57</sup> Craig Wilder, *Covenant with Color*

When I read this encounter I think again about the question of scale, and what was negotiated at the scale of the street, or the scale of the corner. By scale, I mean both the phenomenological (experiential) sense and the more structural sense of the term.<sup>58</sup> The street corner is a complicated geometry as it relates to Black urban life; it is highly pathologized. In 1965, when June Jordan designed her futurist urban blueprint, “Skyline for Harlem,” she imagined an alternative city, one without corners, relying instead on curvature and softening the lines and intersections that form the grid.<sup>59</sup> For Jordan, this architectural plan was both a reflection on the social construction of space in cities that had been deemed Black ghettos, and a reparative urban design solution. But in East Flatbush we find that the street corner serves as a way to map not the ghetto but the predominantly white sub/urb. In mid-century Brooklyn, the corner is where and how mostly Black working class women experience and “know” certain parts of the city. It is where they are, to whatever extent, able to negotiate the terms of their own labor, however fragile those negotiations were, they are able to fraternize, and even to act outside of the bounds of domesticity and domestic labor—in the instance above, to be flippant, to be rude.

And yet, these street corner geographies have been rightly categorized as sites of racialized and sexualized labor exploitation; these sites marked black people’s presence in the city in very specific ways. Black women also had to know how to perform, how to present themselves as ‘good’ domestic workers. In his study of the antebellum slave

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<sup>58</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan “Place: An Experiential Perspective,” *Geographical Review*, Vol. 65 No. 2, (April 1975), 151-165 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/213970>; Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010)

<sup>59</sup> Doreen St. Felix, “Out of Print: June Jordan,” *Lenny Letter*, October 23, 2015, <http://www.lennyletter.com/culture/news/a89/out-of-print-june-jordan/>

market, Walter Johnson describes the production of race at the point of sale, noting that “each step in commodification was also a step in perception.”<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the street corner is a place where the relationship between Black salability and the reproduction of white middle-class homes becomes real. Thus, it is on the corner, through the salability of Black women’s labor that (1) race is codified, and (2) that certain bodies are marked as both out of place and as having a specific use value, thereby making manifest the relationship between race, gender and place.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, reminded by McKittrick that “the plantation provides the future through which contemporary racial geographies and violences make themselves known” I think about Brooklyn’s links to the global economy through its plantation geographies. I bring into Brooklyn’s history Caribbean narratives, not just post-Caribbean narratives. While media and migration have long created circuits of exchange between the Caribbean the North America, Brooklyn’s newest arrivants— black and brown immigrants from post-colonial nations— would not have necessarily known Brooklyn’s urban histories and the ways in which blackness was etched into the city’s very infrastructure. The chapter is not tightly bound to the routes of the dollar cabs on Flatbush, Utica, Church or Avenue D though these routes guide me. I end with a consideration of contemporary practices of gentrification and how these practices, tied to Brooklyn’s plantation geographies as well as other global circuits of capital, fund

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<sup>60</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 171.

Brooklyn's future aspirations of becoming a 'world-class city.' Instead, throughout the chapter, I draw on both dominant and alternative mappings to (re)member that "the city is a place of manifold rhythms, a world of sounds, private freedom, pleasures and sensations."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall. 2004. *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*

## Babylon

As I write this, J'Ouvert approaches. Long before the sun rises on the first official day of carnival, Eastern Parkway will awaken, enlivened by the revelers, some muddled, some horned with bodies blackened by paint and grease waving bats and pitchforks, some masked, some chained. In the deepest creases between darkness and day, folks wind and step through the streets of Brooklyn, engaging in what Frantz Fanon called “the ecstasy of dance...where the exorcism, liberation, and expression of a community are grandiosely and spontaneously played out” through bodily movement. They will invoke rituals of the enslaved, rituals of resistance, rituals of masquerade, rituals of play. Meanwhile, city authorities have decided to increase the police presence at this year’s festival. In response to two deaths that occurred at Carnival in 2015, the NYPD—in solidarity with a number of community groups—is plastering Brooklyn with flyers that read: This community will no longer tolerate this violence/ Do Not Shoot Anyone/ Do not stab anyone/ Every act of violence will be fully investigated and prosecuted/ This year, celebrate J'Ouvert and keep it safe.

Just as unsettling, or perhaps more so, the city plans to install and deploy 200 floodlights along the festival route. In a recent *New York Times* article, Brooklyn borough president Eric Adams explains that “Over a million people come here and participate in the celebration... All it takes is a few who would rather use the cloak of darkness... to create their craft of criminality.”<sup>62</sup> Revelers with bare skin, clothes and hair doused in other worldly colors, laughing and dancing and touching and jumping, will do so under

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<sup>62</sup> Ashley Southall, “In Hopes of Deterring Violence at J'Ouvert Festival, Officials Turn Up the Lights,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/27/nyregion/jouvert-festival-brooklyn-carey-w-gabay-killing.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/27/nyregion/jouvert-festival-brooklyn-carey-w-gabay-killing.html?_r=0).

the glare of light. This year, they will not enjoy whatever comforts and provocations are offered by the night. This, I think, is what Simone Browne refers to as “black luminosity,” “a form of boundary maintenance occurring at the site of the black body, whether by candlelight, flaming torch, or the camera flashbulb,” “an exercise of panoptic power that ‘belongs to the realm of the sun, of never ending light.’” Ironically, the hyper-visibility offered by the floodlights obscures the fact that those masquerading as demons, jab-jabs and La Diabliesse are really just humans after all.

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I begin this chapter with thoughts of this year’s J’Ouvert celebration to think about contemporaneous practices of surveillance, formalities and the landscape of Brooklyn. I want to think through these practices of surveillance, their relationship to Black urbanity, their impositions on Black mobilities. And I draw on Simone Browne’s work because she reminds us that there are long histories of surveilling Blackness that bear upon the present. Browne has looked at the ways in which enslaved Africans and Native Americans quite literally became part of the infrastructure of colonial New York City through the deployment of lantern laws beginning in 1713. Lantern laws prohibited Black and Native American people over the age of fourteen from being “in any of the streets of New York City” without a lit candle lantern. Browne suggests that “We can think of the lantern as a prosthesis made mandatory after dark, a technology that made it possible for the black body to be constantly illuminated from dusk to dawn, made knowable, locatable, and contained within the city.”<sup>63</sup> Browne’s work moves us beyond the

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<sup>63</sup> Simone Brown, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

politics of location and fraught discourses around ‘making the invisible visible,’ instead offering a provocation on the politics and geographies of *locatability* and hyper-visibility in the production of race and Blackness.

In this chapter, I ask, what is the relationship between the informal economy and architectures of surveillance that, at present, shape the city? In posing this question, my goals are:

1. To situate dollar cabs within a broader landscape, and to place conversations about the policing of the informal economy at the intersection of Black mobilities and technologies of surveillance.
2. To understand the political economy of the surveillance of dollar cabs.

But I also want to look at the ways in which Black people who occupy the informal articulate and counter practices of governmentality, and how the city becomes mutable as people improvise in response to various modes of surveillance. In order to accomplish the goals of this chapter, to think about “mobilities and moorings”<sup>64</sup> in relation to surveillance, I keep in mind the important histories and nodes that Browne and others have outlined and mapped.

Most of this chapter happens along Flatbush Avenue. In the first section I revisit attempts to formalize the dollar van industry throughout the 1990s, using as a case study overlapping legal struggles to operate in Queens and along Flatbush in Brooklyn. I discuss the implementation of various modes of identification and classification having to do with van drivers that came out of those attempts at formalization. The dollar cab industry was

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<sup>64</sup> Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller, and John Urry, "Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings." *Mobilities* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1-22.



quite amorphous in the 1980s but once it came into the line of vision of the state— by which I mean city planners and representatives, the police, the Taxi and Limousine Commission and the Department of Transportation— the contours of the industry changed. In the next section, I map just one of Brooklyn’s borders— Flatbush Avenue— and discuss how bordering affects the informal economy and dollar van drivers in particular. Increasingly, Flatbush has become the dividing line between what Brooklyn is and what it will be. Therefore, I focus on the connections between gentrification and boundary maintenance. Throughout these sections I pay serious attention to the function of the police and bodily violence enacted by the police upon dollar cab drivers. However, there are ways that subjects speak, ways that they respond to and live under “routinized surveillance.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, towards the conclusion of this chapter I attend to the techniques and vernaculars of counter-veillance employed by those that do life within the space of the informal economy.

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I meet up with Don in the parking lot of the Dunkin’ Donuts where some vans rest midday. We met through Kingston, another van driver, just a few days earlier. Though Don isn’t authorized by the city to operate a dollar van, he has been driving Flatbush since 1989— he drives eight or nine hours a day when he isn’t working as a ‘suit-and-tie.’ He started as a doorman, one of the men who opens and closes the doors for passengers, collecting cash for the driver as they ride in the van. *We got no NYPD attention in the early 90s*, he tells me with a wide grin, *they didn’t know what we were*. There’s a hint of

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<sup>65</sup> Simone Browne, "Everybody's Got a Little Light Under the Sun: Black Luminosity and the Visual Culture of Surveillance." *Cultural Studies* 26, no. 4 (2012): 547

affection when he refers to Flatbush in the early 1990's as the "wild west." Don laments how the dollar cab market has changed. *There's no future out here*, he tells me. *When it started you had guys who bought homes and companies...but now you have to be out here 15 hours.* Part of the problem, Don thinks, is the very emergence of the dollar van as a segmented 'industry.'

Though the contact between the state and dollar cab drivers may have looked and felt differently, it wasn't entirely the case that the city was oblivious to the emerging market. The 1990's ushered in the hyper-regulation of dollar vans and the creation of an "informal" economy—a market that, as Ananya Roy argues, reflects the "fickle, arbitrary, unstable relationship between the legal and the illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized."<sup>66</sup> In 1992, the New York City and State Department of Transportation, the Taxi and Limousine Commission, the New York Police Department, the Department of Finance and other local and federal agencies came together to form an inter-agency strategy to minimize the presence of dollar vans along the Flatbush corridor. Following this, the transit authority announced a plan to increase police enforcement and bus service along the B41 bus route, posting and distributing flyers and cards encouraging bus riders to utilize the city bus rather than dollar vans that read: "Most Flatbush Av van services operate illegally. These vans are unauthorized, uninspected, uninsured, unlicensed and unsafe." By that time, the city hadn't conducted any comprehensive study of dollar vans in order to assess their safety and drivers' licensure (this would come years later). Yet, the language used in their campaign would

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<sup>66</sup> Ananya Roy, "Urban Informality: The Production of Space and Practice of Planning." *The Oxford Handbook of Urban Planning*, eds. Randall Crane and Rachel Weber, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 698.

have an afterlife in the years to come, and would frame public attitudes about dollar van drivers in ways material and immaterial.

The years between 1993 and 1997 ushered in two overlapping legal struggles which brought to the fore public conversations having to do with the de/legitimization of dollar vans— as well as a few odd marriages between elected city representatives and the van industry that I will return to later. The first case involved a protracted seven-year struggle between the van cooperative Brooklyn Van Lines and the City and State of New York which came to a near halt in 1997. The second involved a lawsuit brought forth by the Interborough Alliance for Community Transportation (which included Brooklyn Van Lines), the Queens Van Plan, a collective called Pat Carrier and & Sons and the Rockaway Commuter Line. The second suit claimed that the existing regulations against the dollar cab industry exceeded “legitimate public health and safety objectives” and were instead meant to “exclude newcomers and to protect entrenched transportation providers from competition.”<sup>67</sup>

In focusing on these two legal cases I am interested not only in what and who the cases challenged, and the end results of these struggles. I am interested also in the liberal Americanist discourse deployed throughout the hearings and in the print media. As mobilities scholars have well argued, mobilities are inherently ideological; they produce, reproduce and disrupt dominant spatial knowledges. The language used throughout the suit offers a useful space in which to understand the politics of mobility. In this case, the discourse would eventually produce a legitimate immigrant subject with the right to be

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<sup>67</sup> “Vans Want Justice- Seek Right to Operate Legally,” *Carib News*, February 18, 1997.

mobile and participate in the life of the city, while simultaneously producing an illegitimate, ‘unregulated,’ ‘other’ who could be managed, policed and surveilled.

I start with the case of Brooklyn Van Lines, which challenged a city statute that required drivers to prove that their service was both necessary *and* convenient for the public. The same statute required the city council to approve licenses for dollar van drivers while at the same time granting the council the authority to void licenses approved by the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission— a resolution that would stunt the growth of the dollar cab market and criminalize vehicles in operation.<sup>68</sup> As a collective, Brooklyn Van Lines had been applying for licensure and the ability to legally operate 20 vans under the same umbrella since 1992, though they had been operational since 1990-1991. In 1992 there was a five day hearing in which Vincent Cummins, the primary owner of Brooklyn Van Lines, presented affidavits from 35 residents, resulting in 1,000 pages of testimony in support of van company. With such support, Cummins’ operation was approved by the Taxi and Limousine Commission but authorization was denied by city council because, it was argued, the dollar van would have a major impact on the Transit Authority’s revenue. The *New York Post* suggested that union campaign contributions were responsible for the council’s continued disapproval of dollar van applications.<sup>69</sup> Transit workers and unions were pitted against informal taxi drivers and collectives like Brooklyn Van Lines. Enter...Rudy Giuliani.

Almost on queue, a smiling, young Mayor Giuliani appears on the cover of *Caribbean Life* with the tagline “Giuliani to City Council, Give Dollar Vans a Square

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<sup>68</sup> Asha Best, "The Way They Blow the Horn: Caribbean Dollar Cabs and Subaltern Mobilities," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106, no. 2 (2016): 442-449.

<sup>69</sup> “Transit Union Roadblock,” *New York Post*, July 23, 1997.

Deal...I Will Continue to Fight With You.” The city council had rejected Brooklyn Van Lines’ most recent application for authorization by a vote of 46 to 2. Giuliani called the council’s decision “a vestige of the horrible past of this city in which we crushed jobs and opportunities and relied on dependency” and vetoed the vote, effectively ending the struggle between the transit union backed city council and Brooklyn Van Lines. It was a strange— though not altogether singular— moment in which the interests of informal workers and the conservative mayor would overlap. Both parties were calling for more authorized— read regulated— dollar vans to be operational, and for unauthorized dollar vans to be neutered. But there were other benefits for the strange bedfellows— earlier that year, a group of van owner-operators had filed a lawsuit against the City and State of New York, the Taxi and Limousine Commission, and the Department of Transportation for harassment; Giuliani’s support of van drivers only helped to make the suit more visible. And, of course, it was a re-election year. In August of 1997, the Interborough Alliance for Community Transit (which, again, included Brooklyn Van Lines) drafted a press release endorsing Giuliani for re-election. It read: “IAC is prepared to support Mayor Giuliani with it’s EQUIPMENT, TIME, MONEY and VOTES.”

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# GIULIANI TO CITY COUNCIL: GIVE DOLLAR VANS A SQUARE DEAL

**"...I Will Continue To Fight With You"**  
— Giuliani To Van Operators

By Roderick J. Broome

Facing a possible City Council override of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's veto of a bill that would legalize "dollar vans" throughout the city, the president of one van group is fighting back and seeking public support from commuters.

"We would appreciate if they could write a letter on our behalf to the City Council Speaker Peter Vallone urging him not to try to override the mayor's veto," said Vincent "Castro" Cummins of Brooklyn Van Lines, Inc. "Since we want to service the public in a safe, legal manner, the more letters the better for all concerned."

"We take this opportunity also, to say thanks again for your support over the years," Cummins added.

In a message to the Transport Workers Union (TWU) some of whose members were recently laid off by the Transit Authority, Cummins declared, "We of the



Mayor Rudolph Giuliani

and during that period, not one single bus driver lost his or her job as a result of the existence of the vans.

"The MetroCard just came about, and already several token booth clerks have lost their jobs. Those, too, who have been laid off are not being rehired because the same MetroCard is now being sold in stores, banks, check cashing outlets and the like," he said.

Cummins, a Vincentian-Barbadian, was actually responding to recent unfavorable statements by

was recently passed in the City Hall and once more denied Brooklyn Van Lines, Inc. the right to establish itself as a legal means of transportation.

Giuliani vetoed the bill which, incidentally, was passed by a whopping 46 to 2 Council vote — more than enough signatures to override his veto. Both Clarke and Henry expect, unfortunately, that the override will stand.

"I see here an opportunity for the city to really move the van operators forward that is being thwarted," Giuliani said to the Council. "We should not be afraid of competition

... "The Council is not doing the right thing for people who are trying to do their best for their families, the mayor continued. "We need to regulate the vans and assure people that they are safe, licensed and clean ... I will continue to fight with you," Giuliani said to the van operators.

Jamaican-born Council woman Una Clarke concurred with the mayor.

"All they are asking for is a chance to legitimize their business and to run it with pride. They are best

Vincent Cummins, who presently operates 14 vans legally has been diligently trying, for the past seven years, to get all of his 40 vans legally operational, but to no avail. But, while he is grateful for the support of the Mayor and a "certain few" City Council members, he may have to turn to the law courts should the veto not hold.

"I will not rest until our vans are totally legal, and not stone will be left unturned until that goal is reached," Cummins assured.

On July 4, the Transit Authority began offering commuters free transfers from bus to subway, subway to bus, or bus to bus. All they have to do is start out with the brand new MetroCard Gold, and use the card again within two hours to complete their trip. Therefore, most two-fare zones have been eliminated in New York City.

Cummins was asked how the new "swipe card" affected the dollar vans on Flatbush.

"Let's put it this way, the MetroCard is a step in the right direction," he replied. "We always felt that the commuters of New

introduction of the MetroCard does not affect us at all. The riders in our area are split up into four different categories. You have the ones who take the bus, the ones who take the vans, there are the riders who take the first mode of transportation that comes along; and the riders who take taxi cabs. You are not going to find many of them defecting from their respective means of travel unless something goes seriously wrong to force that defection," Cummins explained.

"Dollar-van riders use us to get to their destinations on time. A bus with over 60 passengers will have to make far more stops than a 14-capacity van, which virtually runs express, especially during peak hours. Even after the limited bus system was introduced it was still business as usual for us, our few stops enable us to move much faster."

Interestingly, the one-dollar fare has been in existence for some 16 years in Brooklyn, while the MTA fare has caught up and surpassed the MTA's amount of the single fare commute.

Does Cummins expect an increase from the dollar

Image Description: "Give Dollar Vans a Square Deal," Caribbean Life, 1997

As I talk to Don, he remembers the early struggles between van drivers and transit operators. He remembers staging a protest on the Brooklyn Bridge, dollar vans blocking the flow of traffic. He remembers meetings between van drivers and city reps. His memory fills in archival occlusions. Alongside Giuliani, most of the print media coverage of the legal battle focuses on either one of two men: Vincent Cummins of Brooklyn Van Lines or Hector Ricketts, who operated dollar vans in Queens, two drivers framed as exceptional, non-radical immigrants with both a desire and a propensity for hard work. At times, the two men are in suits and ties framing them as entrepreneurs and at others they are simple family men. In one article, Cummins is photographed casually dressed in the drivers' seat with, three women and three little girls peering out of the window in the seats behind him. His voice is described as "honey-sweet," his face as having an "easy smile."<sup>70</sup> Cummins and Ricketts became figures through which Caribbean immigrants, at least in specific residential communities, could be framed as adhering to a set of legitimating narratives.<sup>71</sup>

These representations were juxtaposed with accounts of dangerous landscapes and vulnerable women. Consider the following testimony excerpted from the Brooklyn Van Lines appeal:

Patricia [—] is employed at Long Island College Hospital at 340 Henry Street in downtown Brooklyn, where she works a shift beginning at 3:15 P.M. and ending at 11:30 P.M. She is picked each day at Lenox and Bedford Avenue, near her front door, and taken directly to the hospital. [...] In the evening, she is returned directly to her home, and were she to utilize the B-41 bus, she would be required to walk approximately 1 1/2 blocks to her home during the late evening hours.

