UNLOCKING NEW YORK:
SQUATTERS, URBAN EXPLORERS, AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Maxine Allison Vande Vaarst

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Approved by:

Patricia Sawin

Bernard L. Herman

Glenn Hinson

Sharon P. Holland

John Pickles

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ABSTRACT

Maxine Allison Vande Vaarst:
Unlocking New York: Squatters, Urban Explorers, and the Right to the City
(Under the direction of Patricia Sawin)

Across New York City, gentrification and austerity price the working-class out of their homes and drive them from their neighborhoods. The city cannibalizes its people, creating what Victor Hugo once called a "paradise of the rich...made out of the hell of the poor." Despite this, there are still spaces for everyday acts of resistance in New York. On the Lower East Side, a makeshift cadre of squatters fought a twenty-year battle to win control of their homes. On the Upper West Side, a group of Puerto Rican radicals, led foremost by women, transformed shuttered apartments into a site for communal housing, healthcare, and education. Even in the city's forbidden zones—the interstitial world of tunnels, construction sites, and abandoned factories—urban explorers venture beyond the locked gate to find creative expression and recapture what Henri Lefebvre terms the "right to the city."

The landscapes these groups inhabit, rich with secret histories and far from the surveilling eye of the state, form the basis for a whole new urban geography. Here in the *terrains vagues*, squatters and urban explorers alike repurpose the waste products of capital into something beautiful. Just as capitalism creates luxury and order in one place by breeding poverty and pollution in another, so do these individuals engage in the reciprocal process, converting urban ruins into self-organized, autonomous communities. They together develop a model for the post-capitalist city, one in which planning serves human needs and desires rather than the profit motive. It is this New York, the rebellious undercity, which this dissertation seeks to uncover.

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Cities are not the products of regulators or planning commissions. They are the children of thoughtful, caring people working in concert to create livable urban cultures. Those named here are the among the most thoughtful and caring people I have known. They are the ones who move history forward, and if they manage to leave as great an impression on the world as they have left on me then our future—and our cities—are in excellent hands.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CPT	Central Park Tower
LES	Lower East Side
MoRUS	Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space
MSP	Minneapolis/St. Paul
NYC	New York City
NYPD	New York Police Department
OMI	Operation Move-In
RttC	Right to the City
TSP	Tompkins Square Park
UWS	Upper West Side
WSF	World Social Forum
WSURA	West Side Urban Renewal Area
WIC	(Dutch) West India Company
WUF	World Urban Forum

INTRODUCTION

Against the Modern City

In 1961, urban studies activist Jane Jacobs began her acclaimed work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* with a simple pronouncement of intent. "This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding," she wrote. "My attack is not based on quibbles about rebuilding methods or hair-splitting about fashions in design. It is an attack, rather, on the principles and aims that have shaped modern, orthodox city planning."[1] Such a forthright thesis may have struck some readers as impolitic. It marked her text as polemical from the start, a lightning bolt of humanist conviction in a discourse that was at that time dominated by depersonalized, 'rationalist' perspectives on city infrastructure. Her introduction was indeed brusque, but that was the point. Jacobs would not mince words. She refused the near-authoritarian design policies of New York master builder Robert Moses, who sought to drive the poor from their homes and flood the city with highways. Instead, Jacobs differed from her contemporaries in foregrounding the experiential knowledge of everyday city-dwellers. "Planners frequently seem to be less equipped intellectually for respecting and understanding particulars than ordinary people," she wrote, contrasting them with those "untrained in expertise, who are attached to a neighborhood, accustomed to using it, and so are not accustomed to thinking of it in generalized or abstract fashion."[2] If planners like Moses and their modern orthodoxies had brought about the death of great American cities from on high, Jacobs reasoned,

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[1] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 3.

[2] Ibid., 441.

then perhaps those cities' revitalization would depend upon a bottom-up approach. Perhaps it was time to return the power of planning to ordinary New Yorkers. Perhaps it still is.

In keeping with the spirit of Jacobs' writing, I will be similarly blunt about the purpose of my essay. This dissertation is an attack on the modern city. It is a rebuke against property law, landlords, planning authorities, and every other tool capitalism uses to discipline urban space and make it hostile toward the working-class. It is at the same time a celebration of what city-dwellers have constructed in the shadow of capital. The human cosmopolis is among our greatest collective achievements. It is a meeting ground for all people, all languages, and all cultures. It is an abundant site for art and the creation of beautiful things. The vast, anonymous city is also, paradoxically, the most lasting product of our desire to share and be close with one another. Cities are an expression of intimacy, and in any ideal scheme the relationship between a person and their city would be a love story. When we look to the skyline, we should see the reflection of our own highest aspirations. The streets should be ours to wander. Civic institutions must serve the interests of all, and each denizen ought to have clean living spaces and a community to enrich their lives. Yet as Charles Baudelaire laments, "The form of a city changes faster, alas! than a mortal heart."[3] In the span of mere centuries, those with money and power have stolen the city from its people, reshaping it in their own image. Using austerity as their weapon, capitalists and their allies in state and media have privatized public space and reserved the best qualities of urban living for their pleasure alone. The result is an asocial, anti-human city—not a love story but a tale of abuse. These are the untenable circumstances against which this essay protests.

My goals for this project are threefold. First, I will examine the historical and contemporary relationship between New York City (NYC) and the monied institutions that rule

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[3] Charles Baudelaire, "The Swan," in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. Keith Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 115.

it, as well as the principles of a working-class “right to the city” (RttC), through which ordinary people might reclaim control over the built environment and its functions. Second, I will argue that a model for a post-capitalist New York already exists in the practices of squatting and urban exploration, through which participants, both historical and present-day, take back ownership of the spaces they inhabit and engage in a radical renegotiation of the city’s terms of use. Last, I will document through extensive field research how the experiences of these squatters and explorers point us toward a nascent liberation movement, through which the will of the people and the character of their city may begin to align.

This is not a call for reform. There is little time now for reform, or for debating urban studies from a comfortable academic remove. Indeed, I deliver my findings at a moment of crisis, as wealth inequality threatens to devour New York and render it uninhabitable for all but its wealthiest citizens. Just as Jacobs was outspoken in her writing—so necessary for galvanizing resistance against Moses and his urban renewal plots—so too will I be upfront about the polemic qualities of my own writing. This is a work of radical scholarship, conducted with the hope that New Yorkers and urbanites everywhere will someday join in revolutionary action and overthrow the unjust system that plagues our cities. My hope for this dissertation is to both theorize and help foment that change. Today, with more than half of the world’s population residing in urban centers, there should be no doubt that any such insurrection will be born in, and of, our cities.

Squatters and Explorers: Methodological Foundations

Revolution comes in many forms, however, and it is conceivable to engage in rebellious and even liberatory behavior within the status quo of the historical moment. Indeed, small-scale rebelliousness is essential to the development of any possible future revolution, as Chapter 1 will show. One means of kickstarting that transition away from the hierarchical capitalist city and toward communal autonomy is by fostering new, unsanctioned experiences within urban space. Sometimes, that is to say, city-dwellers need to break the rules. We can observe this in several pursuits, from graffiti artists painting murals on bare walls to New Yorkers uncapping fire hydrants to stay cool in the summer. Both began as illegal actions. Both existed outside the sphere of what was allowable by law and planning, and yet both initiated a positive shift in the way people relate to the landscapes they inhabit. Graffiti is now an ordinary and often desired aspect of city living, and open fire hydrants have become a semi-legal, community-directed alternative to New York's crowded public pools. In cities, as in much of life, we must never mistake what is *permissible* for what is *possible*.

Squatting and urban exploration, also known as urbex, are two of the most transformative subcultural activities happening in cities today. Unlike graffiti and uncapped hydrants, however, they remain illegal in almost all cases, and their practitioners are regularly defamed in news accounts and treated as hard criminals and thieves. What I would like to propose is that squatting and urbex are not pernicious, but instead revolutionary undertakings that raise people above property and grow the realm of the possible. On one level, I mean to say that they are revolutionary in the sense that all everyday applications of city space that emphasize use value (an object's ability to satisfy human needs) above exchange value (an object's worth as a market commodity) possess transformative potential. But on another level, I believe they are

revolutionary in the literal sense as well. The radical dwells within the quotidian, and the gap between abolishing capitalism and a single person following their passions without want for profit is, in a manner of speaking, only a matter of scale. Squatting and urban exploration are not the long-heralded socialist revolution in and of themselves, but I believe they are a model for the reimagining of space and possibility needed to generate that revolution. In this sense, I am operating within the framework provided by anarchist anthropologist David Graeber:

> A revolution on a world scale will take a very long time. But it is also possible to recognize that it is already starting to happen. The easiest way to get our minds around it is to stop thinking about revolution as a thing—'the' revolution, the great cataclysmic break—and instead ask 'what is revolutionary action?' We could then suggest: revolutionary action is any collective action which rejects, and therefore confronts, some form of power or domination and in doing so, reconstitutes social relations—even within the collectivity—in that light. ...And history shows us that the continual accumulation of such acts can change (almost) everything.[4]

Before going further, it would be helpful to specify what squatting and urbex are in the context of this dissertation. I take squatting to mean any long-term occupation of a property that the occupier does not own or have authorization to use, and especially when this occupation accompanies the political assertion that need, possession, and the labor one puts into their home should outweigh legal ownership in cases of dispute. I understand that phrases like "long-term" and "need" are open to contestation, but so is the act of squatting itself. Squatting cannot help but exist as contested practice, given that a confrontation with law and market logic is baked into it from the start. These qualities make squatting more interesting to me, rather than less reputable. They also make squatting's connections to the wider themes of this dissertation quite clear. As Robert Neuwirth writes in *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World*:

[4] David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 45.

> The world's squatters give some reality to Henri Lefebvre's loose concept of "the right to the city." They are excluded, so they take. But they are not seizing an abstract right, they are taking an actual place: a place to lay their heads. This act—to challenge society's denial of place by taking one of your own—is an assertion of being in a world that routinely denies people the dignity and validity inherent in a home.[5]

We should note that not all squatters hold such strong political ideals. Most who squat do so to survive, and many in this cohort never develop a sense of ideological consciousness around their experiences. Even so, the radical politics of squatting are well-known. This is true both within the squatting community and among the public, owing to contemporary squatters' decades-long affiliation with gutter punks and anarchism. Sensing this duality, human geographer Alexander Vasudevan has characterized squatting as, "on the one hand, a range of customary beliefs, makeshift practices and coping mechanisms that have emerged in the absence of the most basic of necessities" and, on the other hand, "equally responsible for the making of new social forms—often radical and militant—that point to a different understanding of the home as a site of cooperation, emancipation and self-organization."[6]

Urban exploration, meanwhile, is a form of recreational trespass, in which explorers delve into sewer drains and scale high-rise buildings to witness the off-limits beauty of the built environment. Whereas more conventional modes of exploration draw participants away from cities and into nature, urbex asks us to believe that we can find just as much mystery and wonder in—and typically above, below, or in-between—the human-made structures we inhabit each day. Canadian explorer Jeff Chapman, better known by the pseudonym Ninjalicious, calls urbex "a sort of interior tourism that allows the curious-minded to discover a world of behind-the-scenes sights," while encouraging people to "create their own adventures...instead of buying the pre-

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[5] Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World* (London: Routledge, 2005), 311.