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<sup>70</sup> "A Rough Road for Vans," *Daily News*, July 2, 1997.

<sup>71</sup> In one exception, a New York Times writer described Cummins as having the "wary eyes of a hardened criminal." "If Only the M.T.A. were so Efficient— and Profitable" John Tierney August 10, 1997

[She] testified that a friend in the neighborhood had been beaten and mugged in a similar situation, and that she felt safer utilizing van service.

There are several other testimonies that mention routine assaults and muggings. While I do not want to minimize street level violence I do think that it's important to note that there were other testimonies excluded in favor of those like Patricia's. In putting together the case, the legal team capitalized on an idea that ordinary life in Brooklyn is characterized by implicit danger that is brought into sharp relief when it is experienced by women.

Beyond this, support for these community markets, and the valorization of entrepreneurship, was very much entrenched in a critique of welfare. As a staunch fiscal conservative, when Giuliani referenced the “the horrible past of this city in which we crushed jobs and opportunities and relied on dependency,” he was more than likely referring to a post-war New York which had become, according to urban historian Joshua Freeman, “a laboratory for social urbanism committed to an expansive welfare state, racial equality, and popular access to culture and education.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Giuliani's time in office ushered in what Neil Smith referred to as an era of “urban revanchism,” where the city's governance was motivated by an acute reaction to perverse, racialized and class-based understandings about the causes and culprits of “urban decline” and “decay” in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>73</sup>

A letter to Speaker Peter Vallone from one Caribbean civic group in support of the lawsuit described Caribbeans as “hard working people” who “believe in the ‘American

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<sup>72</sup> Joshua B. Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II*, (New York: The New Press, 2000)

<sup>73</sup> Neil Smith, “Giuliani Time: The Revanchist 1990s,” *Social Text* 57 (1998), 1-20.



Dream’ and subscribe to our ‘Free-Enterprise System.’” Further, the letter stated, “The ‘Dollar Van System’ encourages self-sufficiency, entrepreneurship and reduces reliance on public social support systems.” In another letter of support written by a dollar van rider to the city council, the writer asks why dollar vans are perpetually ticketed and harrassed. However, she prefaces the query by stating, “I am an American Citizen, An Executive in a Major Cooperation based in New York City (Midtown)” and goes on to say “As a homeowner...with heavy taxes, I deserve better treatment.” In the wake of the court battle— as a direct counter to Transit Authority backed campaigns that described the informal taxi market as ‘unsafe,’ ‘chaotic’ and ‘anarchist’ in the years prior — neoliberal discourse around entrepreneurial success and disdain for social services were operationalized and tagged to the dollar cab, effectively linking individualism, legalism, automobility, and the ‘free market.’ In this regard, Giuliani and the van supporters (at least publicly) were very much aligned.

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Perverse political entanglements withstanding, at the intersection of electoral politics, the traces left behind by the lawsuit illuminate instances of heightened contact between informal workers and the police state. Una Clarke, a Caribbean born councilwoman had amassed a collection of materials around her advocacy for dollar vans, and Caribbean communities of Brooklyn more broadly speaking. It is within the dozens of boxes that comprise the Clarke files that I find clippings from community newspapers, letters of support, letters of complaint and other ephemera documenting the contention between van drivers and the city. As I comb through archival objects organized in manila folders labeled “Dollar Vans,” I come across the letter below, neatly

printed on looseleaf paper. Because of its location in the archive I read this as a letter from a van driver to Councilwoman Clarke detailing a routinized police encounter in the form of a traffic stop:

*To: Mrs. Una Clark,*

*On the sixth month of the year, on the sixteenth day of the month. I was traveling south of Utica Avenue. I came to a halt at a red traffic light.*

*Suddenly, I saw when an officer pulled across in front of my vehicle. I then saw that it was a scooter and recognized the officer was officer [REDACTED]. He came up to the driver's door and demanded my driver license, registration and insurance. I handed it to him. Then he asked me to turn off the ignition and give him the keys. I hesitated and told him he has no right to my keys. He then drew back, pulled his gun from his waist and said to me "Nigga, I said to give me the fucking keys." With fear, I handed over the keys to him.*

*He then turned around, throw the keys in the scooter and started to drive off. Upon driving, he said to me "Let the van stay there, a tow truck will come and pick it up." Then he drove off in the opposite direction. (north)*

*I watched him drove off, out of sight, I then put my spare key in the ignition and drove out of the flowing traffic.*

*Yours truly,*

[REDACTED]

It is a scene of mobilities and immobilities, an illustration of the politics of stillness and its relationship to modes of state control. There is something sensational and yet so ordinary about what the writer describes that, at that last line, I exhale and chuckle in the same breath. I manage to read the letter only a few times before bits of it are redacted by someone other than myself, excised by the tip of a fat black sharpie. And then, it becomes a new text entirely. I wonder about the relationship between archives, erasure, preservation and replication. Or rather, I wonder what narratives, bodies, data can be replicated by the black boxes that form hollows on the page. From the new version of the letter I cannot ascertain much about the virulent officer, though I know that the

driver is identified as a “nigga.” I know too that this is not the first encounter between the officer and the “nigga.”

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*If the TLC has the authority over the vans, why the NYPD,* Don asks, of no one in particular. For reasons I think I understand, he isn’t comfortable being recorded electronically. Awkwardly perched in the front passenger seat of his van, I write as he thinks aloud. *They’ve created a system you can enforce. The city is allowing things to happen that are crippling to the industry.* What Don described—the disciplining of informal mobility—can be linked to a series of campaigns intended to bring some semblance of ‘order’ to New York’s urban landscape. Throughout the 1990’s, at the helm of Rudy Giuliani, but through a collaboration of several bureaucratic arms, the City had designed an elaborate architecture around mobilities and immigrant economies. This restructuring coincided with a significant shift in the demographics of taxi drivers in New York that took place between 1980 and 1990. Increasingly, taxi drivers were im/migrants, originally born in countries of the Global South.

Cotten Seiler’s *Republic of Drivers* defines automobility is an apparatus. According to Seiler, “the driving subject moves along grooves created, surveyed and administered by that apparatus, and is also legible to it through various modes of enumeration [...]connected to the nation-state and corporate capitalism.”<sup>74</sup> In New York, the link between mobility, surveillance and capital is particularly germane as the disciplining of immigrant mobilities was part and parcel of what one scholar has called “the

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<sup>74</sup> Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 9.

entrepreneurial regime of urban governance.”<sup>75</sup> Manhattan in the 1980s and 1990s was marked by intense neoliberal urban planning, a very acute rationalization of space that married gentrification and corporate re-branding strategies. A number of scholars have looked at the ‘Disneyfication’ of Times Square as a clear illustration of this.<sup>76</sup>

It is within this broader context that, as Neil Smith reminds us, Giuliani “introduced a raft of new laws intended to raise taxi drivers’ insurance liability, make drug tests mandatory, and impose much higher fines on cabbies than other drivers for a range of offenses.” The new regulations, which can and should be understood as technologies of surveillance, were part of a campaign against a lack of ‘civility’ and for “quality of life” in the city.<sup>77</sup> Underwritten by somewhat strange claims around urban civility, morality, a renewed and aggressive sense of ‘law and order’ and anti-poor, anti-working class rhetoric, these measures served as the city’s response to the perception of recklessness and speed— or what some have called “unruly mobility.”<sup>78</sup> What makes this unfitting is that in 1993— just one year before Giuliani deployed this new set of regulations— 35 taxi drivers had been murdered, their money stolen. Most of them were livery drivers operating in the boroughs.<sup>79</sup> Three years earlier, in 1990, then Mayor

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<sup>75</sup> Junxi Qian, “No right to the street: Motorcycle taxis, discourse production and the regulation of unruly mobility,” *Urban Studies* 52, no. 15, (2015): 2922–2947, doi:10.1177/0042098014539402.

<sup>76</sup> See Sharon Zukin, Neil Smith, Ananya Roy’s “Nostalgias of the Modern.”

<sup>77</sup> Neil Smith, “Giuliani Time,”

<sup>78</sup> Junxi Qian “No right to the street”

<sup>79</sup> Craig Wolff, “Massive Cabdriver Protest of 35 Killings Snarls Traffic,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/27/nyregion/massive-cabdriver-protest-of-35-killings-snarls-traffic.html>.

Dinkins had declared the murder of taxi drivers “a public crisis.” That year, 7 drivers had been shot to death within a span of six weeks.<sup>80</sup>

In a New York Times editorial, one writer referred to Guiliani’s campaign as a “program of behavior modification.”<sup>81</sup> Albeit vulgar, it was an apt choice of words. As I write this, in order to apply for licensure as a van driver, a person must complete an online form that asks for your driver’s license number, first and last name, date of birth, social security number, cell phone number, telephone number and email address. You would also submit “identification information” or what Simone Browne has called “body data”— sex, one of four options for hair color, one of four options for eye color, height in feet, height in inches, weight and country of birth— a photo ID and consent to “fingerprinting for good moral character,” along with drug testing. As with other material forms of identification and serialization, this “dossier” then becomes property of the city government, bringing drivers into direct contact with the state. And, as with other forms of state identification, it is through this application procedure that the dollar cab driver “produces” himself as a ‘responsible citizen’ and, in many cases, as a “responsible immigrant.”<sup>82</sup>

First imposed on the yellow taxi— an iconic symbol of unfettered middle class mobility, disposable income, racialized labor, and New York city-ness— these sanctions provide an important point of comparison and framework for understanding the

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<sup>80</sup> John J. Goldman, “Dinkins Calls Slaying of N.Y. Cabdrivers ‘Public Crisis,’” April 23, 1990, [http://articles.latimes.com/1990-04-23/news/mn-131\\_1\\_police-officers](http://articles.latimes.com/1990-04-23/news/mn-131_1_police-officers).

<sup>81</sup> “The Cab Crackdown is Overdue,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1998, A24, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/14/opinion/the-cab-crackdown-is-overdue.html>.

<sup>82</sup> Simone Browne, “Getting Carded: Border Control and the Politics of Canada’s Permanent Resident Card,” *Citizenship Studies* 9, no. 4 (2005): 427.

regulation of dollar cabs in East Flatbush. This is because, having lobbied with a modicum of success to fall under the rubric of “legitimate” taxi drivers, authorized dollar vans traversing the streets of Brooklyn and Queens were now beholden to the same spate of laws, tests, and fines, managed and administered through the Taxi and Limousine Commission and enforced through the local police.

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Kelton and I met inside of the same Dunkin’ Donuts where I had interviewed Don and Kingston. He had had his hack (TLC registered driver’s) license for a year, and leased his van through a collective. For each day that he drives, he pays \$110 to the owner of the van collective. In addition to the cost of obtaining a hack license and leasing fees, he had paid an additional \$2,000 to a brokerage company in Forest Hills in order to have the proper liability insurance. He later found out that it was the wrong type of insurance and that his license plates were invalid for operating a commuter van. *The broker should refund back my money...he’s a white collar thief...he just wan take me money and fuck me up.* As we speak, and he reflects on his predicament, he grows increasingly agitated. *Me right, me nah wrong. He just tek all me money and do wah him want. Is a tough work but people haffe survive. They have all the right. Poor people don have no right cause we don’ know nothing about the law... because them is insurance man.* According to Kelton, he was told that there was additional paperwork that he had to sign, but unsure of what exactly he was signing and very much aware of his own positionality as black, working class and immigrant, he refused. *Baby love*, he said to me, *me ‘fraid fe sign. Sign fe what? Sign fe my money you ah tek and live life with?* I do not know if Kelton ever recovered the cost of the invalid policy. But my conversation Kelton made

clear for me the entanglements between informality, mobility, and speculation, or the political economy of insurance.

Despite providing a quasi public service and falling under state regulation, despite incurring the costs of special licensure (outside of their own license to drive), procuring and maintaining a vehicle, and potential leasing fees, dollar cab drivers are also expected to support the cost of liability insurance. Many drivers with whom I collaborated on this project cited the inflated insurance requirements as an impediment to becoming an authorized van driver. Since dollar cab and other taxi drivers are expected to support these expenditures in addition to liability insurance, brokers play an essential role in the speculative economy. There are few protections for informal workers against fraudulent brokers, adding another layer of precarity to this form of labor. When I refer to precarity I am drawing on what Lauren Berlant has referred to as the “taxonomy“ of precarity where precarity can be understood as enacted in a number of ways: as persistent structural (economic) problem, “as a way to recognize and organize ongoing class/group antagonisms/nostalgias” and as an “existential problem” -- that of contingency, insecurity and instability.<sup>83</sup> A seemingly mundane instrument, and the cornerstone of speculative capitalism, insurance has become integral to the state regulation of informal mobilities. While the imposition of higher fines and mandatory drug testing for taxi drivers (I include here dollar cab and van drivers) have been key to the management of informal and other “unruly” street mobilities, it is the increase in insurance liability that has had major material consequences for this informal space.

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<sup>83</sup> Puar et al “Precarity Talk”

But there is also a discursive dimension to this. To be uninsured, particularly as a driver, means that you are not participating in public life in a moral or an ethical way—that is to say you aren’t being a good citizen. You are, what some might term, a ‘moral hazard.’ Because dollar cabs often operate outside of dominant systems of licensure and transit planning (that is prescribed routes and timetables), when a traffic accident does occur it is often framed as inevitable and almost always the fault of an unlicensed and uninsured driver. In thinking about insurance liability and regulation, I turn [again] to mobilities scholar Junxi Qian whose work brilliantly brings to the fore the ways in which the state constructs “the problem of street insecurity” and naturalizes the relationship between accidents, death, injury, and informal modes of mobility.<sup>84</sup> In Brooklyn, the increased emphasis on insurance, risk and liability, is co-constitutive of the problem of street insecurity.

In 2006, there was a traffic accident along Flatbush Avenue that involved a dollar van. It was a ‘hit-and-run’ and the incident left a woman seriously injured. Officials and bystanders assumed that, because the van was probably unlicensed or uninsured, the driver responsible for the accident was reticent about coming forward. In response to this, city council members convened to discuss yet another ‘crackdown’ on the dollar van industry:

“They’re like wild animals running around this city,” Council Member Domenic Recchia [...] said of the vans that operate in neighborhoods with little or no train and bus service. [...] The council’s Transportation Committee chairman, John Liu [...] said Ms. Gibbons [the victim] was “the latest example of how the public is in danger” due to the existence of dollar vans.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Junxi Qian, “No right to the street,” 2931.

<sup>85</sup> Azi Paybarah, “Dollar Van Industry Faces Crackdown After Hit and Run,” *New York Sun*, March 16, 2006, <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/dollar-van-industry-faces-crackdown-after-hit/29246/>.



In a section called “Reporter’s Rant,” on the online local news site *Canarsie Courier* one contributor wrote a lengthy post lambasting passengers for utilizing dollar vans.<sup>86</sup>

So what — you took a dollar van from the Junction at Brooklyn College to get to Kings Plaza Mall. [...] So they’re illegal - BIG DEAL! You’d do anything to get to your destination and make your life easier! Right? What you don’t care about is the fact that, not only are those dollar vans illegal, they are dangerous to those traveling inside and outside of the vehicle. Even if you do care and you’re still hailing these cryptic-looking monsters, you’re adding more fuel to the fire to keep them operating and posing a risk to the public.

To those commuters who give up waiting for that LEGAL form of transportation - YES, it’s partially YOUR fault that there are massive collisions and accidents as a result of dollar van traffic. [...] You don’t care that the dollar van driver you just trusted with your life has NO insurance - so if you and the other passengers are injured, you’re SCREWED?

Those vans are not only illegal because they’re not licensed by the Department of Transportation, chances are the drivers do not have insurance that will cover the number of passengers hopping aboard.

Later in the post, the author intimates that van drivers— which she describes as “hellish looking” “bad boys”— are likely rapists, questions whether the vans are transporting drugs, and urges passengers to use smart phone app-based Uber instead. The pivot towards drug use and sexual assault is disquieting and noxious. The author cited above deploys the word ‘rape’ in a way that is intentionally triggering, and invokes a much longer history of understanding black men through the lens of sexual predation.

But, because dollar cabs are gendered spaces where we find differential forms of mobility, I think that it is worth taking a moment to think critically about the function and limitations of this sort of discourse. Rejecting it as purely anti-black minimizes the fact there have been a number of sexual assaults and other forms of harassment that occur

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<sup>86</sup> Dara Mormile, “Reporter’s Rant: All You Need to Travel Is a Dollar Van and a Dream!” *Canarsie Courier*, September 1, 2016, [http://www.canarsiecourier.com/news/2016-09-01/Other\\_News/Reporters\\_Rant.html](http://www.canarsiecourier.com/news/2016-09-01/Other_News/Reporters_Rant.html).

within the space of the dollar van. These violent encounters have been recorded and editorialized across a range of news sources. It is not my goal here to rehearse or to put on display the experiences of those who have been assaulted and harassed. However, a scan of news articles pertaining to rape, sexual assault and harassment aboard dollar cabs reveals some things that require analytical attention. When journalists talk about rape within the space of a taxi, they often attribute it to a driver (or group traveling with the driver) “capitalizing” on the availability of tinted windows, the darkness of night and early morning hours, or simply taking advantage of the fact that it is a van— a vehicle that has become closely associated with rape. In other words, according to much of the news coverage, traveling in a dollar cab or van is rife with opportunities to rape or to be raped. This logic, however impaired, is quite useful in the production of street insecurity, which requires representational practices that cast the potentially uninsured driver not only as unruly but as inherently and uniquely predatory.

And these representational practices are not limited to popular discourse. The characterization of dollar cabs and dollar vans in both scholarly literature and city planning documents also fits within a larger grammar of crisis and danger. They also draw on the popular narratives of decay and decline through which Brooklyn has been articulated and understood. Excerpted from Robert Cervero’s landmark study on ‘paratransit’ in the U.S., this editorial from a transit trade magazine describes dollar cabs as:

groups of dented vans, some with legal license plates, others with stolen ones, that weave around public buses on the same route and careen into bus stops outside

the subway exit. They are unkempt, often unlicensed, often illegal alien drivers bleat passengers at a dollar a piece...in flagrant violation of state and city laws.<sup>87</sup>

Throughout Cervero's otherwise balanced study of informalized transit, Brooklyn's dollar cabs are described as 'prowling,' 'preying,' and 'spawning' similar modes of travel in other localities. In planning literature dollar vans are referred to as 'feeder' or 'shadow' transit. This, I think, is more than the problem of semantics. It is an opportunity to think further about where and how the 'shadows' are cast in urban studies, and about the narrative consequences of repeatedly mapping Black urban life where shadows have been cast. For what can one do in the shadows besides prey and prowl? This repetitive way of mapping and attempting to rationalize Black mobility, Black urbanity and informal urbanisms forecloses on the possibility that poor people, immigrants, working class folks— that Black and Brown people across class and income strata— often produce, figure, and navigate space in ways that are quite rational to themselves.

Wild animals. Cryptic-looking monsters. Illegal alien drivers. Hellish. Unkempt. Preying. Prowling. Spawning. These are undoubtedly provocative examples of how the discourse of animality and alienness — not to mention other-worldliness—belies street insecurities and conversations around informal immigrant mobilities. Nonetheless, taken together, these examples illustrate the ways in which the language of street insecurity, at least in this context, is acutely racialized, gendered and entrenched in broader sentiments about immigrant mobilities and the right to the city. That is to say, recklessness, risk and unruliness at the street level is figured through blackness, masculinity and specific

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<sup>87</sup> Robert Cervero, *Paratransit in America: Redefining Mass Transportation*, (Westport: Praeger, 1997), 65.

categories of citizenship. I wonder how it is that a lack of insurance (whether perceived or real) has come to represent recklessness and unruliness.