[6] Alexander Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting* (London: Verso, 2017), 7.

packaged adventures too many of us settle for."[7] Though urbex has seen exponential growth in popularity since the early 2000s, thanks first to websites like Urban Exploration Resource and later to materials posted by explorers to the social media platforms YouTube and Instagram, it is not in any way a new phenomenon. Ninjalicious' rejection of "pre-packaged adventures" calls to mind the empty spectacles derided by the Situationist International, while urbex itself is reminiscent of Guy Debord's theory of *dérive*, in which astute wanderers traverse the city without formal purpose, marking its psychogeographical terrain as they go. Urbex, as Ninjalicious conceives of it, is a direct response to Debord's warning of a society built on commodification, consumerism, and alienation from ourselves and our neighbors. "For too many people, urban living consists of mindless travel between work, shopping and home, oblivious to the countless wonders a city offers. Most people think the only things worth looking at in our cities and towns are those safe and sanitized attractions that require an admission fee," Ninjalicious writes of the frictionless, curated city produced by planning. "Their alertness has atrophied due to the lack of any real adventure in their lives, and their senses have dulled to help them cope with the cacophony of noise and meaningless spectacle that surrounds them. It's no wonder people feel unfulfilled and uninvolved as they are corralled through the maze of velvet ropes on their way through the gift shop."[8]

In 1917, Max Weber spoke of a disenchanted world, one in which the industrial precision of capital had expunged from culture not only religion, but spontaneity and awe as well. Urban exploration is an answer to that problem, a means of re-enchanting the world and filling ordinary landscapes with a gleeful sense of danger. Non-explorers are apt to view urbex as reckless and

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[7] Ninjalicious, *Access All Areas: A User's Guide to the Art of Urban Exploration* (Canada: Infilpress, 2005), 3.

[8] Ibid.

absurd, and I acknowledge that some explorers are hobbyists who enjoy the thrills but do not intuit much beyond that. Urban exploration surely does not have the same obvious political features as squatting. Nevertheless, there is an unmistakable radicalism to it all, and this quality is not lost on most seasoned explorers. "There's a very particular kind of agency that comes from using the body to get into spaces that you're not supposed to access," urban exploration ethnographer Bradley L. Garrett writes. "That translates very easily into a kind of politics."[9] Garrett expands on this idea in his book *Explore Everything*, a foundational text in the developing field of urbex studies:

> It is both a celebration and a protest. It is a melding, a fusing of the individual and the city, of what is allowed and what is possible, of memory and place. Urban explorers make it clear that the city is not as secure as some may suggest and that, more importantly, by undertaking risks to probe those boundaries, one can create opportunities for creativity, discovery and friendship, and even uncover the places and histories that those in power would prefer remained hidden.[10]

These two populations share a great deal of overlap, yet to my knowledge they have never been studied together. This is not to suggest that they have not been studied at all. On the contrary, there is a significant body of literature concerning squatting and urban exploring as separate avocations, and much of this writing demonstrates the subversive qualities present in their appropriation of city space. I am grateful to Garrett and Amy Starecheski, an oral historian who has extensively documented New York squatting life, for both advising me during the beginning stages of my fieldwork and for the ways in which their research frames these practices as acts of reclamation. Their analyses have shown how squatting and urban exploration serve as a kind of identity work, allowing participants to reassert autonomy over themselves and their

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[9] Stephen Moss, "Politics, Thrills or Social Media: What Drives the New Breed of Urban Explorer?" *The Guardian*, November 10, 2016, theguardian.com/cities/2016/nov/10/urbex-politics-thrills-social-media-new-breed-urban-explorer.

[10] Bradley L. Garrett, *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City* (London: Verso, 2013), 6.

cities, cultivating a new sense of being in the process. Authors writing about these two subjects, like Garrett and Starecheski, have long been in conversation—but only by way of subtext. They seldom cite one another, and no one has yet synthesized urbex and squatting in such a way as to explicitly interpret them as two interconnected genres of rebellious urban living. This is the intervention I seek to make within the present discourse. I want to focus on the commonalities between squatters and urban explorers because I feel they are already unified through a struggle against poverty and the banality of proletarian life, and that they each propose the refusal of private property as a tactic to sustain their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

These groups share common space as well as common purpose, for they both operate within the ruins of the modern city. Abandoned warehouses like Brooklyn's Gowanus Batcave attract squatters as a dwelling place in the same way that it draws in explorers to sift through what remains of its old life. Both groups are at home in these *terrains vagues*, the interstitial realm that lurks beneath the touristic view of the city. This zone is sometimes called the urban void, a non-place marked by absence and therefore at odds with capitalism's drive toward development and the optimized economization of space. Urban voids come in many flavors, but at base they are "areas that, for some reason, have ceased serving a purpose, thus existing residually...in their urban inconsequence."[11] The urban void lacks any prescribed uses, and so it becomes a canvas onto which anyone is free to script their own sense of purpose. It is an antidote to the regimentation of planning. "From the point of view of the norm the urban void is an *un*ordered, *un*tidy, and *un*defined space," Cecilia von Schéele writes. "It is a kind of space in which the interpretation and practice of the city becomes liberated from the everyday constraints

[11] Rute Sousa Matos, "Urban Landscapes: Interstitial Spaces," *Landscape Review* 13, no. 1 (August 2008), 62.

determining what should be done and where."[12] Because the urban void takes travelers 'under the hood' of the city, exposing them to infrastructural in-betweens and supposed dead ends, it also encourages a kind of systems-level thinking about the nature of urban design. "Exploring industrial ruins and structures made me look at the city as one living organism. I started to feel not only the skin of the city, but also to penetrate the inner layers of its intestines and veins, which swarm with miniscule life forms," writes explorer and visual artist Miru Kim. "These spaces—abandoned subway stations, tunnels, sewers, catacombs, factories, hospitals, and shipyards—form the subconscious of the city, where collective memories and dreams reside."[13] One may call these landscapes a wasteland, but it is their wastefulness under capitalism that makes them so suitable for reinvention and transforms perceived absence into a "space of experimentation and re-creation."[14] In this way, the urban void and the squatters, explorers, and others who inhabit it are the fullest realization of a sentiment I found spray-painted on one New York squat house roof: *The waste of the system will lay the system to waste*.