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There are police cars stationed near Flatbush and Atlantic so I walk about a block or so away from that intersection to catch a van. A van with the decal “Alexis/ Carl Normand” approaches. It’s licensed (I see the TLC stickers on the side and front windows). There’s a Haitian flag hanging from the rearview mirror. Only two other passengers are in the van, one sitting in the front seat-- the driver grumbles at her to fasten her seat belt, then follows with “if the police see...” Even though there’s congestion on Flatbush we move along at a steady pace-- the driver sees another van driver heading in the opposite direction and honks (as a greeting). Then we hear a siren and the van slows to a stop. We’re being pulled over.

Three police officers approach the van, one on the drivers side and two on the passengers side. The police officer is cordial enough, asking for a license and registration and proof of insurance (though he hasn’t said yet why we are pulled over). As he collects the driver’s information another officer comes over. I wonder how many cops are necessary for what seems to be a customary traffic stop. One of the cops to the right side of the vehicle runs her fingers over the TLC decal on the side of the van, and then scratches gently with her nails. The officer on the left explains that the van has been pulled over to see if it’s stolen (this doesn’t seem like a reasonable explanation to me). He tells our driver that there’s been an increase in this type of van being stolen (white, Ford passenger vans) and hands the driver an ALERT (I can only see the word ALERT and Ford Econoline). Another van passes and the driver sees that we’re stopped. “Smile. It

could be worse” he shouts to our driver and our driver laughs. The van checks out but before letting us go, the officer instructs the driver to get his van “etched” as a matter of protection. He says that etching can ensure that the vehicle isn’t stolen. As we pull off the driver speaks only in (French) patois, to the other passengers and sometimes to the other drivers who ride alongside our van in the other lanes. The only word I can understand is TLC.

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I am guided to a conference room. Almost all of the furniture in the space is a washed out gray. It is frigid in this room. Eventually they join me, apologizing for being a few minutes behind...something about a conference call. As we shake hands I jokingly apologize for my cold fingers. We chuckle, as unfamiliar people do, and he makes a quip...something about the muggy heat of the subway and how you can always tell which car is air conditioned, because it’s the most packed. I hear myself laughing, and feel us moving away from pleasantries. They have prepared and printed out their answers in advance of our interview. They explain that the Taxi and Limousine Commission is the “regulatory body that licenses all for hire vehicles in New York City, so this means we regulate over 100,000 drivers, over 65,000 vehicles.”

I ask how and when the TLC came to oversee dollar vans. *Do you want to take this one?* she asks her colleague. I find out that it is a tedious process that a driver must navigate should he want to authorize his van to be street legal:

Sure. So...commuter vans are pretty unique in that they are regulated by multiple agencies. They are first regulated by...they need to get New York State DoT approval to operate as a commuter, they need to get, I think it’s 19A certification, then they come to the TLC with an application saying ‘we want to start a commuter van route’ or a service area...they come to the TLC, the fill out an

application, and then if everything checks out in the application we then forward that application to the New York City Department of Transportation who then approves the service area and finds if there is a “public need” for the service...If the DoT says ‘yes, there’s a public need for the service,” DoT sends the application back to us...after DoT, once they get it, it has to be sent around to local community boards, there has to be public hearings on it because the public needs to be able to state their objections on it if they have any...so if that’s all fine and good the application comes back to us, they look it over again and then we most likely will approve the application once it comes back to us.

I ask about what seems to be collusion between TLC and the NYPD. It is true, they tell me, that is the local precincts of the NYPD with whom the TLC is in partnership. They have a “zero tolerance” policy, I am told, against illegal mobility:

If you’re in an area of Brooklyn, Queens, where there is a lot of illegal commuter van activity we will reach out to the local precincts for support in...limiting the amount of enforcement that goes on. We’ll do some sting operations where we’ll try and round up as many illegal vans as we can. The illegal vans, believe it or not, are incredibly organized within themselves so...it’s hard to seize multiple at a time because the second you go after one they’re all on their radios and they all run away and evade us and the police.

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There aren’t any vans waiting near Kings Plaza so I stand at the corner near the Golden Krust. I catch an unlicensed van driven by an older driver, with a partner who sat in the front row. The partner collects the funds and counts available seats. He calls every woman “pretty lady” and some of the men “boss.” Over the course of our trip the van was entirely full, with three to each seat and a single person in the front seat. He and the driver listened to the CB radio the entire way which was full of chatter, Jamaican men talking about how traffic was “block up,” especially near the Brooklyn Library. A (white) woman who had gotten on with an infant asked “Is traffic blocked all the way up?” The drivers’ partner turned to repeat her question, flattening out his otherwise distinct Jamaican accent, “Is traffic bad all the way up?” “Traffic block up,” he answered. As we passed the Botanical gardens, the driver says on the CB “De Southside of the library--

blue and white.” He warns the other drivers about the heightened police presence. “You haffe drive 5 miles per hour...cause if you drive 35 dem a say you drive 50” the doorman says to the driver. “Flatbush hot today.”

The drivers on the CB continue to chatter about police, and traffic, sometimes making jokes...one about a driver who was stopped by the police and “defecated himself like a foul.” In retrospect, I think of Robin Kelley’s proposition in *Race Rebels*, to understand busses as “moving theaters,” where theater serves as both “a site of performance and a site of military conflict.”<sup>88</sup> While Kelley explored “dramas of conflict,” domination and resistance aboard buses, he also alerts us to the ways in which laughter and ridicule amongst black passengers can serve as acts of transgression or a sort of “hidden transcript.”<sup>89</sup> Near Prospect Place and Flatbush we pass a van that has been pulled over by the cops. The cash collector says “Crooklyn” and even though the myriad voices over the CB can’t hear him, they echo, saying “Crooklyn” every time they want to refer to the overt police presence on Flatbush and other Brooklyn streets. Sometimes they utter the word “Babylon.”

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Earlier in this chapter, I gestured towards the politics of stillness. In that instance, I was alluding to the function of stillness as a means to control informalized mobility. In this section, I want to return to stillness; this time as one mode of counter-veillance, or response to localized police control. As Tim Cresswell has noted, conscious of how “stillness is thoroughly incorporated into the practices of moving,” mobilities scholars

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<sup>88</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 187.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

have explored the notion of stillness in myriad ways.<sup>90</sup> Within the field of mobilities, scholars have looked at “obdurate stillness,” that which poses a challenge to state sanctioned displacement and “enforced stillness,” such as that which is experienced while incarcerated or otherwise contained. Mobilities studies have opened up conversations around the imposition of waiting, and moments of “stuckness” that “occur[s] in dramatic ways when infrastructural mobilities break down.” Further, mobilities scholars have suggested that we push further to understand borders and bordering in relation to movements, flows and the production of stillness. Finally, at the scale of the body, mobilities studies offer ways to think about waiting and boredom.<sup>91</sup> This expansive body of work has been incredibly generative. It has encouraged me to think about the ways in which, at the street level, regulatory systems work through the production and enforcement of stillness and “stuckness”— the seizure of vehicles by the TLC, traffic stops and ticketing, at times, incarceration.

When I asked Don why van drivers seem to wind down midday in order to wait and convene at that particular location (Dunkin' Donuts), he said, *this is when the cops change shifts*. Based on their own experiences, some drivers believe that during certain times of day, and in particular precincts, there is an increased risk in being stopped, searched, ticketed and having their vehicles seized.<sup>92</sup> Thus, waiting has become just one practice through which drivers organize themselves, their labor and daily lives in order to avoid

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<sup>90</sup> Tim Cresswell "Mobilities II: Still" *Progress in Human Geography* p.648

<sup>91</sup> Ibid p.650-651

<sup>92</sup> Here, following Audra Simpson's work on “ethnographic refusals”, I am writing in a way that intentionally avoids disclosing the exact location of the rest stop, the exact times of day that drivers wait, and the precincts with whom these drivers have contact.



contact with local enforcement. When I asked drivers why they do not wait at one of the stops authorized by the city, some said that they had no idea where those stops were; others did not know that such authorized stops exist. This is because most of those stops are mapped in residential neighborhoods, where dollar cabs do not regularly operate. However, the parking lot was, and is, not necessarily a space of respite. The daily routine of parking at this location has been a source of contention between the drivers and the primarily Jewish residents in the surrounding neighborhood. Nonetheless, drivers improvise and find ways to make place while in waiting.

On one occasion, I visited the rest stop with Matthew, a community organizer doing work around police harassment and gentrification in Brooklyn. We happened upon a group of drivers who had removed one of the seats from their passenger van, resting in on the sidewalk to create a makeshift bus bench. I was fascinated by the modularity of the van, interested in how it could be rendered into parts to create a new space entirely. In the empty row created by the removed seat, they set up speakers which I presume were transported in the back of the van. They had placed two crates in front of the bench and set out lunch, which we seem to have happened upon towards the tail end. Some smoked cigarettes, some sipped beverages, they all chatted and exchanged moments of laughter, music played quietly in the background. Through the provision of limited authorized van stops that few drivers know about, or where there was very little signage and certainly no space to rest outside of the enclosure of the driver's vehicle, the city has created very little room for informal taxi drivers. Yet, they had managed to create their own sense of place, albeit ephemeral. Eventually, it would take two of them to lift the seat back into place,

and put the speakers and crates back into the trunk space of the van. And then, the rest stop would be gone.

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The dollar van driver stops tapping the horn. Flatbush is quiet as we pass the gardens and Grand Army Plaza. I see an American Apparel and an eatery that boasts crepes and cold-pressed juice. For a moment I think I've gone too far and I wonder if I'm still in Brooklyn. By the time we've reached the Barclay's Center, the Brooklyn that I know has become acutely unfamiliar. My lack of familiarity makes sense of course; my family relocated from Canarsie to a suburb of Boston just as I was entering the 3rd grade. When I left Brooklyn my geography was limited to Kings County Hospital, the one bedroom at 48-- Snyder Avenue, the two bedroom at 6-- Remsen Ave, P.S.235, my aunt's house on E. 51st, Rehoboth Church and Conway on 34th Street in Manhattan. There was also Pre-School Minds, the concrete park where I watched longingly as my older sister and her friends played double dutch and where I found out I was "double handed") and the corner store where I occasionally stopped on my way home from school to buy bazooka gum and 10¢ water guns. Another aunt lived in a two story adorned with Africanist masks on Ralph between avenues A and B. Over the years, as it is with rituals, I had returned to visit Flatbush and Canarsie to visit family, wandering familiar routes. I never had cause to venture downtown.

Before Flatbush turns into Flatbush Avenue Extension, we end up on Schermerhorn and eventually at Hoyt Street. I am in downtown Brooklyn and this is the end of the line. I am told that "welfare" was once here, and that the line for services would snake around the building. I am told that the welfare building must have been

moved to another part of town. I would later discover that it is still there (the Brooklyn Food Stamp Department), but I am interested in the geographical refusals, the ways in which this center for social services cannot even be imagined in the place that Brooklyn had become and is in the process of becoming. And while I fear talking about it as though it's some provincial hamlet tucked away on the outskirts of Brooklyn, I can't deny that East Flatbush somehow seemed very far away.

In 2014 the online journal *Bklynr* published the article “Brooklyn’s Dollar Cabs Will Not Yield.”<sup>93</sup> “A ride up the length of Flatbush,” journalist Dino Grandoni writes, “offers a 30-minute summary of the vast expanse of Brooklyn. Going north through blue-collar Marine Park and Flatbush, restaurants and auto repair shops flanked by parking lots give way to buzzing stretches of storefronts and clusters of housing complexes.” Grandoni’s dollar cab itinerary moves through Prospect Park and Grand Army Plaza, Park Slope and Prospect Heights. “Then you’re surrounded by skyscrapers of downtown Brooklyn, which at this point puts you far closer to Manhattan— both literally and figuratively— than where you began.” From the author’s perspective, the Flatbush route forms a colorful thread between Brooklyn’s most “remote” and “tony” locations. Brooklyn comes to a crescendo once the dollar van reaches downtown and a different world seems to emerge as the dollar van gets closer to Manhattan. It is interesting...we seem to have taken the same route, but he thinks of inherently different worlds— I think of borders.

In Brooklyn there are many ways that borders are produced, mapped and lived. There are census tracts, more official neighborhood boundaries, and those understood

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<sup>93</sup> Dino Grandoni, “Brooklyn’s Dollar Vans Will Not Yield,” *Bklynr* 24, April 3, 2014, <http://bklynr.com/brooklyns-dollar-vans-will-not-yield/>

through mental maps, subterranean subway routes that mark the surfaces in unique ways and, above ground, streets lines that form threads through multiple spaces of “community.” Throughout this project, I have understood Flatbush and other thoroughfares are borders. As I reflect back on that ride down the length of Flatbush, I think of Soja’s explanation of borders as carrying “the softer limits of identity and community, desire and imagination.”<sup>94</sup> I think, too, about Simone Browne’s use of the ‘bordering’ as an “active verb,” as a “process.”<sup>95</sup> Here, I define borders not only as lines that bisect or signify the containment and separation of space but also as nodes where larger pathways of people, objects, capital, movement, and spatial imaginings converge and diverge. And I think of gentrification as a process of bordering, as a process of creating nodes, or points at which everyday lives, resources, mobilities, and desires around inhabiting or making place, emerge, intersect and depart from one another. This is not wholly ideological or discursive; this bordering process is made material through strategic speculation. As Neil Smith observes, since the 1990’s, gentrification has become “a crucial strategy for city governments in consort with private capital in cities around the world.”<sup>96</sup>

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“It’s nice over here now,” Rachel says, “They used to call Myrtle Ave, ‘Murder Ave.’” We pile into the second row of a dollar van headed towards East Flatbush. The driver closes the door behind us with a rope he has tied to the handle. As we speed down

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<sup>94</sup> Edward W. Soja, “Borders Unbound: Globalization, Regionalism, and the Postmetropolitan Transition,” *B/ordering Space* (2005): 33-46.

<sup>95</sup> Simone Browne, “Getting Carded”

<sup>96</sup> Neil Smith, “New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy,” *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 440

Flatbush we hit a bump, or maybe pot hole and neatly aligned bodies and bags tumble towards one another. We laugh. “You gonna bounce me pon Asha and mash har up. She’s a likkle bit.” Rachel says— raising her quiet voice almost loud enough for the van driver to hear.

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Within the context of gentrification, and the changing landscape of Brooklyn, I think back to my conversations with the TLC staff members, and the role of the community board in the seemingly participatory decision making process around granting approval for the operation of new vans and van lines. Flatbush connects several neighborhoods. What happens, I wonder, to dollar vans, other informal economies or black/immigrant/working-class geographies of mobility, when the “community” changes, when it is displaced or is slowly eroded through the emergence of new borders or the shifting of old ones? Tied to community districts, community boards (CBs) are a [unique feature] in the composition of Brooklyn, and of New York more generally speaking. In Brooklyn, there are 18 community boards that do not necessarily coincide with territories demarcated by neighborhood or street lines. Still, CBs have an advisory role in “assessing the needs of their neighborhoods.” More importantly CBs have an advisory role in matters of land use and zoning, which have been key to the ongoing ‘redevelopment’ of Brooklyn or, the state sanctioned re-ordering of Brooklyn’s urban life.<sup>97</sup> Because of this, CBs have become sites of contestation, where we find competing visions of the everyday

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<sup>97</sup> “About Community Boards: Responsibilities,” NYC Mayor’s Community Affairs Unit, accessed June 23, 2017, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/cau/html/cb/about.shtml>.

life of Brooklyn and the city's futures.<sup>98</sup> Community organizers have explicitly accused community boards of colluding with developers to displace working-class residents, and residents of color more specifically.

The question most germane to this chapter is: as gentrification creates new borders and points of disjuncture in Brooklyn, how does surveillance and police repression work in service of securing these borders? There is a wealth of news commentary citing the parallels between the changing landscape of Brooklyn and the increased police presence, albeit sensationalized. One article struck me as having a different register. In 2014 the Huffington Post published an article titled "Hipster Bistro Enrages Brooklyn Neighbors With Joke About Racist Police Tactic."<sup>99</sup> The article details an incident where a new eatery in Crown Heights, described in the article as "quickly gentrifying," posted a chalkboard outside of their restaurant that read "Stop and Frisk your Appetite! Breakfast Available All Day!" The sign also featured a clever chalk drawing of a cup that read "pomegranate iced tea" and "green iced tea." According to one of the managers of the bistro, "offended" customers put their signage "in a social context we didn't consider." At the level of popular culture it is virtually impossible, I think, to misunderstand what "stop and frisk" is, and how people of color have responded to it. Rather than cultural ignorance, I think that there is something different at work here, or what I have referred to as a different register. In addition to a real knowledge about who

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<sup>98</sup> Sarah Crean, "Turmoil At Community Board Reflects Intensity Of Change In Brooklyn," *Bklyner*, February 17, 2016, <http://ditmasparkcorner.com/blog/politics/turmoil-at-community-board-9-reflects-intensity-of-change-in-brooklyn/>.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander C. Kaufman, "Hipster Bistro Enrages Brooklyn Neighbors With Joke About Racist Police Tactic," *Huffington Post*, August 7, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/07/stop-frisk-sign\\_n\\_5659068.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/07/stop-frisk-sign_n_5659068.html).

and what gets policed, the sidewalk sign registers the banality of both police surveillance tactics and police violence.

The sentiment that heightened policing is part of the mundane was one that was reflected across my interviews with residents, community organizers, dollar cab drivers and passengers alike. Policing unruly mobilities at the borders seems to be part of the scaffolding of gentrification. For dollar van drivers and passengers traveling through border zones, routinized traffic stops rationalize heightened contact between informal mobility and the police. An organizer working as part of an organizing collective Equality for Flatbush, posted several Facebook photos documenting one such ‘routine’ stop along Flatbush, at the intersection of Church Avenue. On that particular day, there were approximately 20 officers stopping cars traveling southbound. Moving closer again to East Flatbush, some blocks away from Flatbush and Church, at Flatbush’s Triangle Junction, is yet another popular intersection where van drivers experience more frequent contact with the police. I think about my interview with Rachel, and how she describes seeing these traffic stops: *Like the [van] we were in, he doesn’t want to go up to the Junction, that’s a primary spot...there’s a huge police presence right there. We were there the other day and they had ‘em lined up, the police were stopping them and I guess checking insurance and licenses and all of that.*

I think about that image of the vans lined up, or the men lined up, or the passengers lined up, or some combination, the aesthetics of surveillance. This, I think, is somewhat related to what Katherine McKittrick refers to as “violent arithmetics”— the “inventory of numbers...that introduce blackness,” the ledgers, the “archive numbers,” and the “economic descriptors” that makes the violence of race knowable and factual and

makes anti-blackness common sense.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, there is a way in which the logic of the public police line-up (in this case of mostly black men, informal workers, and working-class black-migrant people) both translates and produces other types of transparent numerical data. What kind of diacritic is a line-up? The line or the line-up, which I think of as a geometry of power, also makes visible spatial boundaries, the organization of racialized, classed and otherwise grouped subjects and subjectivities marking what is in and out of place.

That these corridors where heightened surveillance occurs seem to overlap with the city's business improvement districts (BIDs) points again to the intersection between gentrification and policing in contemporary Brooklyn. According to Mpho Matsipa's work on the role of BIDs in urban renewal in Johannesburg, BIDs were shopped as attractive solutions to post-colonial governance because they were understood to be "the most common model throughout northern America and various other countries outside northern America" in approaching "the problems of urban decay and urban management."<sup>101</sup> For cities, BIDs functioned as a solution to the problems of 'urbicide.' In Brooklyn there are approximately 28 operational BIDs, with BIDs have been an important strategy for urban (re-)development, emerging in the 1990's in the U.S., and gaining currency by 2005. I do not want to suggest that all organizations and people involved with Brooklyn's BIDs are interested in the police-and-displace- to- develop model, or that police activity in Brooklyn is concentrated around these specific corridors. Quite the opposite—the policing of black and brown people in Brooklyn is pervasive.

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<sup>100</sup> Katherine McKittrick (2014) "Mathematics Black Life" *The Black Scholar* Vol 44 No 2 pp. 16-28

<sup>101</sup> Mpho Matsipa 2014 *The Order of Appearances: Urban Renewal in Johannesburg* Dissertation



But BIDs do represent a vested interest in private capital, property, and spatial management, and the geography of these districts undoubtedly impacts the way that public space is understood and practiced at the street level.

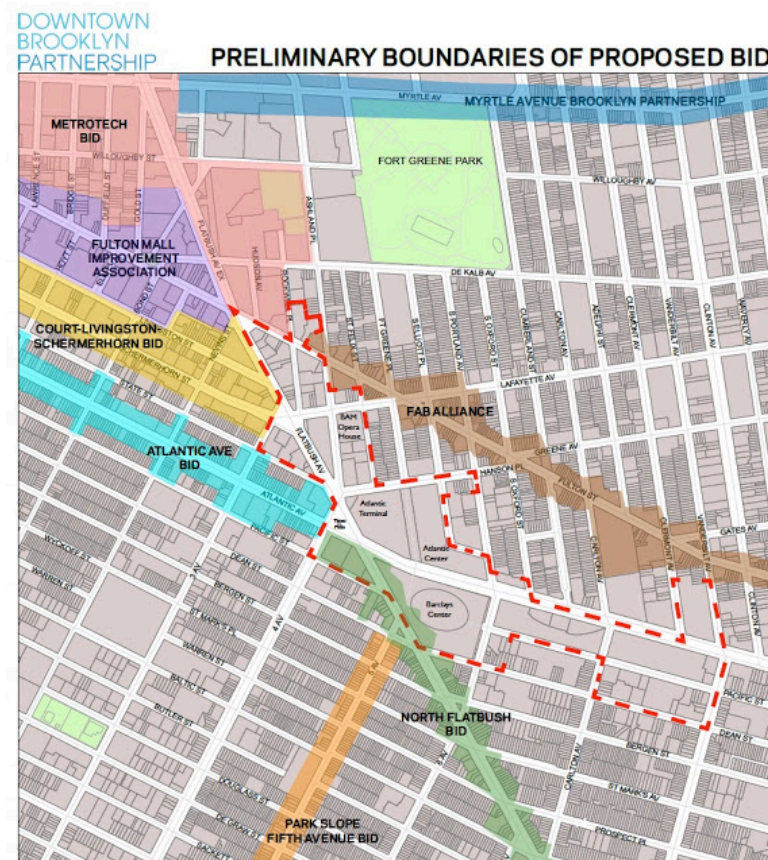


Image Credit: Proposed BID Boundaries, Atlantic Yards/Pacific Park Report <https://atlanticyardsreport.blogspot.com/2013/01/boosting-barclays-downtown-brooklyn.html>

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My uncle has been living in East Flatbush since the 1980's and has taken a dollar cab to the train station nearly everyday of his working commute. I asked him if he'd ever experienced an encounter with the police while in a dollar cab and he answered yes.

...It was a situation that made me kind of angry really, because this was an old man...I would say he's probably in his 70s I mean...and you know the cops stopped him...and they walked up the car you, you know...I mean...the one on my side had his gun. I could not see the...I could not see the whole point of it you know what I mean? And I looked at him in a very critical way and he spotted his light in my face and he said, "Look how this one is looking at me." So I looked away, you know, because I didn't want to provoke any sort of...you see what I mean? But I thought it was totally...you know the way they approached this old man, I thought it was totally unnecessary you know, with their hand on their gun...

I am again reminded of that idea of black luminosity as I envision the officer with his spotlight. "Look at how this one is looking at me." It was an encounter wholly designed to discipline not only the driver of the cab but the passenger as well.

Here, I think also about Sarah Sharma's "Taxis as Media," in which Sharma defines the taxi "as a medium that both alters and is implicated in the 'pace, pattern, and scale of social life' while it operates as a raced and classed form of affective labor under contemporary capital."<sup>102</sup> At the intersection of medium theory and labor studies, and enabled by a focus on two specific "interlocutors"— taxi drivers and business travelers in Toronto — Sharma thinks through the relationship between space, time, and cultures of labor. While in my project there are different relations of power between drivers and passengers (the typical dollar cab passenger does not translate neatly into the figure of 'the business traveler' as he is imagined in Sharma's work), I find the attention to (1)

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<sup>102</sup> Sarah Sharma Taxis as media: a temporal materialist reading of the taxi-cab *Social Identities* Vol. 14, No. 4, July 2008, 457-464 p.458

relations of culture and power in the space of the taxi and (2) interlocutors instructive. In the case of Brooklyn's informal taxi economies, because of his frequent presence, the police officer becomes another interlocutor, also changing the dynamics between culture and power, highlighting proximities between driver and passengers in terms of how they are racialized, and their movements disciplined.

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Matthew has organized a community meeting for this evening, an open forum to discuss and strategize around the harassment of van drivers by local police. He and I had met many times before. The first time I interviewed him we met in a small office of a building on W 24th between 6th and 7th.

I sit perched on a plastic folding chair, peering around a room flush with banners, bullhorns, posters and protest signs. Matthew eats a late lunch while I skim emails that are opened but answered. Between bites, with an admixture of fatigue and excitement, he tells me about a "demo" planned for that evening.

"So, tell me, what do you want to know?," Matthew asks.

"Well, we can start with... where it is you live in Brooklyn," I reply.

"I'm unfortunately displaced in this moment and live in Sunset Park... or stay in Sunset Park. I'm trying to get back to Flatbush, I just came from there this morning... You don't need to know my whole journey in New York cause that's a lot. I mean I started off in Brooklyn, I've lived in Jersey... I don't think I've officially ever had an address in Manhattan." He had lived mostly in Brooklyn for the past 12 years. "I've done subletting and lived with people because sometimes to be a political activist sometimes you don't have an address... But most of my legal addresses have been in Brooklyn." This, I think,

is a cartography of gentrification: a constellation of landings and stayings. Brightly lit clusters that, if you look closely enough, make manifest more apparent celestial forms like glass towers, protruding skylines and globular arenas.

From his position as an organizer and a displaced resident, he reflects on what he sees as connections between policing, heightened media narratives around sexual assault by dollar van drivers and realities of gentrification. For Matthew, all of these disciplining strategies work in tandem:

I feel like it's incredibly frequent. I got a call—I did a big flyering a couple days ago and got two calls within a day one when the cop— this has not ever happened — this just happened— where the driver while he was...being stopped right then and there. So, in my personal life, yes, I would say at the height of the crackdown, when it was really happening— it's still happening— we're not, you know— but my experience was it was weekly. It was almost sort of like, do you have enough time to prepare...there will probably be a stop. I've watched cops come — and it was probably an unregistered vehicle — and the cops break the actual window in the back trying to stop— he took his walkie-talkie and hit the back. And the driver— to their credit— got away. But that's— I feel like their kinda relentless. They're just *on* the drivers.

Actually there's a story out today, did you see? There's a story out today talking about sexual assault and dollar vans and— we're trying to figure out—it's a very small press that did it— but they put [the name of our collective] in the actual Tweet because we've been defending the drivers. And it's a typical tactic— they did that during OWS— they were like, 'there are sexual assaults happening— and there probably were. But not in some mass way [...]— One of the things that came to mind was like, it's important that it people are being sexually assaulted that they come forward and all of that kind of stuff— and it's good that this article was written— yes, rape culture is real— and there needs to be more articles written— particularly about, you know— for example, how many countless women are assaulted by the police everyday— in police custody— assaulted during their arrests— assaulted and then arrested— assaulted, and if they say something are arrested— I mean, that's pretty widespread— I mean this story goes back decades— you have to look at the calculation of why are we telling this story— why are we gathering information and evidence now that drivers are sexually assaulting women in this moment when gentrification has made it completely and totally clear that they are...under siege— and if they [dollar vans] could away today, they are folks that would be quite happy to not see one dollar van on Flatbush Ave whatsoever— So it's the timing of the story— I mean it's

okay for anyone to come forward— it’s just so interesting they do so “well most of the drivers are well behaved”— but now it’s the *precaution* that they use— telling women how to—I’m kind of like, wow, interesting, this is where you want to go? I mean, again, in light of what just happened with Eric Garner— like there’s a sister right now whose son’s leg was broken and she was sexually assaulted in her home and she was a domestic violence survivor, the police were coming to check on her case and they roughed her up and broke her child’s bed and sexually assaulted her and she’s now suing why aren’t we having more stories about that? She’s a Brooklyn resident. Where is that story you know?— We should talk about all kinds of stuff in rape culture, all the time, every single day — why is it so timely around the drivers?

That evening, I arrive at the public library early to help him set up. He hopes van and other taxi drivers will show up to the meeting— he’s been distributing flyers for days, and some have helped by publicizing the meeting via CB radio, but there is no centralized body through which drivers in Brooklyn are ‘organized.’ For Matthew, this is perhaps the biggest impediment to strategizing against what he refers to as “economic harassment,” in the form of excessive ticketing. There is also the where and when of organizing; it is evening, a busy time for commuters. Eventually people start trickling in; six drivers attend the meeting, most of them authorized van drivers permitted through the TLC. Some of them are also frustrated with the high level of ticketing. Some of them see ticketing as part of the life of the job. Other things on the agenda: what did everyone think about a potential “know-your-rights” campaign? On this, the group was more tepid. What about organizing around Commercial Drivers Licenses (CDLs) for all drivers? On this, I grow tepid, thinking about licensure as a major point of contact between mobile subjects and the state, and an instrument through which to enumerate citizen-subjects.<sup>103</sup> A different type of licensure would not suffice, I think to myself.

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<sup>103</sup> Cotten Seiler Republic of Drivers p. 65

Kingston, who was one of the earlier arrivals, began waxing poetic about the state of affairs in the dollar van industry, about how he's been involved in the business for a long time, about how it was unlikely that anything would change, about how there's only so much he can do. I thought back to my earlier conversations with Don about the split between the authorized van drivers and the "plastics," those who (for whatever reason) are not permitted through the city. It was true, at least from the perspective of some authorized drivers, that there was an economic advantage to the continued harassment and eventual eradication of un-permitted dollar cabs. It is the authorized drivers who have created what they call collectives in order to lease out their vehicles to newer drivers for exorbitant daily fees. Don referred to this as "catching a vic'." Others may call this labor exploitation. In this way, this informal mode of transit, and the economy created by the circulation of working-class people and capital, functioned very much as what some scholars articulate as an 'extension of the marketplace.' Part of the goal of this chapter is to illustrate how that market logic has been cultivated since the 1990s battles over legalization of dollar vans and anti-dollar van lobbying efforts by city transit unions and funders.

But it is also important to emphasize that, whether authorized or un-permitted dollar cab drivers have long improvised in relation to these varied instruments of surveillance and regulation. In the early 1990s van drivers had organized large scale protests along the Brooklyn Bridge, but there were less sensational modes of place making too. Communicating through low-fi technologies such as the CB radio, hidden transcripts, police evasion, and strategic moments of waiting are all modes through which the informal taxi economy is able to persist. New realities of gentrification have rendered

visible the city's edges, producing new borders for informal taxis to navigate and for police to protect. What informal taxi drivers are dealing with now is a more robust architecture of surveillance, one that surveils through both the material and the discursive. The branding of unruly mobilities, the utilization of seemingly mundane things like insurance to cultivate street insecurity and rationalize the informal economy, and the deployment of local police are crucial to the scaffolding of this broader structure. In response to these technologies of surveillance, though garnering tepid responses from some van drivers, community organizers have staged protests throughout the city, protesting on behalf of drivers.

At present, there are new and tenuous relationships of solidarity growing between community-led groups that fight gentrification and work with dollar van drivers and community organizers elsewhere in Brooklyn. In April of 2016 a resistance art collective, *Mi Casa No Es Su Casa: Illumination Against Gentrification* presented *F.O.H.! An Exhibit Against Gentrification*. Staged in Bushwick, the exhibition featured lighted signs that read “No Eviction Zone,” “Gentrification is the New Colonialism,” and “Derecho a Techo.” Along the walls of the exhibition space hung the banners of other community led anti-gentrification organizations, with slogans like “Brooklyn Is Not For Sale,” making the exhibition a space of solidarity building amongst multiple racialized and classed groups facing displacement and techniques of policing under gentrification. I include the exhibition here because it not only brings us back to Simone Browne’s work on black luminosity and racialized surveillance, but pushes us to think about what Browne alternatively refers to as “dark sousveillance”— an “imaginative place” from which one

resists racialized surveillance through “anti-surveillance, counter-veillance and other freedom practices.”<sup>104</sup>

In Browne’s formulation, “dark sousveillance speaks not only to observing those in authority” it is also a “reading praxis” for understanding the sorts of contemporary surveillance mechanisms that are so much a part of the plantation logics of the past.<sup>105</sup> An example of dark sousveillance, the lighted signs that comprised F.O.H.! provided alternative logics through which to read and re-imagine Brooklyn. The work of Mi Casa and the F.O.H.! exhibition— is about a creative looking back at the state. Through the use of dark sousveillance F.O.H! literally illuminates mechanisms of racialization, displacement and spatial control operating in the everyday life of the city. While the collective is primarily focused on documenting and resisting realities of gentrification in Bushwick, these new solidarities between Mi Casa and Flatbush-bred organizations suggest insurgent possibilities for Flatbush.

## **Conclusion**

A few months ago, I presented a small introduction to this work, discussing the nature of policing in Brooklyn’s informal economy. In response to my presentation, I was asked whether or not I had interviewed any police officers in the writing of this project. For me, this was as much a question of pragmatics (whose voices and perspectives were included and excluded, and how I made such determinations as a researcher) as it was about the ethical entanglements involved in doing the work of political ethnography. This is part of the argument and challenge that I am working through in this section of the

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<sup>104</sup> Simone Browne *Dark Matters* 21

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*



dissertation. In returning to that question here, I think not only about ethnographic approaches to the ‘field,’ but about how black urbanism, as a critical method, always involves the work of looking back at the state. I am struck by an image captured by one community organizer — not in the aftermath of any particular event but of a ‘routine’ traffic checkpoint— not only because the uniformed police replicas evoke a sort of house-of-mirrors, but also because of the absurd juxtaposition between the overwhelming presence of these officers, and the crisp blue and yellow sign above reading BEAUTY/DISCOUNT. In this chapter, in memory or in some other trace, the police were somehow always present. The very movement of black people through (urban) space provides a lens, a way of seeing and annotating practices and geographies of surveillance and policing in the city.



This chapter emerged from the lived experiences of my interlocutors, from the memories and archival traces that told of precarity, and from my own encounters as I traversed East/Flatbush almost daily. My goal in this part of the project was to shed light

on the very modes of governance that produce the spatial precarity of dollar cab drivers and the people who passenger them. In this endeavor, I explored the management of black mobilities through technologies of surveillance, and the production of the informal economy. I discussed not only the more transparent modes of surveillance, but mundane forms of management as well (the operationalization of risk and insurance, for example). I mapped the borders produced by expanding territories of gentrification, and think about how policing and gentrification work to create lines of demarcation that change how Brooklyn is experienced and who can move freely across the changing landscape. I also gesture towards the ways in which dollar cab drivers resist these geometries of power, and find ways to live and work. Finally, I close with new strategies for resistance through solidarity building, strategies that put the dollar cab economy in conversation with other black, im/migrant and informal labor rights groups and residents.

## Does She Even Exist?

“Did you come across any women drivers?”

“No... Well... I’ve heard of one. They call her ‘Chocolate,’ but I’ve never met her.”

“That’s so fascinating...Chocolate? She’s like this elusive figure. Does she even exist?”

I pause, marveling at the question.

I had heard about Chocolate from Don. As we sat in the Dunkin’ Donuts parking lot talking humorous interactions on the CB radio, he grinned, telling me about raucous jokes exchanged with Chocolate, and how she purred when she called him Lion.

Thinking back on this exchange, the question of whether or not she even exists is even more hilarious and provocative.

In so much of the material that I worked with for this project, black and brown women’s movements and labor guide me. Women definitely populate the dollar cab economy. And yet, dollar van drivers are almost always understood to be men. The court cases and newspaper clippings that I mined in “Babylon” mostly centered male drivers. There are archival glimpses of a singular woman figure here and there— an article referencing a woman pretending that she was just driving with family, but never confirming whether or not she was really the operator of the van. In one interview, a woman who has taken dollar vans on Flatbush since the 1990’s remembers one woman driver with an American accent. Women are frequently listed as owners of van companies, their names printed in small letters on co-op vehicles. But “Chocolate,” the woman driver, remains an ethnographic fiction, the stuff of folklore— I am forced to

imagine her. Still, her absence does more work than not, because it brings into sharp focus the production and performance of masculinities within this segment of informal labor. Even her invocation marks the jagged intersection between public space, black men and certain ways of thinking and talking about work. And I think this matters a great deal to the broader project of black urbanism as a way of thinking about how certain practices and spheres are articulated into broader narratives of space and place.

This chapter, then, is about gendered performances of informal labor. I did not conceptualize it as such. The original point of departure for the chapter came out of the fact that in most of my conversations, amongst drivers and passengers alike, people referred to the dollar cab economy as a *hustle*. Used always in the vernacular, the word repeated itself across nearly every conversation that I had with my interlocutors who lived in Flatbush, though it disappeared in my exchanges with planners and other regulatory representatives. It became a device that contained several possibilities— definitions of time, skill, urbanity, risk, the ordinary, “getting by” and perhaps most importantly “alternative interpretations of work.”<sup>106</sup> I also understood it as movement and motion, a way of articulating black urban mobility alongside moments of stillness and slowness. The way that hustling was invoked asked me to revisit what I understood as work— and how informal work, and hustling, ask a different set of questions than other studies of wage labor that are more economicist in nature. In contrast, I wanted to explore the idea that hustling, as an integral part of how cities are performed and lived in the everyday, is always about improvisation.

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<sup>106</sup> Tatiana Adeline Thieme, “The Hustle Economy: Informality, Uncertainty, and the Geographies of Getting By,” *Progress in Human Geography* (February 2017): (page # for “alternative interpretations of work”), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132517690039>

But the conversation about Chocolate— the question of whether or not she exists — reminded me that hustling is both a term and a way of working that is already gendered. It carries with it a lot of baggage. The way that hustling was invoked throughout my conversations signaled something different than in a great deal of contemporary academic literature in which the language of the hustle is either used as a way to talk about sex work, or used to talk about histories of black urban life in particularly fraught ways. Alternatively hustling is sometimes couched in studies of informality, precarity, and entrepreneurship, and harnessed by scare quotes. The literature on black ghettoization, blight, urban decay and deviance in the U.S. coming out of the 1960's — but persisting in different narrative forms for decades afterwards— is illustrative. This strand of ethnographic and archival research employed the term hustling in the context of studying black urban life (in the U.S.) but usually limited the definition of hustling to activity that is popularly deemed 'illicit' or 'deviant' (often theft, sex work and drug trafficking). My goal here is not to rehearse that literature in depth. Rather, I gesture towards it in order to note that while on its face that body of research seems to be about how poor/black people 'survive,' in moralizing these urban acts (sex work, trafficking and the like) these survivalist narratives often end up reproducing a certain discourse about black criminality and urban pathos that requires unthinking.

As Robin D.G. Kelley notes, progressive scholars attempted to write against that very discourse but often ended up reproducing and re-inscribing “monolithic interpretations of black culture” particularly as they pertained to black urban life and

poverty.<sup>107</sup> The original title of this chapter was “Hustling, and Other Hard Work.” It was borrowed from Bettylou Valentine’s eponymously titled ethnography of black ghetto life published in 1978, in part as a gesture towards that body of progressive scholarship described by Robin Kelley, and in part to connect to a genealogy of black women’s ethnography that has tried to write in and through the vernacular. The tone towards the urban poor and working-poor within the writing of these progressive scholars was certainly one of sympathy, but some of the language of dispossession, and consequently fraught definitions around hustling, remained. Within various studies that sought to detail black ghetto life, hustling was figured not as labor but as a result or perhaps a type of pestilence, part and parcel of those unruly geographies produced in the post-Fordist era. And, while women may have participated in informal circuits of exchange, the hustler was definitely black, male and poor. In 1998, even as he acknowledges the multiple connotations of the term hustle, one urban theorist defines the hustler as a “social predator,” separated from “that other social type of the ghetto called ‘the gorilla’” only by his trickster persona.<sup>108</sup> Put another way, hustling was a trope used to craft a vision of a tortured city and deviant black masculinity.