Despite these commonalities, one could still make the case that squatters are too distinct from explorers for this comparison to function, foremost because they are driven by need rather than a desire for play. But this perspective ignores the rather playful history of artist squats like Bullet Space on 3rd Street, where residents produced not just a place to sleep at night, but music, poetry, and sculptural art as well. There is always a dialectical bond between what we must do to live and what we choose to do so that we may feel alive. The squats I visited during my time in

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[12] Cecilia von Schéele, "The Void: Urban Wasteland as Political Space," (PhD dissertation, Lund University, 2016), 14-15.

[13] Miru Kim, mirukim.com/statementNakedCitySpleen.php (Site no longer accessible), cited in Bradley L. Garrett and Harriet Hawkins, "Thinking Through Explorer Subject-Bodies: A Response to Mott and Roberts," *Antipode* (2013), antipodeonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/garrett-and-hawkins-response.pdf.

[14] Matos, "Urban Landscapes," 62.

New York were not shelters, but homes stuffed with creative artefacts, photobooks, journals, and the same creature comforts that distinguish a well-loved bedroom from a hotel. Many of their walls are covered with resident-produced murals and graffiti, allowing squatters to mark their presence and share messages and observations about squatting life amongst themselves. In recent years, residents at C-Squat on Avenue C have converted their building's first floor storefront into the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, where they display their communal archives and homemade zines for the public and occasionally host readings or musical performances. The first floor at Bullet Space is likewise a permanent gallery for the artists who live upstairs. Many come to squatting because they have few other options, but just as many decide to stay because of what they find in addition to housing: community, self-expression, and the pleasure of the unexpected. Squatting, like urbex, is at times a very playful practice.

Some notes on ethnographic methods and my positionality with regards to this topic: the core fieldwork portion of my research took place between December 2018 and December 2019, during which time I interviewed several dozen individuals from across the five boroughs, and numerous explorers from outside the New York area as well. To better facilitate this process, I also lived in New York from June 2019 through the end of that year, residing first in a large apartment building straddling the Washington Heights and Inwood neighborhoods in uptown Manhattan, and later in a smaller residence in Astoria, Queens. Both arrangements represented a bit of a trek to the Lower East Side squats, or to the radical history collection at New York University's Tamiment Library, but I took this as another lesson in the pressures of the New York rental market. This was my first time living in the city, but I have a longstanding relationship with New York that predates this dissertation. My family history on both sides runs through Ellis Island, and my mother and maternal grandparents were all born in the Bronx

between 1930 and 1960. I grew up in the New Jersey suburbs, twenty miles from the Lincoln Tunnel. Daylong trips across the river were common for my family, either to catch the latest Broadway musical, or to get dinner at Katz's Delicatessen, or to visit my grandparents at their office on 40th Street and Broadway. "The City," as North Jerseyans call it, has been a continuous presence throughout my life, for good and for ill. It was for me a familiar, alien landscape—enticing and intimidating, close at hand but a world away.

I am old enough to remember the so-called reforms of then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani, and the transition away from Times Square peep shows to the more sterilized version of Midtown that exists today. I was not alive to witness the seediest lows of the 1970s, but as a child I heard their death rattle, and as a young adult I saw 'bad' neighborhoods become hip and luxury housing begin to rise, along with the overall cost of rent. In the summer of 2012, fresh out of college but not yet resolved to attend graduate school, I took a job at a public relations firm located at 42nd and Lexington Avenue, across the street from Grand Central Terminal and the Chrysler Building. There I had the privilege of experiencing first-hand how miserable it is to find yourself cooped up in an office on a warm, sunny day. I got to see how my wealthy employer churned through recent graduates because our labor was cheap and because we were desperate for work to pay our rent and student debt. Each weekday evening, I stood in the halls of the dirty Port Authority Bus Terminal, waiting in hour-long queues with travelers much older than myself, and I knew they must have crept through this same miserable line back to New Jersey almost every day for years and years, just to earn their paycheck. I took to heart a dreary poem bolted in panels to a series of I-beams in the Times Square subway station, written by Norman B. Colp and entitled "The Commuter's Lament." It read: "Overslept. So tired. If late, get fired. Why

bother? Why the pain? Just go home. Do it again."[15] The final panel featured no words, only a photo of an unmade bed meant to remind the passerby of the comforts they had left behind while chasing dollars. Colp's poem forced me to give shape to my own unhappiness, and to acknowledge the senselessness of a life toiled away in wage slavery.

This was the beginning of my turn toward leftist politics. It should not surprise that it occurred at the center of global capital, and as I first left the safety of my university campus and tumbled headlong into the broken economy that the 2007-08 financial collapse had left behind for people my age. After two months of nothing but pain in New York, I quit my job on a whim and moved to the open prairies of Colorado. New York was ruined for me then, and I saw it as nothing but an overcrowded and detestable prison. How appropriate it is that I return to it now, to find that for all the injustices that come with being the most powerful city in the capitalist world (as Chapter 1 demonstrates), there are still so many magnificent things to love about New York. This is even more true for those lucky enough to escape the commute and begin their days at home in NYC, as one of the 8.6 million teeming lives that make up the human fabric of this city. I appreciate that my PhD program gave me the chance to see New York again, to at last cross the Hudson River full-time and return to the place where my family's story on this continent began. I am now better equipped through theory to recognize that for everything that makes living in New York a struggle, there are so many more reasons to believe this is a city worth saving.

For my interviews with squatters, though I prepared some questions in advance, these discussions tended toward a more freeform, conversational tone. Some were conducted in cafés but most occurred in collaborators' homes, which is to say that they took place in the very apartments that these talented individuals had squatted for decades and restored with their own

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[15] Norman B. Culp, "The Commuter's Lament/A Close Shave," 1991, Metropolitan Transit Authority, nycsubway.org/wiki/Artwork: The_Commuter's_Lament-A_Close_Shave_(Norman_B._Colp).

hands. It was humbling to sit in these clean, welcoming rooms and imagine what they must have looked like thirty years ago, when there were missing floorboards, exposed joists, and no water or electricity, knowing that they had been rescued from abandonment only through the hard work of those who lived there. Several collaborators shared photographs from those early days, along with letters and legal notices from the eviction wars of the 1990s. These documents, along with my interviews, form the primary source material on which I have built this essay's analysis of the squatting community. I will also at times refer to the interviews collected by Starecheski for her Squatters' Collective Oral History Project, which she assembled between 2008 and 2012. Starecheski and I met with members of the same squatting community, and we have several collaborators in common. Due to differences in scope and funding, however, she was able to cover more ground with her oral history fieldwork than I have through this dissertation, and so I am thankful that she and her interlocutors have granted access to their interviews.

Most of my research into squatting concentrated on the squatters of the Alphabet City neighborhood on Manhattan's Lower East Side (LES).[16] This is also true of local media coverage on the subject, as the LES radicals organized the largest, loudest, and most successful squatting project in New York history. It helps that they also best conformed to the public stereotype of what a squatter looks like. Many were young White people, sometimes (but not typically) from middle-class backgrounds, and an affection for punk rock music and anarcho-punk slogans and

[16] Naming conventions relating to this area are tricky. "Alphabet City" refers to the 4x14 block zone between Avenue A and Avenue D (bordered by Houston Street to the south and Stuyvesant Town to the north), widely regarded as a subsection of the larger "East Village" neighborhood. This second moniker, however, is a more recent invention which some have decried as a product of gentrification. While the East Village is today considered distinct from the Lower East Side, with Houston St. serving as the line of demarcation between them, the area's pre-gentrification history shows that it is indeed part of the LES and always has been. As such, I will mostly steer away from references to the "East Village," opting instead for "Lower East Side" when speaking in broad terms and "Alphabet City" when focusing specifically on Avenues A through D. At times I also use the names interchangeably. Note too that Alphabet City is *also* sometimes referred to as "Loisaida," a Nuyorican name derived from the Puerto Rican Spanish pronunciation of "Lower East Side," meaning that there are at least four different names applicable to these fourteen blocks alone. Yes, this is confusing—but so is New York geography.

aesthetics was common among their ranks. These descriptors do not apply to every member of that community, but in general the LES squatters looked the way many imagine squatters to look, marking them as easy targets for derision and commanding the attention of tabloid papers like the *New York Post*. Yet they are far from the only squatting movement to develop in Manhattan. I also met with figures affiliated with the Operation Move-In campaign (OMI), which took place on the Upper West Side (UWS) in 1970. OMI's organizers are distinct in that they were primarily Puerto Rican and Afro-Caribbean, including women who were also mothers and grandmothers. Locating Operation Move-In veterans was more difficult than reaching out to the LES squatters, first because many have since passed away, but also because their movement faced a greater degree of repression along racial and gendered lines. The notion of a White graduate student coming around to ask questions may have been less palatable for them, as was politely expressed to me on several occasions. Further complicating this is the fact that Operation Move-In has largely dispersed and faded from public memory, whereas the LES squatters have managed to remain in their homes for more than three decades and maintain a high-profile in local history. There are many reasons for this disparity, including the obvious racial dimensions. I will explore these matters further in Chapter 2, but for now suffice it to say for now that OMI is a critical chapter in New York's anti-capitalist history and one of the great squatter movements of the twentieth-century. It will therefore be a crucial component of this dissertation.

The Lower East Side squats are also unique because they are no longer illegal occupations. The residents of C-Squat, Bullet Space, and nine other buildings reached an agreement with the city government in 2002 that transferred ownership of the properties from the City of New York to the squatters, on the condition that they renovate the buildings and bring them up to code. This was a major victory for the squatters, but one fraught with complex

feelings about squatting's purpose and a loss of the collective and individual identities that each squatter had developed through their years of involvement with renegade housing. Going legal and attaining co-op status meant squatters were no longer forced to defend their homes against state violence, but it also meant leaving behind the most subversive aspects of squatter culture and moving toward something more like the standard apartment model seen elsewhere in the city. Residents were no longer brothers and sisters-in-arms but neighbors. There are no rent payments, but monthly dues are required to pay off their government-mandated loans and cover maintenance fees. The squatters won, but at the cost of absorption into the capitalist system.

This legalization process was a recurring narrative in my conversations with squatters, and it is something with which everyone interested in squatting as radical action must grapple. It is not, however, the focal point of my study. Starecheski has already provided an excellent and near-definitive look at the legalization process in her book *Ours to Lose: When Squatters Became Homeowners in New York City*. I prefer to view my collaborators on the Lower East Side not as ex-squatters, or former squatters, but as squatters in the present tense. They are, by and large, the same people who squatted these buildings before legalization, and they still live in the homes that they salvaged from the waste bin of capital through their own sweat and struggle. That these buildings continue to exist at all, and that they remain affordable housing for working-class people in a hyper-gentrified neighborhood, is a testament to their efforts. Referring to them exclusively as 'former squatters' diminishes the history they share with their buildings—a history still being written today. The act of squatting may be vanishing from New York life (for now), but the LES squatters themselves are not going anywhere. Legalization merely reshaped the relationships squatters share with their buildings. It did not destroy them. My breakdown of LES squatter history in Chapter 2 has been structured with this perspective in mind.