The approach to hustling shifts in more contemporary scholarship, but is still underwritten by familiar discourses. In Lester Spence’s retrospective, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*, the author looks at hustling as an ethos that emerged in the context of the fiscal crises of the 1970’s and which hardened during the 1990’s, an ethos that has a direct relationship to what he calls the neoliberal turn. We

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<sup>107</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997)

<sup>108</sup> Loïc Wacquant Inside the Zone: The Social Art of the Hustler in the Black American Ghetto p.4

might think of hustling here as a “structure of feeling,” which I understand to mean “social experiences in solution” or the “culture of a particular moment.”<sup>109</sup> Spence argues that black politicians and political leaders espousing the rhetoric of hustling, entrepreneurship and a certain language around self-sufficiency is both a failure of the black political imagination and a triumph of neoliberalism.<sup>110</sup> “Black families,” according to Spence, “forced to hustle hard are forced to be responsible for every aspect of their life while the resources required to do so in the first place are withheld from them.”<sup>111</sup> For Spence, the problems with neoliberal logic are many, but in the context of black people living under structural deprivation, the mobilization of entrepreneurship and hustling as a political tool is dangerous at worst and impoverished at best. According to Spence, the valorization of the perpetually laboring figure—or the entrepreneur—is actually neoliberalism at work. Thus, hustling is market logic, market time. This is true. But there’s something there in his invocation of “black families,” ...

There is, of course, fruitful scholarship on women and informal labor, gender and livelihoods, and gendered mobilities too broad in scope to cover here. But this gendering of ‘the hustle’ as masculine persists across academic and popular life. As a requiem, and point of connection, I note that Eric Garner’s death occurred in Staten Island as I was conducting my fieldwork, and at least a year before I even started conceptualizing how I would write this chapter. This loss of life intervened on my thinking and this work. Eric Garner was murdered by officers of the NYPD after those officers approached him on

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<sup>109</sup> See also: Jenny Bourne Taylor, *Structure of Feeling*, Blackwell reference

<sup>110</sup> See also: Arthur Bloustein and Geoffrey Faux 1972 *Star-spangled Hustle*

<sup>111</sup> Lester Spence, *Knocking the Hustle*, p.116

suspicion of selling loose cigarettes, or “loosies” (hustling). He told the officers that he was tired of their continued harassment and, because he did so, he was tackled to the ground and placed in a chokehold that caused a loss of consciousness and eventually his premature death. Video recordings of his death were circulated en masse and the words that he uttered as he died— “I can’t breathe”— repeated en stereo. In a perverse manifestation of what Elizabeth Grosz calls “bodies-cities,” New York agreed to pay the family of Eric Garner \$5.9 million.<sup>112</sup> His death was a result of his blackness, maleness and type of work, all of which marked him as being out of place.

Conceptually, this chapter has three points of departure. The first, absences and archetypes— from the imagined absence of women from the everyday work of driving, to the absolute death of Eric Garner as a result of perpetual criminalization and state sponsored police violence. The second point of departure is hustling; as a vernacular way of speaking and doing work, hustling and its relationship to black masculinities remains central to how I approach the narratives contained in this chapter. In an earlier iteration of this chapter I leaned on Tatiana Thieme’s approach on hustling. Defining hustling as an “embodied” and “cultural economic practice” and a “form of ‘traveling theory’,” Thieme’s project complicates and troubles academic discourses on the hustle in ways that I find productive.<sup>113</sup> The third point of departure comes from the idea that, because hustling is a gendered performance of labor, both the streets in which they operate and the space of the taxi can be understood as performance geographies. I draw on Sonjah Stanley Niaah’s use of the term performance geography, which she uses “to refer to a

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<sup>112</sup> See [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/nyregion/fatal-police-encounters-in-new-york-city.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/nyregion/fatal-police-encounters-in-new-york-city.html?_r=0)

<sup>113</sup> Thieme “The Hustle Economy” p.11



mapping of the material and spatial conditions of performance: entertainment and ritual in specific sites/venues, types and systems of use, politics of their location in relation to other sites and other practices [...]” as well as the relationality of various actors within the space of performance.<sup>114</sup> Marking moments of the absence of women in conceptions of informal labor, and performances of masculinity within the informal economy, I get at the question that prompted this chapter— does she even exist?

In the first section I draw on AbdouMaliq Simone’s formulation of “people as infrastructure.” I consider infrastructures to be both material (transparent and seeable) and discursive, produced by ways of knowing and inhabiting Brooklyn’s formal and informal geographies. I argue that gender binaries and maleness form an integral part of the foundation of the infrastructure of this informal economy. Following this, I turn to performances of masculinity, working through the lens of ‘rudeness.’ In the 1960’s and the 1970’s the pop cultural figure of the ‘rude bwoy’ emerges. He was very much a product of a ghetto culture, an articulation of how the ghetto makes culture rather than just existing as a space void of cultural logics. Though rudeness takes on new meaning in the language of and style of 1990’s dancehall music, it signals badness, flamboyant masculinity and toughness. Embedded in the logics of Rastafarianism, it also signals a refusal to be governed. In this chapter, I look at instances of how rudeness is performed by dollar cab drivers in the everyday. In the third section of this chapter I offer a counter to the discussion of rudeness by touching briefly on discourses of entrepreneurship, respectability and the politics of formality. This section hearkens back to the previous

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<sup>114</sup> Sonjah Stanley Niaah Performance Geographies from Slave Ship to Ghetto Space and Culture Vol 11, Issue 4, pp. 343 - 360 First published date: May-08-2008 10.1177/1206331207308334

chapter, in which I discussed how rhetorics of free-enterprise and republicanism merged with representations of respectable ‘family-oriented’ men, and how these rhetorics were mobilized in advocating for the formalization of the dollar cab industry. In this section, I illustrate briefly how masculinity remains deeply enmeshed in how some drivers understand and articulate entrepreneurship. In the final section, I return to the question that titles this chapter about the where of women.

### **Infrastructure**

I came of age listening to Mos Def and Talib Kweli’s “Definition.” For me, it was a sort of Brooklyn anthem. From Mos Def’s slow lead in with a patois inflected “lord, lord have mercy,” to the “one, two, threee” (which I would later learn is a sample of Boogie Down Production’s “The P is Free”) it felt like a uniquely Brooklyn sound, if there was such a thing. In the music video for the late 90’s track, Def and Kweli cruise Flatbush Avenue in a dollar van, Kweli using the CB radio as his mic and playing doorman/cash collector, holding a stack of bills in his hand as passengers— from unknowing Brooklyn residents to Common and Dead Prez— climb in and out of the vehicle. DJ Hi-Tek plays driver and Mos Def rides shotgun. The van, adorned with black, red, green and yellow flags is named the ‘Black Star Line,’ the title of the duo’s eponymously named album, and a clear reference not only to the Marcus Garvey steamship project but to a particular politics around blackness and entrepreneurship that I return to later. Critics and reviewers interpret the song as a call for unity and a departure from perceptions of violence in hip-hop music. For me, the dollar van was such an apt vehicle for the message because, to a

certain extent, both lyrically and visually, ‘Definition’ was about the everyday of black life in Brooklyn and the hustle— as a type of city-ness.

As the street-bound Black Star Line swerves through traffic on Flatbush collecting fares, scenes of Brooklyn’s everyday street life are interspersed with those of Mos Def and Talib Kweli emceeing. As Def and Kweli imagined it, this was the Brooklyn of “murals of Biggie” from “the townhouse to the tenement.” The bodegas that took WIC checks and sold 50¢ blunts, even the street corners themselves, were as much a part of the city as Grand Army and Prospect Park. The young girls playing hand games and boys on bikes, the police, folks selling weed— in this song and visual companion— all came together to make Brooklyn. ‘Definition’ was a counter-cartography, an alternative map of Brooklyn’s infrastructure.

Infrastructure is a framing that I borrow from AbdouMaliq Simone’s work in Johannesburg on “*people as infrastructure*, which emphasizes economic collaboration among residents seemingly marginalized from and immiserated by urban life.” As Simone explains:

Infrastructure is commonly understood in physical terms, as reticulated systems of highways, pipes, wires, or cables. These modes of provisioning and articulation are viewed as making the city productive, reproducing it, and positioning its residents, territories, and resources in specific ensembles where the energies of individuals can be most efficiently deployed and accounted for. [...] By contrast, I wish to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people’s activities in the city. African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used. These intersections, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure—a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> AbdouMaliq Simone *People as Infrastructure* Public Culture 16(3) 407

I draw on Simone’s framing here not to suggest that the dollar cab drivers themselves act as infrastructure to support the city— though I think that there is room for that argument as well. Rather, I draw on the idea of people as infrastructure to put forth the claim that hustling works in part through collaboration (economic and otherwise), flexibility and improvisation amongst working-class and working-poor people. As such, the social and economic exchanges created around and within the cab, along with the cab as a unique object, together function to produce a sort of infrastructure that sustains not just the black/immigrant informal economy, but East Flatbush itself. People-as-infrastructure is resilient to the modes of urban governance previously discussed because it is precisely the strictures of urban planning and management that require “complex engagements” and “modes of connection” between people that are continually pushed to the periphery of the city (both rhetorically and in the material sense).

This is, in part, what ‘Definition’ is about. But I hail ‘Definition’ as a re/presentation of the dollar cab economy because it also begs the question that opened this chapter, the question of whether or not ‘she’ exists. Looking back at ‘Definition,’ as a re/presentation of black urban life in Brooklyn, it very much illustrated the ways in which the dollar cab economy was built around men’s interactions and homosocial spaces. In the video, women are present only as passengers and onlookers, sometimes featured holding babies. It is mostly men who fill the frame. This plays out in the reality of this informal geography as well. In the case of Brooklyn’s dollar cab economy, each nodal point and interstitial exchange does the work of gendering not only this type of labor but the city’s street life itself. In a previous chapter, I discussed the practice of waiting, the

makeshift van hubs that pop up in parking lots or around shopping malls or along side streets, the discursive space created via the CB radio where information and stories are exchanged, and spaces of organization where van drivers came together to resist city regulations



and erasures. While women are overrepresented in other forms of street work, typically, the sites that I map in this project have been homogeneous, very masculinized spaces. Women are mostly absent from these sites, except for in the case of radio where we might show up as the subject of discussion— or in the case of “Chocolate”— as an interlocutor in these conversations that position her in ways that ask her to perform, to inhabit what I discuss elsewhere as rudeness, even as they allow for a bit of levity or pleasure or connection in what may otherwise be a somewhat isolating form of labor.

This idea of an infrastructure built around masculinities is not just based on the connections formed by the overwhelming representation of men at these impromptu hubs, or in this labor sector. Infrastructures of masculinity are also built upon the exchanges between mostly male drivers with women and with other men inside of the space of the dollar cab. I consider here my meeting with Kingston. He has been van driving since 1992. He’s sort of...everywhere. That’s a clumsy way to put it I guess. But, what I mean is, whenever a journalist or an academic needs a photo and a caption about hard working Caribbeans and dollar vans, he’s there with a quote about how some drivers are reckless and give everyone a bad name, a kind of self-appointed spokesperson. He drives the Flatbush route, in a van adorned with Red Stripe logos and Jamaican flags. He won’t talk about the economics of the thing, his income, but what he will say is that he’s an entrepreneur — an owner-operator. This means that he leases out vans to other drivers who can’t immediately afford to front the cash for their own vehicle. He will say that he makes extra money from allowing local businesses to purchase ad space on his van — ad wraps. He makes extra money also from doing construction work on the side. He will say that he works harder for himself.

He tells me all of this as I ride along in the passenger side of his van, the side where he usually doesn't let passengers sit unless they are women, the passenger side where the handle of the door is deliberately disabled. Since livery drivers are often vulnerable to acts of violence (in which I include economic theft, physical harm and other types of harassment) I assume that the door handle also has something to do with his own sense of safety and precarity. Occupying this passenger seat, I think about how I am weighing my own sense of security against his own. This is my consciousness of gender, as we make an impromptu stop and I must wait for him to open the door with the deliberately disabled handle.<sup>116</sup> Riding alongside Kingston made me acutely aware of the gendered politics not only of who typically owns and operates the vehicles, but where certain passengers are allowed to sit and what sorts of bodies and people are allowed to occupy these informal spaces at all. According to Kingston, many drivers will not passenger men who they read, in the moment of passing and assessing people as potential passengers, as "faggots." He tells me that he "doesn't discriminate" as long as your money is green. (He tells me a lot of things and then tells me that he wouldn't be saying half of it if I were a white woman.) Thinking of 'people as infrastructure,' reminds us that exclusions and violences that are part of the social become enclosures of a different sort. While dollar vans may be a site where black people meet across class strata, where black people made the city more accessible in an era where city administrators had foreclosed on certain neighborhoods, they operate in the opposite way for the non-normative, including the differently abled (there are no boarding mechanisms for wheelchairs for example).

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Here I reference June Jordan Report from the Bahamas

**Rudeness**

I'm sitting in the second row of a passenger van headed back to my aunt's in East

Flatbush gazing out the window, watching the streets go by, when I hear the words:

It's jus a breast ting  
 Leftside love the breast ting  
 It's all about the breast ting  
 See I love the breast ting

I love breast  
 I love breeeast  
 Everyday of my life I love breast  
 When I wake up in di morning  
 My mouth is on the breast  
 Everyday of my life I love breast

Mi seh mi love breast— straight  
 Suck breast —straight  
 Squeeze nipple— straight  
 Hickey di titti —straight...

It isn't that I'm particularly genteel, that I don't have an appreciation for the vulgar, or for bad music, but there is something about the song and the volume and the space that makes me wonder if they see me at all, or if they give a shit. Brow furrowed, I am stuck between incredulity, wanting them to play something else, wanting them to play nothing at all, and thinking that the melody of the refrain sounds oddly familiar. (Turns out, it's a dancehall cover of a pentecostal hymn that I used to sing in my grandmother's church when I was younger— "I love breast" sung to the tune of "I Am Blessed.") Instead the driver turns up the volume, laughing with his two companions one of whom rides shotgun and the other who sits front row, hovering in the space between the two seats, leaning in to hear the raucous lyrics. They looked young, all three of them. Every once in



a while they break from their front seat dancehall to collect money from each new passenger. *A big tune dat*, the driver says jokingly. *Mi nah really rate it*, says the doorman.

I open with this memory of my first encounter with Leftside's "I Love Breast" as a point of entry into a broader discussion about rudeness, and "slackness," and performances of masculinity on the road. Before I move any further, it may be useful to explain how I am thinking of rudeness. In many ways, rudeness marked that post-colonial 'moment,' by some accounts, popularized by Bob Marley's "Rude Boy" in 1966. In various readings of rude bwoy culture, the rude bwoy is this sort of angry, ungovernable, part out-law, part- folk hero, pop- cultural figure born out of the violent and alienating conditions of post-colonial ghetto life.<sup>117</sup> In this work, I am not so much interested in imagining dollar cab drivers as the rude bwoy's of Brooklyn's streets, or arguing that they identify with rudeness. Thus, I turn away from bifurcated readings of rudeness as either political or a representation of post-colonial gangster masculinity. But there are connections, and I do think that the history and style of rudeness matters to how I am reading gendered performances of masculinity in Brooklyn's present. Rudeness is often staged in the style of driving, the attitude and the performances of the driver within the vehicle. Here, I turn towards David Scott's reading of the self-fashioning of rudeness, the self-cultivation of rudeness, which I find particularly instructive.<sup>118</sup>

For Scott, the "practice of self-fashioning entails the cultivation of, for example, a certain gait [...], a certain deportment, a certain way of holding and moving the body through (urban) space *such that* the body becomes [...] an embodiment of menace, threat,

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<sup>117</sup> David Scott "Fanonion Futures" in *Refashioning Futures*

<sup>118</sup> David Scott "Fanonion Futures" in *Refashioning Futures*

and imminent violence.”<sup>119</sup> While I wouldn’t say that the sorts of performances that I saw on the road constitute what Scott describes as “an ethical practice of freedom,” there are certainly instances where the performance of gangsterism is reminiscent of the rude bwoy plays out in such a way that it seems intended to “constitute a site of internal *danger* to the norms of bourgeois-liberal civility.”<sup>120</sup> These performances are often paired with other signs and symbols— flags, music— performances of something akin to Rastafarianism. Vinson Cunningham, “Fieldnotes from Gentrified Places: Home to Flatbush” offers a hilarious illustration of this.<sup>121</sup> Cunningham writes:

A while back, call it a month or so ago, two, my fiancée and I found ourselves hurtling down Flatbush Avenue — that wide vein running barely interrupted under the skin of Brooklyn: former Native American footpath, former Dutch farming road, former Revolutionary War mini-theatre — in the middle row of a dollar van. These vans, in case you’ve never experienced the mingled pleasure and terror of a ride, shuttle largely unmarked up and down the borough, made conspicuous only by the intrusive triads of their horns, honked incessantly, and the broad gleam of their grills...

We’re in this van, and the driver’s got a big borderless beard and his locks bagged up in a knit hat, and in the air of the van hangs the pleasantly relentless smell of weed. Every thirty seconds or so the driver turns his pointer and his middle finger into a gun and he shoots it skyward in silent time with the music. At some point, halfway home, maybe, he gets a thinly coded tip through the staticky dispatch radio that, like a sign of shared worry, adorns the front panel of each of these vans.

“Red and blue,” says the voice through the radio. “Red and blue down Flatbush.” The driver turns serious, lowers the music, cuts out the pantomimed gunplay. He turns his head halfway around.

“Everybody ‘pon de truck,” he says in his best announcer’s voice. “Ev-er-y-bo-dy ‘pon de truck: If dem pull us over, this” — this two-dollar, pot-perfumed ride — “is a church trip. You hear me? This. Is. A. Church. Trip.”

With this the music rises again and the gun rematerializes and the driver veers warned but wild down Flatbush towards home.

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<sup>119</sup> David Scott p. 212

<sup>120</sup> Ibid p. 214

<sup>121</sup> Vinson Cunningham 2015 FIELD NOTES FROM GENTRIFIED PLACES: HOME TO FLATBUSH Internet Tendency <https://www.mcswceneys.net/articles/home-to-flatbush> last accessed April 4, 2017

I include Vinson Cunningham's "Fieldnotes" here precisely because it annotates with such levity the many registers of performance happening along Brooklyn's streets and in its everyday life. When I first read Cunningham's "report from the field," I laugh, imagining the pantomimed gunplay, the tam and the weed. If the current disciplinary system requires its subjects to be "responsibilized,"<sup>122</sup> then everything about the driver's dancing and finger gun, weed smoking and swerving suggests a refusal.

Instead of being conformist, the driver's directive to his passengers, the invocation of the church trip is subversive and performative on multiple levels. Of course, it is most directly related to the fact that this is an unlicensed taxi, and church vans are differently governed. It is a practical deception. On the other hand, the driver deploys the character of the churchgoer intentionally—it is the most readily available, non-threatening and respectable version of blackness he can think of. This is not an unusual tactic; I interviewed a former driver who told me that whenever he was pulled over by the police he would simply tell the police officer that everyone in the cab was his family. They were all black after all so he could exploit the hypervisibility of Black bodies. In this way, whether calling upon the family or the church group, they use the state's own typologies as a possible strategy for self-preservation. But, in the case of Church Trip (the name that Cunningham gives to his driver) I remain most interested in the performance of masculinity through rudeness and gangsterism, a performance replete with all of the necessary attendant props (most recognizably guns, drugs and loud music). This,

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<sup>122</sup> See Scott's discussion of Marley's music on p 216

combined with speed, produces the “mingled pleasure and terror of the ride,” that embodiment of threat and danger that Scott describes.