Research into the urban exploration community was less a matter of straightforward interviews and more in the vein of participant-observer ethnography. I spent so much of my time with that community crawling through cracks in the earth or balancing on narrow ledges hundreds of feet above the ground. Urban exploration offered a form of direct involvement that I could not replicate with the years-long process of squatting. It also presented greater perils. With urbexers, I was not just speaking to people who had broken the law. I was actively breaking the law myself and faced a recurring risk of arrest and the danger of getting hurt or even falling to my death. I do not mean to overplay this. No academic research is worth dying for, and every chance I took with my safety was a calculated one. Had I felt that I or any of my collaborators were in a truly perilous situation, one in which the potential for harm outweighed the benefits to my project and our sense of fulfillment, I would have stopped. The same is true for all but the most extreme urbexers. One of the most profound experiences that comes with exploring is getting to watch some of the bravest people you know negotiate with fear. It is not uncommon for accomplished explorers to need a moment to build courage, or to pause and assess a situation. Indeed, that is one of the skills that makes them so accomplished. It is also the sort of in-the-moment response that one can only observe when you are with them, present in that heightened frame of reality. While it is possible to explore on your own (and I did do this several times while living in New York), urbexing is best enjoyed as a social experience. The only real way to understand it is to find explorers you trust, pull up your boots, and step into the darkness together. I will provide greater detail on this process in Chapter 3.

Finally, there are three methodological guidelines that this dissertation will follow to ensure the safety of each collaborator and, when relevant, the long-term preservation of exploration sites. First, all urban exploration contacts have right of review and are free to make

edits regarding the way in which they are presented. They can also suggest some larger changes and request the use of a pseudonym if they have not already done so. I will not portray them in a manner that they have not agreed with. Moreover, any urbexer who appears in these pages but was not one of my direct collaborators—meaning I did not interview them but observed their actions while exploring—has been assigned a pseudonym by default. The only exceptions to this are public figures who openly use either their real names or specific exploring codenames in mass media. I will follow their lead and use those names here as well.

Second, any personal data that I have collected, including real names and full interview transcriptions, are now stored on encrypted hard drives. This is both a standard safety measure and an attempt to mitigate the unlikely yet not unprecedented risk that police may commandeer my research to use as evidence in a court case. This may sound outrageous, but it is precisely what happened to Garrett when he was yanked from a plane at Heathrow Airport by the British Transport Police in 2012 and prosecuted for criminal damages.[17] I spoke with Garrett by phone in December 2018, and he made it clear just how important a security measure this is. I have therefore taken care to implement it properly. Third, I will not disclose the exact location of any urbex site unless that site is already a well-known public landmark. That is to say that I will withhold details about caves and abandoned buildings, but I will not take that precaution when discussing the Williamsburg Bridge, for example, because doing so would not put its continued existence at risk. As for the squatters, there is less concern that my work will place them in legal jeopardy, but they will also receive review copies upon the paper's completion. I consider this a basic courtesy and, more importantly, a requisite for ethical scholarship.

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[17] Robert Booth, "Oxford University Academic Who Scaled Shard is Spared Jail Sentence," *The Guardian*, May 22, 2014, theguardian.com/education/2014/may/22/oxford-university-academic-shard-jail-place-hacker-garrett.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 ("To Master and To Own") lays out the basic historical and theoretical premises on which this dissertation operates. It begins with a deconstruction of New York's exceptional status within the capitalist world—a status which elevates that city above all others in wealth, power, and relevance to my topic. This section ("New York and the Zero-Point of Modernity") will also draw on the work of theorists Michel Foucault, Mark Fisher, Santiago Castro-Gómez, and Walter D. Mignolo to define modernity as an epistemological age, and the era that birthed capitalism as a system and New York as the seat of capitalist authority. The following part ("Reviving the Right to the City") investigates the radical potential of the right to the city concept as formulated by its originator, Henri Lefebvre. Here I review the near-revolutionary atmosphere of 1968 Paris into which the right to the city was born, and its potential for a twenty-first-century renaissance. I also reject the diluted variations of this concept recently promulgated by the United Nations and others, in which the RttC is not a right claimed by the people but rather a privilege conferred by states to their citizens. This explication is necessary to establish a categorically socialist formation of the right to the city, and to outline how I will be making use of this socialist interpretation in my analysis.

The second chapter ("From the Ashes of the Old") concerns New York's longstanding squatter heritage, beginning with the numerous shantytowns that cropped up throughout the region during the city's nineteenth-century industrial development. The first section ("The Early History of New York Squats") describes the longstanding economic struggle between squatters on the one side and the combined forces of media, real estate, and government/police on the other. Here I use primary source narratives like the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*'s 1883 report on the clearing out of the Darby's Patch squat to link the inequities of that time to the present-day

demand for fair housing. Included in this section is a look at Seneca Village, a prosperous Black neighborhood demolished in the 1850s to make way for the construction of Central Park. I also give thought to how these evictions parallel the White supremacist structures of frontier colonialism and how they might inform our understanding of similar retributive actions taken against future squatters. The next section ("Operation Move-In") tells the story of the 1970 squatter rebellion and the many first-time activists who fought against urban renewal by seizing state-owned apartment buildings on the Upper West Side. Through mutual aid and communal self-care, OMI squatters converted these apartments into not only rent-free housing, but schools, day care centers, libraries, and more, dramatically transforming their relationships with each other and the city. Throughout this portion of the chapter, I synthesize numerous academic sources, collaborator accounts collected through my fieldwork, and scenes from the 1971 documentary *Rompiendo Puertas* to explain how gentrification operates, and how it laid the groundwork for one of the most radical housing rights campaigns New York has ever seen.

Following this, I recount the events of the infamous 1988 Tompkins Square Park Riot ("Legacies of Protest in Tompkins Square Park"), during which members of the New York Police Department (NYPD) engaged in severe and disproportionate violence against squatters and their working-class allies. This episode, best termed a police riot, left a substantial imprint on the neighborhood. It more clearly defined the economic battlelines between gentrifiers and community activists—including squatters—that remain contested to this day. The Tompkins Square Park Riot is therefore an essential moment in the life of the New York squatter movement. Lastly, I review the tumultuous but extraordinary history of the Lower East Side squatters ("The Alphabet City Uprising"), from the founding of prominent squat houses like Bullet Space and C-Squat to the eviction wars of the 1990s and the squatters' eventual

conversion from lawbreakers into legal homeowners. This section features a considerable number of first-hand accounts from Alphabet City squatters whom I interviewed during my research, as well as similar accounts gathered by Starecheski during her earlier oral history project. Taken in full, Chapter 2 represents the deepest retrospective on New York's squatter communities possible within the space of this dissertation, bringing together squatters from three distinct chronological periods and linking their struggles through a common frame of analysis.

Chapter 3 ("The Wonders We Have Made") begins with a first-hand narrative of my experience infiltrating a supertall skyscraper with some of my urbex partners ("Stealing the Sovereign Gaze"). In this section, I interrogate the relationship between wealth and poverty, and how New York's most luxurious homes could not exist without working-class toil and dispossession. I also consider the ways in which our relationship with urban space changes when we ascend from sidewalk to sky, and especially when we manage to steal that view from billionaires rather than passively consume it as tourists. The bulk of this chapter stresses communitas and the collaborative placemaking at the heart of urbex, as well as the self-directed culture explorers have constructed in support and defense of their passion ("Together at the Edge"). I demonstrate this through a series of fascinating ordeals: struggling to gain trust in the community, vanishing with my collaborators deep into an underground maze, discovering an anarchist reading room in a stormwater drain, experiencing a panic attack on the side of a bridge, and witnessing how urbexers protect each other by way of a daring water rescue inside a cave. I also report on the things explorers have built for themselves in the urban void, from a gargantuan underground award show to a cocktail lounge constructed inside a water tower.

Finally, my collaborators and I respond to criticisms levied against urban exploration and reflect on the possible disruption to my thesis they present ("The Urbex Critique"). Scholars like

Rebecca J. Kinney, Steven High, David W. Lewis, Carrie Mott, and Susan M. Roberts have argued that urbex is an anti-inclusive, masculinist pursuit that reproduces the imperial gaze rather than countervail against it. Their essays on this subject center around the supposition that urbexers are young, mostly White men who are inconsiderate of difference and keen to insert themselves uninvited into poor, mostly Black and Brown cities in pursuit of privileged adventurism. I do not dispute that there is a touch of truth in these claims, and that any honest accounting of urbex as practice must contend with the socially negative dimensions present inside the community. Yet I also use my fieldwork to show that these assertions are not an accurate reading of urbex in full, and that elevating the worst urban exploration has to offer over the positive work and practical experiences of real explorers does a disservice to the field. Indeed, urban exploration is much more about *adding* to the places urbexers explore than it is about extracting from them. It is a means of rehumanizing the city for all its denizens, not merely the White, male, and able-bodied.

I then end the dissertation with two examples of capitalism's failure to successfully recuperate squatting and urban exploration as market products ("Conclusion: Commodity or Sovereignty?"). Though I acknowledge these practices' limitations and inability to bring about the dawn of the post-capitalist world on their own, I nevertheless close on a note of optimism. Revolution may well be a long way off, but the chance to revolutionize the way we think, feel, and move about cities is here before us now. There are indeed many New Yorkers already guiding us toward that change, should we choose to listen.

CHAPTER 1: TO MASTER AND TO OWN

New York and the Zero-Point of Modernity

Why center my research around New York City? Have I been drawn to this place by its many dazzling icons and landmarks? Have I, like so many around the world, found myself seduced by its spectacle? Not quite. As Italo Calvino writes, "You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours."[18] For me, this question is one of property and ownership. It is the question of how those who own little and produce nothing but their labor can find happiness in a city where ownership and production are everything, and where one's value as a human being is tied from birth to one's accumulation habits and value as an economic actor. These conditions are a catastrophic fact of American life. I have chosen to focus on New York then because it is the epicenter of this catastrophe, the city where the division between the ownership class and the propertyless renter class is at its most apparent. It is true that there are places with more severe poverty, as in much of the Global South and other parts of the United States, and places with greater numbers of people struggling through homelessness. Statistics grading wealth distribution differ on which urban centers are the most stratified, but few rank New York at the top of the list.[19] Yet still New York seems to me the most logical city in which to seek resolution to these questions of wealth and power.

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[18] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. by William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1972), 44.

[19] Salome Chelangat, "Cities With the Most Income Inequality," WorldAtlas, July 18, 2019, worldatlas.com/articles/cities-with-the-most-income-inequality.html.

What makes New York distinct and therefore such a worthy candidate for this study is its status as the supposed capital of the world. It is, after all, the headquarters of the two most powerful stock exchanges, a plethora of the richest investment banks, and the United Nations. Since the 1940s, New York has occupied a position of international prestige disproportionate to its size. This phenomenon persists still, a fifth of the way into the twenty-first-century, despite the substantial growth of rival cities in Asia. We can surmise one explanation for why New York retains its throne: it is where the bosses live. A 2021 "Billionaire Census," compiled by data firm Wealth-X, asserts that New York is "home to more billionaires than almost every country in the world," with 124 of the richest living individuals maintaining permanent or semi-permanent residence in Manhattan.[20] There are more billionaires clustered around Park and Fifth Avenues than live in London and Paris combined, and the recent boom in ultra-luxury housing at Hudson Yards and along the southern edge of Central Park (an area now known as Billionaires' Row) demonstrates that the heart of fiscal power has not strayed far. Even in this era of globalization, the men who move the most money also move to New York.