As Scott argues, “Ruud bwai self-fashioning constitutes a practice of the self by means of which the (typically) young, working-class male refuses [...] to be a ‘docile’ body available to be worked over by capital, to be worked over by the police.”<sup>123</sup> Whether or not a Driva identifies as Rastafarian or rude, we still find instances of the anti-corporatist stance of Scott’s “ruud bwai.” In my conversation with Matthew he remembers *one time—this one young brother* [a van driver]— *he was talking back to somebody and I was like ‘you know brother, this is about professionalism’— and he was like, am I sitting at a desk? Am I in [a] office? I don’t work in an office, so what are you talking about being professional?* In addition to these social interactions, the anti-\_\_\_\_\_ stance, the embodiment of menace, and the performance of automobility also come together in the style of driving. I am drawing on definitions of automobility offered by Cotten Seiler and John Urry who, in separate works, define automobility as “the major item of individual consumption after housing which provides status to its owner/user through its sign-values (such as speed, security, safety, sexual desire, career success, freedom, family, masculinity),” “a source of freedom, the ‘freedom of the road’ and a “technology of the self.”<sup>124</sup>

An illustration: as Kingston and I are headed to downtown Brooklyn via Flatbush Avenue, another driver skirts in front of us, cutting us off to pick up a passenger in a bus zone (not a legal maneuver), quickly ducking back into traffic with smoothness and ease.

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<sup>123</sup> David Scott Refashioning Futures p.214

<sup>124</sup> Cotten Seiler, Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Kindle Edition; John Urry The 'System' of Automobility Theory Culture Society 2004 21: 25 DOI: 10.1177/026327640404046059

Leaning forward on the wheel the other driver swerves in and out of two narrow lanes. Kingston chuckles to himself and shakes his head, managing to pull alongside the swerving van. The driver slows just long enough to chat through the open window. They seemed familiar with one another, Kingston and Swerving Van. Through his window Kingston warns the other driver that TLC (the Taxi and Limousine Commission) is out ticketing that day. “FUCK the TLC!” the Swerving Driver replies before speeding off. There was an amazing timbre to his voice, so much emphasis on the word ‘fuck’ it almost felt like reverb. Beyond his language, the swerving and the way that he hovers over the steering wheel combines as a performative gesture, a moment of refusal—in this case the refusal as Scott articulates it “to be worked over by the police.”

This flamboyance and speed is what most of the people I interviewed, and with whom I traveled, would call recklessness or hustling. As a style, hustling looks differently based on its spatial context and the nature of the work, but recklessness is one way that masculinity is both performed and articulated in the context of the informal taxi economy. I remember traveling with Marcia from her quiet treelined street to Utica and Avenue D one morning on her way to work. Though mindful of the time, she nevertheless let a few cabs and vans pass. Getting in and out of a van was at times a hassle, according to Marcia, and she preferred to take dollar cabs (the four-door sedans) whenever possible. We had been waiting only a few minutes when I see a white dollar van make a u-turn into oncoming traffic to pick up on our corner. As the van turns, the driver simultaneously opens the sliding passenger door with a rope affixed to the door handle as he slows to a stop to pick up a fare. In the moment, I am struck by the deftness of the maneuver, the improvisational nature both in fabricating a makeshift mechanized door

using a rope in order to shuffle passengers in and out more efficiently (something that I had seen in other instances but this one mirrored the manual door lever of other types of buses), and by the driver's instant change of route. "Oh my looord," Marcia says. "No let him go," she tells me while gently grabbing my arm, "That's why I don't like to take them...they're really reckless."

I remember a conversation with Lisette, in which she links recklessness and hustling. She is a nanny from Trinidad and she works in Brooklyn. She takes dollar cabs because they are familiar, efficient and more social than other forms of transport though she is wary of dollar vans ... *The vans, basically they have no regard for anyone. They cut you off at any point in time and they drive really, really crazy— I'm serious [...]...Cause what they do is they hustle, that's how they make their living. So by getting the passengers, more passengers[...] it's about the money, it's about the dollars basically.* What Lisette and others call recklessness is not driven by a sheer impulsiveness, there is a logic and performance behind it. Most passengers take dollar vans because they are faster, and unlike other taxi systems where distance traveled might translate into income, for the drivers the pace and ability to pick up passengers wherever he sees them translates directly into more cash. In an interview with Harris, who once drove dollar vans in Queens, and now passengers them in Brooklyn, he likened the vans to Haiti's tap-taps. Tap-tap, he said, means "quick-quick." But there is also a way that recklessness and hustling isn't just practical— picking up as many passengers as possible— it is a style, "a way of moving through (urban) space," a way of occupying the city, it is rude.

## **Entrepreneurship**

In this section, I shift from everyday performances of masculinity and rudeness to a brief discussion on the discursive work of entrepreneurship. In both academic and popular discourse entrepreneurship has been a popular lens for understanding and writing black-migrant informal economies and flexible practices of accumulation. It is generally positioned as opposite to hustling. I think this has to do with the fact that, as AbdouMaliq Simone notes, the language of entrepreneurship and informality (when used as substitute or proxy for the vernacular hustle) can serve as a ‘normalizing’ strategy.<sup>125</sup> In academic discourse, the language of entrepreneurship serves to bring certain types of work into the broader conversation around labor. Building on the scholarship of Ash Amin, Ananya Roy also points out the ways in which fraught “visions” of world-class urban futures, “hinge on the trope and promise of entrepreneurialism.”<sup>126</sup> As an example, we see this visioning through entrepreneurialism in the expansion of Brooklyn’s BIDs, which I mention in the previous chapter. I remain ambivalent about framing black-migrant labor through the language of entrepreneurship because, as Simone observes, in addition to its normalizing tendencies it can also end up ‘oversimplifying’ both the problematic logics that are at work at the level of discourse as well as what is experienced in the everyday.<sup>127</sup> Studies that valorize the figure of the “ethnic entrepreneur,” for example, can end up reproducing what Paul Gilroy describes as “neoliberal habits and

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<sup>125</sup> <sup>125</sup> AbdouMaliq Simone 2011 The ineligible majority: Urbanizing the postcolony in Africa and Southeast Asia *GeoForum* 42(3) pgs. 266-270 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.03.011>

<sup>126</sup> Ananya Roy, “Spectral Futures,” *CITY*, 2013 VOL. 17, NO. 4, 493–497, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2013.812351> p.494

<sup>127</sup> AbdouMaliq Simone 2011 The ineligible majority: Urbanizing the postcolony in Africa and Southeast Asia *GeoForum* 42(3) pgs. 266-270 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.03.011>

styles of thought that operate spontaneously as a kind of common sense”<sup>128</sup> even as they may intend otherwise. In my travels and conversations about dollar cab economies, I found that the language of entrepreneurship presented itself in some interesting ways that I gesture towards here.

As I discuss in the previous chapter, during the legal struggles of the 1990’s, in order to legitimate the work of van drivers, neoliberal rhetorics of self-sufficiency, ‘free enterprise,’ and individualism (entrepreneurship), were paired with stories and images of vulnerable women being shepherded by responsible, hard working men. If I think about ‘the woman question,’ entrepreneurship and the dollar cab industry, the reality is that women are very much a part of the dollar van industry at the organizational level. Looking at directories that list registered dollar van drivers, many van companies are registered under the names of women, which suggests that perhaps at the level of funding, but certainly at the level of record and data keeping, women have an important role. A focus on discourses of entrepreneurship sheds light on the absencing of women from earlier efforts to formalize the industry. Further, an attention to the discourse of entrepreneurship in the present reveals that it persists as a legitimating logic. The hysterical descriptions of dollar vans and their drivers as rapacious, reflective of perverse ideas around black masculinity and deviance, are often countered with conversations around entrepreneurship and black respectability. The figureheads of the legal van industry are positioned as the anti-thesis of the out-law rude bwoy. In what remains of this section, I offer some thoughts on the tenuous linkages between masculinist ideals

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<sup>128</sup> Paul Gilroy ... We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under ...Fragments for a History of Black Vernacular Neoliberalism *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics* 80, no. 80 (2013): 23-38. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed June 30, 2017).



embedded in the language of Caribbean entrepreneurship and the politics of black respectability.

I found that in some conversations, there were marked differences in terms of how drivers framed themselves in relation to their work— either as entrepreneurs or hustlers. There were overlaps of course, moments where people described themselves as both entrepreneurs and hustlers, but there were different things bound up in the idea of entrepreneurship: ideas around race, the middle-class, gender, a sense of respectability politics and ideas around discipline. An illustration: It is downtime and Kingston and I have stopped at the Dunkin Donuts where we meet a friend, an older man, Mr. Ashby. By way of introduction, Kingston tells me that Mr. Ashby is the right person to know and tells Mr. Ashby that I am a researcher, that I am talking to many van drivers. Mr. Ashby asks me why I am studying dollar vans at all and whether I think they (meaning the drivers) should be happy with the pennies that they get from customers. I think he is suggesting on some level that I am romanticizing the work that they do. What, he asks me with an air that I can only describe as smugness, do I know about Marcus Garvey, and do I know that there is a black-owned bank in Brooklyn by the name of Carver, and do I bank there?

On the one hand, I found his questioning to be a generative form of refusal. Eve Tuck has pointed out, and I think rightly so, that “much of social science research has been concerned with documenting damage, or empirically substantiating the oppression and pain of Native communities, urban communities, and other disenfranchised communities.” In this case it would be narrative rehearsals around Black ghettoization and survival. Tuck argues that, while well intentioned research/ers invite the subaltern to

speak, they are often only invited to speak their pain.<sup>129</sup> Too, those who occupy the “predicament” of the subaltern are not often invited to speak from a space of resistance or pride or any other affect. Mr. Ashby was pushing me to think about why working poor people were and are at the center of my research, rather than others (the middle-class or extraordinary for example). And I was often met with such skepticism. But there was a way in which his questioning also reflected a deep investment in histories and rhetorics of property and possession. It is also worth noting that both Kingston and Mr. Ashby had been involved in the early legal battles against the city, the very court cases that would ultimately segment the dollar vans into two industries— a ‘shadow’ industry and a ‘legitimate’ one. Their attitudes around entrepreneurship were very similar to the ones that had been instrumentalized in those earlier struggles. I later find that, like Kingston, Mr. Ashby has a small fleet of his own that he leases to others, and that he works part-time as a registered nurse. So he does not occupy the same class strata as many others who work in the industry or are just gaining a foothold in it. But it is Mr. Ashby’s invocation of Garvey that is perhaps most revealing, if only because, as Michelle Ann Stephens’s notes in her work, Garvey’s sense of black entrepreneurship was very much bound up in the twinned discourses of masculinity and empire.<sup>130</sup> This was not the first time that I’d seen a Garveyite politics of entrepreneurship— I draw on a fictive performance of the Black Star Line in Mos Def and Talib Kweli’s ‘Definition’ earlier in this chapter.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid p. 226

<sup>130</sup> Michelle Ann Stephens 2005 *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States 1914-1962*

But I also want to note that there is a lot of messiness in the ordinary. My encounter with Everill is illustrative: I am standing on Eastern Parkway. The rain makes everything feel slow, almost sleepy, so I make my way to a van. As I hop in the cab, the driver asks me to put my wet umbrella on a piece of cardboard that he's placed on the ground. I sit in the row just behind him, perched next to the window, reading the posters tacked to the walls of the mini bus. "Prayer for Obama." "God is Our Pilot." I listen to the hum of the CB punctuated by "good mornings" and "hellos" as others board and find their seats. Eventually, once the van is nearly full, we make our way towards Kings Plaza. Traffic is light and we reach the mall quickly. Nearly everyone has gotten off at this point but I decide to take the return trip. Beres Hammond is playing in the background, and I notice a cross hanging from the rearview. The driver, Everill, notices that I haven't gotten off. "Wha happ'n to you?" he asks me, curious as to why I didn't exit with everyone else. "Nothing," I say, before I explain that I am a researcher, that I've been interviewing dollar cab drivers and so on. He responds with a sound that is the equivalent of the Jamaican "seen," something between an affirmation and an acknowledgment. Then, with a hint of skepticism, "So you want to see good drivers... and bad drivers?"

I can tell by his skepticism that this is a refrain that he has encountered before. There was a lot embedded, there, in his pause and in the question itself. What kind of use value does a narrative about 'good' drivers and entrepreneurs hold? How are these narratives circulated? Good and bad drivers are typologies of masculinity, of class, of incorporability into the cities futures. How do these archetypes fit into planning logics or become operationalized in attempts by the city to manage and control the infrastructure of people? What is the role of the researcher and the planner in creating these typologies?

I ended up riding with Everill for the next few hours, sometimes we chatted and I took notes, at other times he exchanged jokes with other drivers on the C.B., and other times we entertained a comfortable silence while he drove along Utica Avenue stopping for the occasional passenger. When traffic slows, we stop at a gas station on Remsen. Our travels mark the edges of Brooklyn's hodgepodge of Caribbean and Jewish neighborhoods. Thinking aloud, he says to me or no one in particular that it's a holiday (Rosh Hoshana) and that few people are on the streets because "stores lock down." He explains that he doesn't work all day, he gets on the road at around 10 a.m. and doesn't usually wait at Eastern Parkway because of the police. He might make \$200-\$300 in a day. So far, he tells me "I work \$82." It is nearing midday by the time we make a stop for lunch and a drink at a West Indian dive bar just off Foster. It is small with painted yellow walls and heavy mahogany furniture. The kitchen looks closed but Everill manages to order a plate of rice and what looks to be stewed chicken. He asks if I want anything but I'm not particularly hungry. I mostly watch Animal Planet on the flat screen perched on the wall, wandering in and out of the conversation between him and the bartender, a young woman. *Nuff lyrics*, she says to me, teasing her friend.

### **"They're Gonna Take Me Serious"**

Late in my research she appears again, this time in two Vines posted online in 2013—barely audible, six-second loops in which we see just a shadow of her from the position of the passenger, filming from the second row of the van. Each loop is accompanied by a caption. The first reads, "First female dollar van Driva. Drives like a maniac like her brothers!" In the loop, through the loud, repetitive sound of the

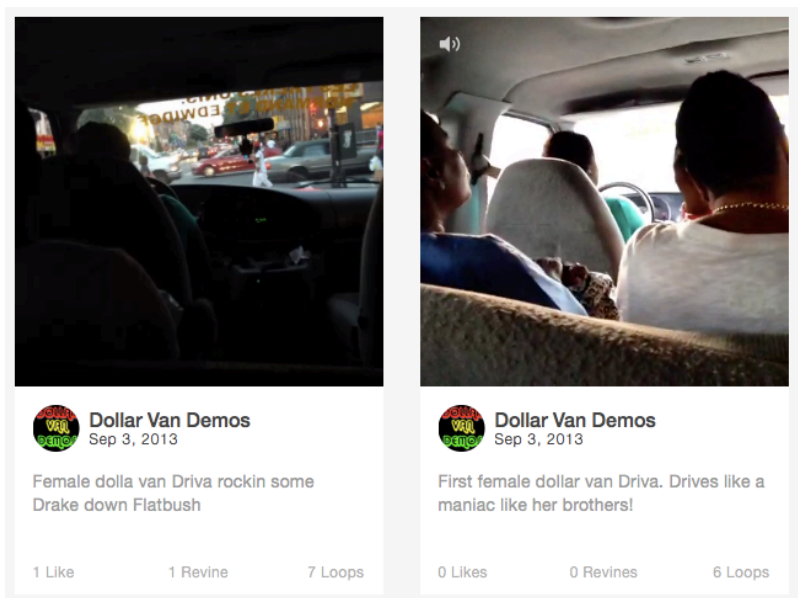
squeaking vehicle, though I cannot say to whom, I can hear her say the words “It’s a short...They’re gonna take me serious...” before the sound trails off and the Vine starts again. The same woman appears in a second loop, with the caption “Female dolla van Driva rockin some Drake down Flatbush.” In this second video the van has come to a stand still at a light, and all we hear is Drake singing “I’m going in/I’m going in/I’m lovin’ life right now...” In some ways, these brief and somewhat illegible glimpses mirror my other archival encounters with her— my continued difficulty in seeing and hearing her. And then there is the platform. In their structure, these loops also illustrate the ways in which we make meaning through everyday encounters, stitching together moments. In a *New York Times* op-ed, imagining the Vine format as techne, one writer observes that Vine allowed “makers to play with structure, form, insertion, pacing and interpolation [...] letting users employ the videos as punch lines, shorthand and punctuation.”<sup>131</sup> If this is the case, what broader narrative is punctuated in these short videos of her? How can these loops, these glimpses, serve as a shorthand?

Up to this point in the chapter I have used the paucity of women drivers in the dollar cab industry to remark upon masculinities and mobilities. In the remainder of this section my goal is to bring women back into the frame. My concern and approach here are primarily speculative. Rather than trying to create a demographic portrait of women drivers in Brooklyn’s informal taxi sector, my interest is in how we can think relationally, how we locate women (and other subaltern subjects) within the context of the dollar cab economy by reading the shorthand, the punctuations, the moments of incoherency and the absences. In this sense, the improvised nature of the six-second videos is instructive, as

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<sup>131</sup> Jazmine Hughes October 31, 2016 Vine Dries Up. Black Humor Loses a Home. *New York Times*

they write her into an already fragmented narrative of life in the city. Even though there are these signifiers that mark her presence as unique (she is the “first” woman driver this Vine user has seen, her aggressive driving compared to the likes of “her brothers”) she is also placed into the series as just one fragment, one loop, one encounter, one out of others. In this instance, beyond the question of whether or not she exists, (or if the subaltern can speak) this encounter opens a different set of questions, different avenues. What does it mean for im/migrant women to navigate and occupy the city in this way? How do women, as dollar cab drivers, experience the policing of the informal economy, the violence of spatial governance? Tanu Priya Uteng and Tim Cresswell note in their work, *Gendered Mobilities*, that “how people move (where, how fast, how often, etc.) is demonstrably gendered and continues to reproduce gender hierarchies.” How can we extend this by instead asking: in what sorts of gendered performances do women participate? What do women’s refusals look like from the vantage point of woman-as-driver?



## Conclusion

In the fall of 2014 New York's local news outlets reported a bizarre story. A woman had been "critically injured" lunging from a moving dollar van in Queens. Though reports note that "it wasn't immediately clear why she jumped," and that "detectives are still trying to figure out what happened and why the 22-year-old-woman couldn't wait for the van to stop," we are told that "the woman was a passenger inside the van when police attempted to pull the driver over."<sup>132</sup> Oddly, these reports were not really about the (unnamed) fleeing woman at all. They were about the reckless driver (Jameson Golding). The hysterical woman, described by the New York Post as "terrified" and as having "leaped out of the back of the van," along with an image of a van sticker with the line "Dem Nuh Bad Like Weh," were deployed as useful devices in bolstering the overarching tale of a reckless and otherwise criminal dollar cab driver. Rudeness (here, signaled through the reference to badness) becomes deviance, the driver's traffic violations representative of his propensity towards what we can only assume to be other, more offensive, acts. (This is what is indexed in the unanswered question of why, apparently having no other viable choice, the hysterical woman leaped from the van.) Of course this story, while perhaps more strange than others, is not new in convention. As I have illustrated elsewhere, in popular depictions of dollar vans women entered, or were brought into, the discussion in order to script and structure black masculinities in very specific ways— the deviant hustler versus the well behaved small business owner and entrepreneur. During the legal struggles around formalization in the 1990s and onward,

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<sup>132</sup> <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Woman-Critically-Injured-Queens-Jumping-Illegal-Dollar-Van-275078161.html>; <http://abc7ny.com/news/woman-in-critical-condition-after-jumping-out-of-moving-van/308702/>

as witnesses providing testimony in court hearings and soundbites for reporters, women were perhaps knowing participants in creating these scripts around “good drivers.” But these narratives also located the presence of women in the dollar cab economy in very specific ways— almost always as passengers. While it is true that the majority of dollar cab operators are men, the result is that women are seen as absent from this space of informal work unless they are passengers.

Of course, passengering is important. Most of the passengers that I encountered in my fieldwork were women. Thus, as I mention in the introduction to this chapter, black women’s geographies and everyday travels guide my work. They are part of the infrastructure that I describe above, albeit in a differently way than other groups. The role of woman as passenger, as traveler and ultimately as mobile subject is a crucial one. For some, traveling in familiar modes of transit like a dollar cab is a way of learning the city, and of reading the city. While I do not focus on it here, passengering itself can be understood as both an active practice of mobility and a sort of subject formation.<sup>133</sup> Mobilities studies have approached passengering in a number of ways, highlighting the embodied experience of being moved, of being shipped, to experiences of public encounter in the space of travel. We can also look at the work of Robin D.G. Kelley, Nicole Fleetwood and Sikivu Hutchinson on black working-class subjects, performance and public transportation. Kelley’s work on buses as “moving theaters” is particularly

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<sup>133</sup> See for example Ashmore, Paul. "Slowing down mobilities: Passengering on an inter-war ocean liner." *Mobilities* 8, no. 4 (2013): 595-611.; Bissell D, 2010, "Passenger mobilities: affective atmospheres and the sociality of public transport" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 270–289; Wilson, Helen F. "Passing propinquities in the multicultural city: the everyday encounters of bus passengering." *Environment & Planning A* 43, no. 3 (March 2011): 634-649. Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals, EBSCOhost (accessed June 30, 2017); Urry J, 2002, "Mobility and proximity" *Sociology: The Journal of the British Sociological Association* 36 255–27



useful to thinking about experiences and practices of passengering. As Kelley observes, “Theater can have two meanings: as a site of performance and as a site of military conflict. First, dramas of conflict, repression, and resistance are performed in which passengers witness, or participate in, a wide variety of ‘skirmishes’ that shape their collective memory.”<sup>134</sup> The everyday dramas are part of the experience of movement, part of the life of the city. While passengering is not the focus of this chapter, I include some reference to it here to say that women’s daily, ordinary experiences of travel can also offer a critical insight into the social life of the dollar cab and of Brooklyn’s informal circuits of mobility more broadly speaking.

But, in this chapter, I take a different route. I lean into the absences. I opened this chapter with a question posed to me by a colleague about the seeming absence of women from the work of driving dollar cabs— “does she even exist?”— not as an accounting of women in the industry but in order to enter a conversation about gendered performances of automobility, of work and of place happening on the streets of contemporary East/Flatbush. In the first section, drawing on AbdouMaliq Simone’s articulation of people as infrastructure, I illustrated the ways in which masculinities shape dollar cab economies. In the following section, turning towards performance geographies, I show how rudeness comes into play both in the space of the dollar cab and on the streets. In the third section of the chapter I touch briefly on entrepreneurship, the politics of black respectability and how— much as in the case of practices of rudeness— legitimating practices can also be

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<sup>134</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “Congested Terrain: Resistance on Public Transportation,” in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996). Kindle Edition; See also Nicole Fleetwood, “‘Busing It’ in the City: Black Youth, Performance and Public Transit,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 48 (2004); Sikivu Hutchinson, *Imagining Transit: Race, Gender, and Transportation Politics in Los Angeles* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006)

enmeshed in masculinist rubrics. I am cognizant of the way in which, in placing mostly male, black, migrants who do informal labor into certain binaries, we run the either of romanticizing the informal or flattening out the complexity of their ordinary lives so that become they ‘good’ or ‘bad’— hardworking, industrious immigrants or renegades simply trying to survive. In focusing on questions of infrastructure, performance and discourse, I am attempting to trouble these binaries, to broaden the discussion and to enter the conversation around ordinary urban practices using the questions that are important to black study and the method of black urbanism. In the final section, bringing women back into the frame, I shift away from the more traditional archival and ethnographic sources and, instead, I use glimpses of an anonymous woman driver captured in short-form video.

## Endings/Noise

How is a city to be narrated? A city that at its surface is a multifarious collage, and, at closer look, ubiquitous in its depth? What should be the culmination of such narrations?

-Ananya Roy

In the postscript to her work on poverty and the feminization of livelihoods, on gender and the city, Ananya Roy asks how the city can be told, and how to craft a singular ending to a project about a city — a space that inherently has multiple points of departure and holds multiple futures.

I think about Brooklyn in the same vein. Like any another city, it is comprised of multiple and always incomplete dramas, both ongoing and ephemeral. It is told through these scenes that range from the comedic to the somber, through conventions, moments of code switching and signifying, spectacle and speculation, contrapuntal rhythms. It is composed through actors and the characters they are sometimes meant to play, made legible by the props, sediments and narratives (or the archives) given over to us by time (history). Brooklyn, like any other city, unfolds daily through a series of sometimes improperly stitched together acts and affects, through geographies both real and imagined. Ultimately, Roy concludes by creating multiple endings. Here, too, Brooklyn presents the possibility of multiple endings.

I

In 2016, some time after I had left 'the field' and began to put this project together, Budweiser released its Brooklyn based "Respect the Hustle" campaign. Plastered on buildings and subway stations in and around the long gentrified neighborhoods of North Brooklyn (Greenpoint, Bushwick, and Fort Greene), each ad featured stark black

and white images of “influencers,” set alongside block lettered white text that read “Brooklyn Earns Its Happy Hours,” “Brooklyn, Where Freelance is Full-Time,” or “Make Your Own Job Title.” On the bottom of each ad: “Respect the Hustle.” A related billboard featured the taglines: “Brooklyn At Work” and “Main Gigs to Side Gigs.” Some of the boards could be found atop of murals, graffitied walls framing the ads.<sup>135</sup> At least one set of ads found themselves wrapped around a new construction site for one of Brooklyn’s newest high-rises. The campaign was supplemented by a guerrilla component, the Budweiser logo replaced with “Hustle Every Step” spray painted on intersections and sidewalks and tagged on Instagram as #graffiti, #streetart with social media users adding inspirational carpe diem type quotes to caption the image. Featuring an ethnically diverse ensemble, whose work seems to transcend or transgress some category meant to hold them or place them, the ads suggest a departure from the vestiges of both the 9-5 job and the register of sameness.<sup>136</sup> Work and play look the same in this world. And hustling is the very thing that allows this cast of characters to transcend boundaries.

Unlike other campaigns, which might seek to invoke a desire to be elsewhere, the “influencers” featured in these ads are Brooklyn-based. Indeed, one ad read “Brooklyn Bound.” This, I am meant to understand, is Brooklyn. Taken together these glyphs tell not only a contemporary narrative of Brooklyn in transition, but of a ‘new’ urban ethos built around no-collar work and style, the ability to self-fashion, to move, to make, to be

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<sup>135</sup> <https://hyperallergic.com/219344/in-bushwick-street-art-comes-with-a-copious-side-of-advertising-billboards/>

<sup>136</sup> Take for example the ad featuring Chelsea Miller, the petite young white woman who is also a knife maker, or Rita Lynn the model with the shaved head covered in tattoos or Chargaux, the Black indie duo whose “lack of classification is their best asset,” according to the Observer. <http://observer.com/2016/06/chargaux-mix-classical-and-hip-hop-to-create-a-genre-all-their-own/>

and to do something far from banal. Undoubtedly extracted from its usage in black sound/expressive cultures, the language of hustling no longer represents the vernacular of the black, queer, migrant urban working/poor; instead it is the brand of Brooklyn itself, as well as the mantra of that subset of Brooklyn's precarious workers known as the creative class. On the one hand, I am tempted to ask how this word, this ethos really, once a signifier of the racialized, sexualized, queer, and otherwise underground, has become fodder— if not for North Brooklyn's gentrifiers, then for a multinational corporation. On the other hand, the answer seems painfully apparent: just as our/their bodies have been fungible, the language and lives of people who have historically had to hustle in the everyday have long been salable. (Months later Budweiser would replace it's own brand name with "America" as part of the roll out of a national campaign— "America Is In Your Hands.")

I am both incredulous and inspired, but I want to think beyond commodification. Here I ask, how might we use this campaign to understand, on one level, tropes of Brooklyn and, on another level, the "narration of power," or a set of combined narratives which "can only be understood in light of the social hierarchies in which they are implicated?"<sup>137</sup> If the narrative contained in this "Respect the Hustle" campaign is at all plausible, it is because it is told from locations of power. By locations, I mean both social and geographical— geographically it is staged in a long gentrified North Brooklyn, where Black and Brown communities have been removed through processes of displacement, and socially, a space in which race, gender and class are understood as mere limitations rather than structures of power. I think of course back to that 1970's

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<sup>137</sup> Roy 223

moment and the Hustle. After all, that coupling of bodily movement, self-fashioning (being ‘dressed to the nines’), performativity, improvisation, joy, adulation and sociality enacted through and inspired by The Hustle— is that not the aspirational vision of work for which the so-called creative class now labors? On many levels, as a representation of a broader dialogue about gentrification, narrations of power and city futures, this campaign represents a useful foil for my own work.

In my project, I became increasingly interested in how to write the city in ways that did not reproduce narratives of power and post-racial fantasies of the city. I also wanted to engage with theories of the city that did emerge from outside of Western city-models. Thus, I framed this dissertation as a localized study of what AbdouMalik Simone calls black urbanism, a study of informal transit— dollar cabs. This, for me, was a way to reframe black im/migrant life outside of more familiar global city paradigms. The global city paradigm, which follows from the premise that the 1980’s marked a distinct difference in the restructuring of the global economy, argued that the rise of the global city formed an integral part of the new architecture of capital.<sup>138</sup> As a conceptual framework it remains incredibly important for understanding place and spatiality in relation to globalization; for understanding globalization as a discursive process which happens within geographies of cities, including New York. However, new geographies of theory highlight the ways in which the framework of the global city:

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<sup>138</sup> See: Sassen, Saskia. 1991. *The Global City: New York London, Tokyo*; 1994. *Cities in a World Economy*; 2005 “The Global City: Introducing a Concept”

(1) often functions as a sort of “regulating fiction”<sup>139</sup> that reproduces, both at the level of theory and policy, the very hierarchies between the Global North and South that it may seek to illuminate by locating “power” within a particular geography;

(2) —because of its “economicism” and its overwhelming focus on technologies, processes and structure— produces conversations around cities that may not adequately account for the manifold practices, performances, exchanges and sensory experiences that make cities what they are.<sup>140</sup>

Thus, for me it did not hold the possibility that cities move. Additionally, I began to think about how the global city paradigm maps Blackness and immigrant lives in ways that reiterate, rather than disrupt, dominant geographical narratives about life at the margins, in the shadows or simply underground. In part this is because global city narratives rely on core-periphery models of the city in which low-wage service workers, in particular immigrant women of color, are understood as working in the city center and residing in the city’s margins, existing as surplus labor.<sup>141</sup> The spaces in which Black and by extension migrant groups live other parts of their everyday are mapped as other than or outside of the (global) city. This is not to dismiss global city studie— signaling the

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<sup>139</sup> Robinson, Jennifer. 2002. “Global Cities and World Cities: A View from off the Map.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26.3: 531-54; See also Ananya Roy (2007) “The 21st Century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory”

<sup>140</sup> See Mbembe and Nuttall

<sup>141</sup> See for example Saskia Sassen’s *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* in which she argues that inasmuch as global capital and technological companies need ‘skilled’ workers, low wage service workers, and in particular women of color, are integral to the functioning of these sorts of high-technology companies. While this work is an important addition to scholarship on the global feminization and exploitation of labor and the production of race, gender and space in relation to the global economy, it still forecloses upon more imaginative understandings of how immigrants do life in and produce different understandings of cities and of the urban.

margins is fundamental. As Katherine McKittrick explains, “invisible geographies, marginality, indicate a struggle, and ways of knowing the world, which can also illustrate wider conceptual and and material spaces for consideration.”<sup>142</sup> But it is to say that we should be wary of analyses that argue that: at the same time that working-class and working poor immigrants are understood as integral to the production of the global city, they are also only producers or authors of the city through their status as low-wage workers.

In this project, black/urban/life formed the method through which I could understand and parse out the drama of Brooklyn through improvised forms of the urban that emerged post-1965, when the city experienced a rapid demographic shift. Bringing East Flatbush into the frame was especially important in part because contemporary East Flatbush is overwhelming Black, with a large working-class immigrant population— more than half of which are born outside of the U.S. Perhaps unlike other predominantly Black neighborhoods in Brooklyn, this was not its reality before 1970— or even some years after— and given the fact of gentrification its futures are uncertain. Additionally, the focus on East Flatbush is important because it is a neighborhood unexplored in most studies of Brooklyn. Shifting away from more popular discourses around immigrant lives in cities allowed me to think about how a city can be told, not in a sort of infrastructural and teleological way but more relationally. Which is to say— I wanted to understand (1) the East Flatbush of relationship to other parts of the city and the city’s history, and (2) how life in East Flatbush could complicate or at least extend the *where* of Brooklyn.

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<sup>142</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* 7



In the opening chapter, “Brooklyn,” I set about the task of excavation, using black geographical knowledge(s) to understand black/urban/life in Brooklyn across different scales. At a conference titled *Other Desires: The African City*, Mpho Matsipa poses a query about “the possibilities and fictions embedded in various archives, be they written documents, buildings, narratives...representational tropes.”<sup>143</sup> My goal in chapter one was to locate and think through various archives not to create a singular history, but to pose the question of city-making and blackness in relation to the Brooklyn. In the second chapter, “Babylon,” I turn towards the logics of surveillance and spatial control that both engender and prohibit black mobilities, and produce spaces of informality within the city. The possibility of erasure underscores the argument in this chapter, as I question how this most recent stage of gentrification presents planning and policing imperatives that may not include popular and informal modes of transit. In chapter 3, “Does She Even Exist?,” I tend to how the gendered performances of dollar cab driving—a sort of daily hustle—play out in the everyday. This chapter was the beginning of writing about the social life of this space of transit—the interior. My goal in these three chapters was to capture the drama of Brooklyn through movement and the mundane, focusing on improvised forms of ordinary life in city’s Flatbush area. Throughout the work, I argue that blackness has produced the city since its inception. And in the post-1965 moment, black mobilities, black urbanisms, continue to illuminate the contours of the power structures through which the city functions.

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<sup>143</sup> *Other Desires: The African City* 2016 Columbia University GSAPP [Insert YouTube link]

This is something like the “the master ending”<sup>144</sup>— it brings together the various threads of the work under the rubric of excavating the margins and disrupting paradigms. It begins with a narrative about representations of race, labor, and city-ness, which are the overarching thematic issues of the work. It is situated in Brooklyn’s present. It highlights broader conversations in which this work is invested, and summarizes how I have approached broader discourses within each chapter. What follows are three additional endings.

## II

This project began as a way for me to think not about sameness but about symmetries, or what might be understood as urban echoes, between Black and Brown life, particularly in cities of the post-colonial world. The dollar van looks and functions like informal modes of transit in other cities, it appears as an unofficial, improvised urban form in the context structural deprivation (a lack of viable transit in parts of the city deemed marginal). Here, I want to return to that idea of symmetries because there is something about iteration, or echo, that pushes against the work, or the event, of a conclusion. In returning to echo as a way of asking new questions around blackness and urbanity, I include a *précis* on sound and radio, which I imagine to be part of my future work.

In Edwidge Danticat’s “One Heart,” she muses over a series of taxicab conversations with mostly Haitian drivers, who she refers to as “fellow urban nomads, reciters, and ambient voyagers.” She opens with a moment of recognition— sharing with the reader how she knows that a driver is from Haiti or any other part of the Caribbean.

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<sup>144</sup> Ananya Roy *Calcutta Requiem* p. 225

“I always talk to cab drivers,” she writes, “in part because my father was one. If they are black and from the Caribbean, I survey their ID cards and mull over their French-sounding names before cautiously asking, ‘Haitian?’ Mostly there’s no need to ask. Haitian cab drivers often have their radios tuned to Haitian music, religious, or political programs, if a Creole CD is not playing.” Radio provides not only a point of entry for Danticat in these conversations that range from the banal to the intimate, but also provides for the voyagers (both driver and passenger alike) a sonic route home. This, I think, is what Alejandra Bronfman means when she writes “The Caribbean, as a region produced in part through sound and the circuits of technology, is an outcome variably listened for.”<sup>145</sup>

The Caribbean, not as a coherent place, but as an attachment— or a set of attachments, or a way of thinking place, or iterations of place— has always informed the way that I understood the urban and I wanted to center a version of Caribbean migrant life here. Thus, this project emerged from a bit of nostalgia— I wanted to return ‘home’ to capture in some small part, the way that I see and read cities. As I traveled through East/Flatbush I realized that so much of what I experienced— nostalgia, recognition, discomfort, reception — happened through listening, through my encounters with the sonic. From the way that the cab drivers blow their horns to the music that they play in the cabs, to the sound of the streets themselves, I experienced Brooklyn through the movement of sound.

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<sup>145</sup> Alejandra Bronfman, *Birth of a Station: Broadcasting, Governance, and the Waning Colonial State*, Small Axe

Defining sound as having “an object quality,” Lawrence Abu Hamdan argues that if “we imagine sound as immaterial, ephemeral and intangible then we run the risk of extracting it from the world in which it participates. We run the risk of essentializing sound, of treating listening as a natural and given phenomenon, as transhistorical and apolitical.”<sup>146</sup> What is held within the space of transmission? What spaces are produced through the practice of listening and how we can think about the material world in which sound is imbricated? In a future iteration of this work, I aim to explore how collective experiences of listening and sound-making can be better understood as forms of affective spatial production, and how radio itself might be approached as both a method— an active process— and as a space of play.<sup>147</sup> I also want to explore how, within the space of transit, radio works, both at the material level, and at the level of the discursive— mediating and organizing the relationship between people, movement, time and place. While radio makes for an “unruly ethnographic site,” radio and radio play, form not just a useful but a necessary point of departure in mapping or listening for the Caribbean

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<sup>146</sup> CITATION — Politics of Listening Conference

<sup>147</sup> Black sound studies occupy vast terrain, the span of which I cannot cover here. But as a field it includes work like Kodwo Eshun’s *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, Alexander Weheliye’s *Phonographies*, Fred Moten’s *In the Break* and Clyde Woods’ work on blues geographies. As I proceed to think about radio I am particularly indebted to those reflections on listening, and on radio, that not only intersect with post-colonial studies and studies of the Caribbean and of Blackness but studies that use the imperatives of these fields to disrupt our understanding of radio as mere physical object, instead inviting us to consider the possibilities of radio in the production of affective geographies. Bronfman’s aforementioned work “Birth of Station,” for example, takes up the history of Jamaican broadcasting and documents the relationship between radio, the state and the massive as well as the role of radio in the project of nation making. A number of expressive texts and interdisciplinary studies have also addressed the role of radio, and the role of sonic interception, in the practice of U.S. imperialism. Dionne Brande’s “Military Occupations” and Edwidge Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light* come to mind. Alexandra Vasquez’s *Listening in Detail* listens through Cuba’s sonic cultures, geographies and histories. The book, in which the author “hopes to offer an *experience with* rather than an account of Cuban music,” mentions the hijacking of Cuban radio waves but he U.S. in the [1960’s] highlighting how sonic interference through radio defined the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba and informed the way that we encounter, or expect to encounter Cuba through sound.

within the space of Brooklyn, and for understanding mobilities in a way than the rubric of transport might allow.

I gaze at the linoleum floor while Wynta makes oatmeal for breakfast. Eventually she joins me at the kitchen table. We eat, and get familiar. After some minutes of chatting about her life in Brooklyn (she too was born in the city and has lived here on and off for years), her comings and goings, I ask her about her daily travels. She tells me that she used to take dollar cabs more often, but now just takes them a few times a week when returning from work, to get home faster. Caribbean drivers, she says, greet you with a 'good morning,' 'good evening,' or 'good night.' I ask her how she knows where the driver is from, or if they are Caribbean at all. Sometimes it's in the smell of incense and other fragrances she says, the flags and beads hung on the rearview mirror, the way they blow they horn.

...a lot of times they're playing music, or listening to a station...whenever I get in a car...whenever I've gotten in the car with a Haitian driver they usually listen to some type of Haitian news...Jamaicans and Trinis are probably...are usually playing the station. These are not necessarily legit stations because there's a lot of hijacked stations. But if you're Caribbean, you can find it. You can find the station that plays the reggae, plays the soca or has the Haitian news and so on and so forth.

They're legitimately hijacked... by stations. It's this one soca station—Trinidadian soca station—that you only catch at certain times of the day because they're hijacking the frequency. Yeah...but you don't unless you're Caribbean what it is... No station plays solely Caribbean...anywhere. And if they do, it's for an hour or so, and they don't stick to one genre of Caribbean music. They'll mix up reggae with soca. Trinidadians don't want to hear reggae with their soca, she says with a slight laugh. And a lot of times Jamaicans don't want to hear soca with their reggae. So you have these stations that play just soca and just reggae.

My conversation with Wynta made me more attuned not only to the geography, architecture and social life of radio in Brooklyn but the entanglements between different modes of mobility—in this case radio and transport. Hijacking is inherently bound up in other practices of movement; it is the interception and appropriation of mobile objects, capital, people and information in transit. So I began to ask different questions— what kind of place-making practice is piracy? What kind of mobility is piracy? Paul Gilroy's

work insists that pirated radio, especially within a broader conversation around black and migrant place-making, is a fruitful space of analysis and exploration. The emergence of Caribbean pirated radio marks geographies of post-colonial life in East Flatbush and other parts of Brooklyn. Here, too, I continue to think with Bronfman, who observes that, “The study of radio...points to multilingual zones of noisy transmission as well as of silence and isolation.” Taking my queue from black sound studies, and their attention to “black communication on the lower frequencies.” I’m interested in attending to those registers of noise and silence.

This discussion is not exhaustive— it serves as a set of notes on future research. But we can consider for a moment Haitian news radio which, according to John Anderson is well represented in Brooklyn’s pirated mediascapes.<sup>148</sup> According to one blog site, “There is a stretch of Nostrand Avenue in Brooklyn that has a Haitian radio station on every block — Radio Soleil, Radyo Pa Nou, Triomphe, Omega, Independans.” Some, like Radio Soleil, have storefronts, others do not. Thus, much like the Caribbean grocery stores, the stores that sell barrels, the roti shops, and the dollar cabs, radio is one way that black/migrant groups produce and experience the city. Radio should be understood in relation to other emergent grammars of the post-1965 urban landscape. By the 1980’s, while some of these areas had long experienced neglect by the city, all of these neighborhoods sagged under the weight of New York’s 1975 fiscal crisis and global fissures in the structure of capitalism. Of East Flatbush in the 1980’s, author Edwidge Danticat remembers the neighborhood as both a “tough geography” and a space of refuge. In the building where Danticat’s family lived, for example, people whose class

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<sup>148</sup> CITE podcast- [radiosurvivor.com](http://radiosurvivor.com)

differences would have created an inoperable distance between them in Haiti were brought into close contact, neighbors brought each other food. She called the building “la cour” — a courtyard that fosters a communal sense of place. “La cour” is an illustration of how, in the wake of containment and material deprivation, black geographic life persists. Beyond enclosure and crisis, “la cour” or what is elsewhere in the Caribbean referred to as a “yard,” is a remaking of a space. I understand the stations jotting Nostrand Avenue as a similar place-making project, a communal space, a space of exchange and information sharing amongst ordinary people.

What I am trying to suggest is that radio mobilities bridge material and transparent geographies, formal and informal, “horizontal and aerial.” They refuse popular forms of mapping because it isn’t about the location of a radio station as much as it is about the multiple points of reception and transmission and the traces left by these transmissions. In this way, radio mobilities provide another architecture for studying black urbanisms, they remind us of the multi-dimensional, they invite us to create new visualizations for the city.

But, again, this is not just about the transparent and discursive. Radio geographies, or mobilities, illuminate structures of power that envelope transport mobilities. In 2013 Solomon Malka and Seon Bruce were arrested on charges of unauthorized radio transmission. Bruce (otherwise known as DJ Fresh Kid) and Malka ran 104.7 the Fire Station, a pirate station broadcasting in Brooklyn and the Bronx. According to the *New York Times*, the exact location of the station’s operators were discovered after the Brooklyn district attorney’s office set up an undercover operation in which they pretended to buy on-air ad time for \$500. In addition to having their

equipment seized, according to the reportage, the two face one to two years of imprisonment. Like other forms of informal mobility, piracy highlights existing technologies of surveillance even as it is built to evade them. In this context, these technologies— alongside the actual music, news transcripts, and new media— also create an archive through which we might be also to read and learn from these transmissions. FCC maps, for example, tell us that New York has the highest concentration of pirated stations in the country, and that Brooklyn has the highest concentration in the state. Where we do not find storefronts like Radio Soleil, attempts at criminalization give us a more granular map of the geography of pirate radio, albeit a complex one; in the case of the Fire Station, while the main operation was happening from a studio on the border of East Flatbush and Canarsie, antenna's were located on rooftops in alternate locations, and the meeting where the uncover officer was to drop off monies for advertisement was set to take place at a barbershop on Flatbush. In some ways, this is a map that resists Cartesian logics, reminding us of the importance of seemingly mundane sites (the barbershop, for example) and airwaves to understanding black life. Taken together, what the traces created by these surveillance strategies continue to reveal is the relationship between mechanisms of control exerted at the scale of the horizontal and also at the scale of the aerial.

### III

Throughout my travels, I listened, witnessed, I dialogued with 20 residents, dollar cab drivers, and transit regulators, and visited mayoral and metro archives. But there is so much that isn't captured in the organization of all of the ethnographic jottings and recordings. The messiness of identities, the slippage of the language of race and class,



and more than that. Here, I am left with the excess. Fred Moten describes improvisation as an excess of representation. Throughout the project, I think through logics of racialization and surveillance, gender and mobility, class and modes of media production and consumption. These are frames that are legible in academic discourse. But what of the encounters that exceed these frames? *One thing is the stop for gas— there’s another thing where it’s like— I just need to go in and go to the bakery— I need a patty— and it’s like brotha’ I gotta go! ..the echoes, the instances that remind me and my interlocutors of life elsewhere... [In Jamaica] they have the cars and the busses...but I mean it’s like, pack ‘em in. I mean when I went I had a boy sitting on my...on my lap. I mean a teenage boy. And it was like ‘Call me seh...I gonna iron ya clothes fi yuh’ ...the pictures of babies and wives on the dashboard, the flags hanging from the rearview...the refusals to have ones everyday life turned into the object of investigation... “No, you can’t write that,” he says calmly... by that time, I had whipped out my aging cell phone to take a note but, heeding his request, I slipped the device back into my pocket. “Why do you want to write that down?” ...the static on the CB, the sound of waiting and boredom...*

There is something quite avant-garde about ordinary life in that these moments resist the languages and rubrics that help us understand modes of codification, and lead us instead to thinking through excess and improvisation.

I remember a conversation with Matthew:

I now can’t deal with very very loud music in the vehicles and— sometimes I’m ok with it— I think over the years— what it is is that I also lived on Flatbush Ave and I am just— noise— I can’t— it’s part of the reason why I moved— there are now three nightclubs and two churches on my block and I can’t take it anymore — so loud music in the dollar vans doesn’t help me— I have to say, the showing of movies is *awesome*. And I have watched myself a lot of music videos, a lot of movies— *bad* movies, bad Caribbean movies, make me very proud to be Jamaican— *horrible* acting— or really really funny comedy— good things— like even, like, Oliver and stuff like that— you know, I have seen comedy play sort of

[...] similar to like *Last Mom on the Couch*— like stuff from Jamaica— you know, the stuff that gets me is the Christian music that we all must listen to Christian music and I can't deal with that either— but my favorite...and I tweeted this... my favorite was the driver who was singing along to Celine Dion and the entire vehicle— no one laughed at him— I think people were kind of...with it— 'cause this was just— not older, older but he was not one of the younger brothers— and he was just like 'my heart will go on'— and he was just there— and it just was like, what joy— I like the Soft Rock Drivers— *a lot*— I love.

I pause at the mention of Soft Rock Drivers thinking about an encounter a few months back. I had left Jersey later than usual and arrived at Newkirk and Avenue D just after the commuter rush. I saw a sedan waiting at the corner and hopped in the back seat greeting the driver with a "good evening." I didn't mind that there wasn't much in the way of banter. I sat comfortably, listening to the radio while waiting for other passengers to fill the empty spaces. Soft rock station — or what my mother grew up calling soft music. "Lady In Red" is playing, and I am both amused and pleased when the driver turns up the volume. "I have never seen that dress you're wearing, or the highlights in your hair that catch your eyes..." I would have stopped myself from humming along but my voice was drowned by that of driver's as he sang along. "But I hardly know...this beauty by my side..." It wasn't reggae or calypso but I suppose Chris De Burgh was as much a cultural import as The Beatles and Olivia Newton John, transported to the Caribbean by way of radio. Like Marley's sound, soft music, and later disco, were in some way part of listening to, or listening for, the Caribbean, markers of globalization as much as anything else.

When I ask him about the music and what he hears while taking dollar vans, Matthew opens with a description of noise not in the space of the taxi, but in his neighborhood. He maps Brooklyn through uncomfortable encounters with noise— the sounds of the churches and nightclubs that surround his home. He understands his neighborhood through sounds of the ecstatic, whether in the form of religious worship or the sounds of drum and bass. It isn't about the device of the radio per se— this is the beginning of a sound map. More than that, it is about the relationship between daily experiences of the urban and the nature of improvisation.

This ending, then, is about compositions, which ways of knowing I bring to how I compose a story about black life in a city. Put differently, it is about how to see black and

migrant lives compositionally, not always through stories of anguish or deprivation but in a fuller sense of what it means to live an ordinary life. It is not figured around questions of erasure, but moments of articulation and notational scores.

The groove persists. Dancehall stations, which also emerge alongside unofficial Caribbean news radio and are popular stations to listen to in transit, do a different sort of work and pose a different set of questions than a field like news radio, questions that— as Tavia Nyong'o writes moves us “beyond the ethnological.”<sup>149</sup> Through the space of car radio, dancehall pirates create their own traffic flows as they bisect other radio transmissions. As I mentioned earlier, like dancehall, pirated radio is ephemeral and difficult to locate cartographically — making it an “unruly ethnographic site.” As the NYT put it “some flicker on and off, beholden to no set schedule and no one frequency,”<sup>150</sup> operating from small stations in homes and other locales, transmitting from rooftop antennas— operating on lower frequencies. In this way, they highlight other geographies of the city. As one station manager put it in a *New York Times* piece, “People are driving and all of a sudden they run into a Caribbean station.”<sup>151</sup> This is the production of locality, to reference Appadurai. Through the airwaves, through sound, listeners ‘run into’ different localities, different versions of Brooklyn or life elsewhere. Unruliness and improvisation have a close relationship in this part of the city.

As an interlude/illustration as I write, I listen to Vybz Radio, a pirated Brooklyn-based dancehall station tuning in just in time to hear:

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<sup>149</sup> Nyong'o Afro Sonic Fictions

<sup>150</sup> Ibid

<sup>151</sup> July 4, 2013 Station Had Listeners, Just Not a License *New York Times*

Every gyal ah/Every gyal ah  
 LET ME SEE YA  
 UH-HUH— REMIX  
 Every gal a whine and do the one drop  
 Catch it pon de left and do the one drop  
 Drop. Drop. Drop. Drop.  
 Drop - Drop- Drop- Drop- Drop- Drop- Drop  
*Yo QQ...The gyal dem have a new dance*  
 THEY CALL ME THE MIX MASTA'  
 YOUR BROOKLYN FAVORITE DJ YA KNOW!  
 Every gyal ah/Every gyal ah/Every gyal ah/Every gyal ah  
 REMIX  
 Every gal a whine and do the one drop  
 Catch it pon de left and do the one drop  
 Drop. Drop. Drop. Drop.  
 Drop- Drop- Drop- Drop- Drop- Drop-Drop  
 UH-HUH— REMIX  
 [...]

BIG UP TO ALL MY LADIES WITH A SEXY BODY!

Every “remix” is an interjection, an additional refrain. The DJ’s voice (“They call me the Mix Masta”/“Big up to all my ladies...”) mixes with the lyrics of QQ and Venomous (“Yo QQ...The gyal dem have a new dance...”) These are the sonic interventions of radio pirates, hijackers. Dancehall stations do not connect listeners to a specific national context (they do not connect listeners to Jamaica, for example) but to the dancehall, a complex performance geography that I cannot fully delve into here. This is a dancehall mix, the space of dancehall itself, a channel that shouldn’t exist, a transmission. In *Sonic Bodies*, a study of dancehall techne, Julian Henriques describes the repetition of “re-wind” in dancehall sessions as a manipulation technique— a way of “building the vibes of the session,” with the crowd. The repetition of “remix” works similarly here. It isn’t just the music, and the incitement to dance, it’s the “big ups” and the shout-outs, popular black improvisational practices. Henrique locates this as a popular practices of tracing, toasting, and voicing noting that “very often, especially to the unfamiliar ear, the MC’s voice

completely dominates the sound of the session,” placing “the MC’s hoarse, rapid-fire shouts, exclamations and comments” within the space of the dancehall. Radio turns ordinary objects like dollar cabs and vans into improvisational theaters and dancehall geographies.

#### IV

Mpho Matsipa posed the question “What kinds of epistemological shifts can a consideration of desire have in our discussion of city-making?” In this final section I offer some tentative thoughts on the consideration of desire, which I think is a particularly useful analytic. To some extent, my work in Chapter 3, on hustling, rudeness and gendered performances, is about desire— as is my treatment of aesthetics and improvisation. This is not about being completely celebratory, or romanticizing working-class black-migrant life; throughout the project, there are all sorts of competing desires at work— the desire not only to inhabit the urban in ways that are familiar, but the desire of the city to organize, locate and formalize; desires around consumption and living the neoliberal ‘good life’ of the self-made entrepreneur and so on. But there is much left to be said about the notion of desire and its relationship to this work.

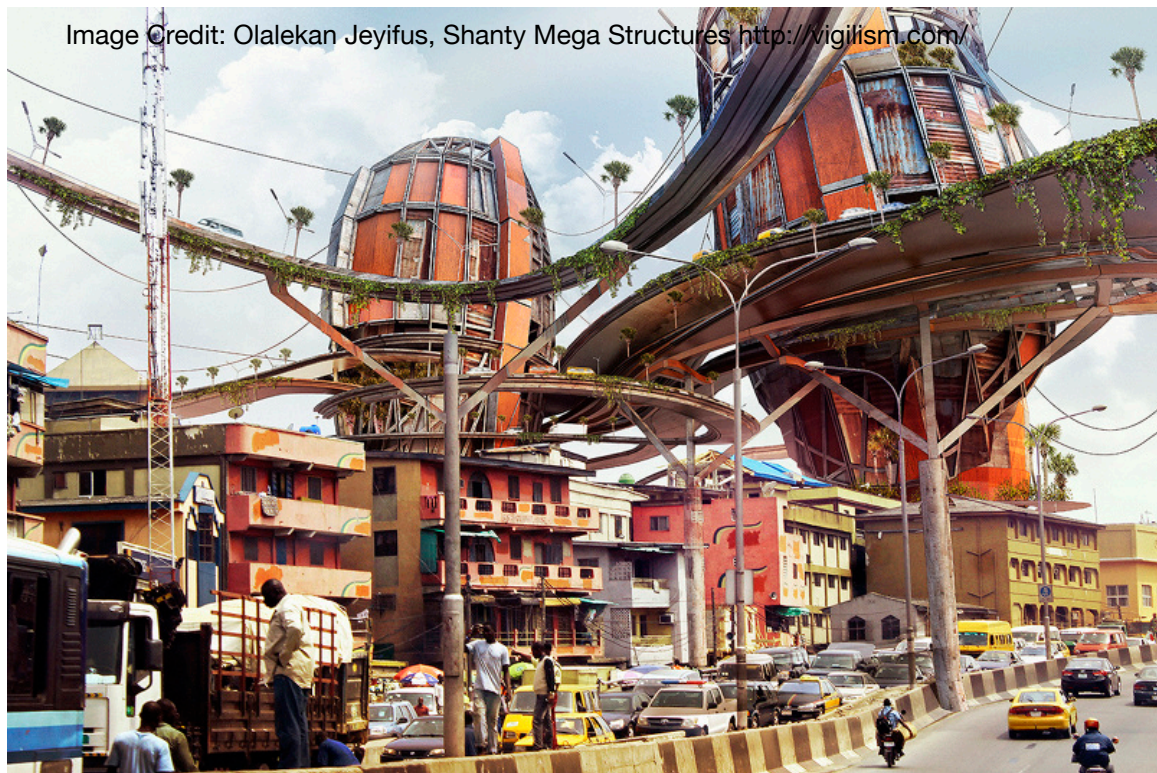
I look at the work of Brooklyn-based visual artist Olalekan Jeyifous, his depictions of Lagos, Nigeria, one in which slum architectures are imagined as high-rises, where the noise of the city is experienced in its cartography, and I wonder if Brooklyn could be imagined as an Afro-Futurist city. Perhaps somewhere in the recesses of my mind, part of this project was about trying to imagine what the city would look like if Barclays, and the new Domino Factory, and the glass structures, and the dollar cabs, and the beauty supply

stores, and the coming container apartments, and the traffic, and the excesses, and old-ass sound systems that the DJs used back in the day, and the parts that they call the ghetto were all allowed to coexist in an urban collage. In Marlon James' novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, he describes a fictional Kingston circa 1976 as a city comprised of slum houses made of "old zinc, the material itself a living history of when last a politician did the ghetto a favor," bourgeois uptowns, "freezone," long standing plantations, government buildings, garbage towns, "wood stalls full of bananas and mangoes and ackee and grapefruit and jackfruit," and congested streets packed with minibuses labeled with names like "Revlon Flex." I do not signal James' novel at random, the urban forms described in post-independence Jamaica also comprise a version of the afro-futurist city post-1965. Seemingly mundane forms of urban habitation like dollar cabs and vans— when placed against a backdrop of this rich landscape, new performance geographies and spaces of play, West Indian markets, communal yards, and the movement of factory labor into the boroughs (the global city)— comprise a version of urban life in post-1965 Brooklyn that looks a lot like life lived elsewhere. Which is to say, imagining Brooklyn as an afro-futurist city means understanding that it composed of so many else-where.

Jeyifous describes the project (featured above) as "a visual conversation on how slums are frequently viewed as unsightly eyesores to be bull-dozed, leaving their inhabitants completely displaced," noting that "in this instance the dispossessed are given prominence and visibility albeit through a somewhat Dystopian vision that speaks to the fact that these communities often suffer from a lack of appropriate sanitation, electricity, medical services, and modern communications."<sup>152</sup> What if there is something beyond

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<sup>152</sup> <http://vigilism.com/filter/Drawings/Improvised-Shanty-Megastructures>



gentrification and development? Can we imagine a vision where one doesn't have to consume or displace the other? What if compression— melding the rhythms and visual schemas of Williamsburg and Flatlands — was a starting point for difficult conversations around urban planning? What if planning started from the fact of ordinary black urban life? Is this what Moten and Harney called “fugitive planning”?

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