There is another reason for highlighting New York, and it is the same reason why that place boasts such enormous wealth to begin with. The city once known as New Amsterdam is one of the oldest major European settlements in the present-day United States, and so it has been the beneficiary of every mode of colonialist exploitation visited upon the continent. Its development began with the expropriation of land from the resident Lenape tribes, who were later forced west under the genocidal policy of Indian removal. It continued with the importation of African slaves beginning in 1626, and the opening of a bustling slave market for the sale and trade of human lives on Wall Street in 1711. All early American enterprises owe their success, at

[20] Wealth-X, "Billionaire Census 2021," wealthx.com/l/311771/-X-Billionaire-Census-2021-pdf/p2q54.

least in part, to the labor stolen from these enslaved people. Yet the abolition of slavery was still not enough to deprive capitalists of their spoils. The Erie Canal and the railroads made New York into the Empire City, funneling in the plundered fortunes of westward expansion and giving rise to the robber barons of the Gilded Age. New York processed millions of immigrants to work these conquered lands, while slumlords and industrialists crowded new arrivals first into tenements and then into factories to enhance the city's labor pool. When there was no more indigenous land to capture, the city drew blood from America's overseas acquisitions, and it is no accident that New York newspapers and their plutocratic owners were among the foremost advocates for war against Spain in the Caribbean. Then, as the US sought to establish a capitalist world order and its own hegemony following the decimation of Europe in World War II, rich politicians like Nelson Rockefeller and planners like Le Corbusier helped inaugurate NYC as the seat of this postwar power system. They and others incorporated many key liberal institutions in Manhattan, from the hedge funds and the World Trade Center in the Financial District to the UN in Turtle Bay. Of those liberal/capitalist institutions found elsewhere, some of the most critical—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the US federal government—are a short drive away in Washington, DC, well within the purview of the New York elite.

This city, we see, is not the *novum caput mundi*—the new capital of the world—but rather the capital of capitalism. It is fitting that New York should hold this title. Whereas Old World cities have lived under many political and economic regimes, New York emerged concurrent with capital at the outset of the seventeenth-century. It began as a money-making venture by the Dutch West India Company (WIC), one of the earliest public corporations. The WIC did not dream of a sprawling territorial empire like that of the English, who were then stockpiling land to the north and south of New Netherland. "This was a business settlement, a

way station on the rising Atlantic trade circuit," writes historian Russell Shorto. "New Amsterdam was not a city with its own governance but literally a company town: its inhabitants were considered less citizens than employees."[21] As such, early New York was not founded with grand, moralistic ideals like those the Puritans brought with them to New England. There were no ambitions to develop a model society. This was no godly errand into the wilderness. The Dutch imperial strategy was "built around not settlement colonies but outposts," designed not to foster community but to monopolize trade by sea and maximize shareholder profit. As such, a lust for wealth has been encoded in New York's DNA from the start. Were one to overlook the region's 3,000-year indigenous legacy, as Eurocentric readings of history encourage us to do, it would appear that New York has no pre-capitalist past. It was born of money, plucked from the earth like a diamond, speaking the guilder and pound as its native tongues.

When New Yorkers recount the birth of their city, they do not tell a fable like that of Romulus and Remus. They talk instead about a real estate deal: Peter Minuit's famous 1626 purchase of Manhattan Island for some wampum and an assortment of other goods. There is reason to doubt the practical importance of this trade, given that the Lenape were not a unified group but a collection of tribes, none of whom held exclusive dominion over the land, and none of whom maintained a system of private ownership. It is also probable that whichever tribe Minuit dealt with would have interpreted the transaction not as a sale but as a treaty or an agreement to share resources. Yet this incident has appeal, Shorto argues, because "It speaks to our sense of early American history as the history of savvy, ruthless Europeans conniving...Natives out of their land and their lives. It's a neatly packed symbol of the entire

[21] Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 61.

conquest of the continent that was to come."[22] Minuit's bargain is, in essence, a triple origin story for New York, American capitalism, and American colonialism, binding the three through narrative in the same way that they have always been bound together by the historically contingent dynamics between them. It is a reframing of events that converts stolen land into a purchasable commodity while allaying the guilt some Americans feel about the violence of empire. It is a legend in which indigenous people are bested not through war but by cunning White merchants, who then seed the land with their wealth to prime it for civilization.

In his book *The Island at the Center of the World*, Shorto makes the case that "beneath the level of myth and politics and high ideals, down where real people live and interact, Manhattan is where America began."[23] Here he distinguishes between New York's material consequence and the impact that mythic landscapes like the Wild West have had on the nation's sense of self. I agree with this thesis, but I would take it one step further. New York and its founding bargain are *also* at the symbolic root of American identity right alongside the Wild West, as the principles of liberty and property expansion they represent are indissoluble in the capitalist imagination. The pact with the Lenape stands out because it is a tale about the transition away from one epoch and into its dichotomous opposite: from wilderness to civilization, from primitiveness to modernity, from anarchy to Enlightenment, and from an ethos in which communities practice shared stewardship over their land to one in which everything is for sale. The racism in these binaries is deliberate, as is the Eurocentrism and the spurious belief that history travels a straight line from chaos to order. Modernity is dependent upon these ideas, and the Minuit story serves to propagate the ideology of the modern and its attendant mode of

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[22] Ibid.,50.

[23] Ibid., 3.

production. And there, at the core of all of this, is New York, the first great European city of the New World and the *new world*, the modern age, the era of capital and colonization.

The use of the term 'modernity' here does not refer to contemporary time, but to Michel Foucault's notion of an epistemological age, or episteme: a discrete period of history in which human discourse and its presumptions mark some ideas as logical and others as illogical, or even impossible to conceive, in defiance of the presumptions of past epistemes. Foucault, writing in *The Order of Things*, notes that in "any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice."[24] Foucault deploys this formulation to enact what he calls an archaeology of European science across time, detailing the epistemic turns that not only helped cultivate paradigm shifting theorists like Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, but which enabled those theorists to think as they did in the first place. It is not that ideas outside the boundaries of our current episteme are unpopular or misunderstood. Rather, Foucault posits that such ideas appear so insensible to us that it would never occur to think of them at all. The result is a totalizing perspective, the fertile earth from which ideologies sprout as they feed on the prevailing suppositions of the day. It is therefore in the interest of those who defend the status quo to preserve the epistemic presumptions that birthed it, and to make them appear so ingrained in conventional wisdom that no one can dream up an alternative. At its apex, the dominant ideology becomes such part and parcel of its episteme that it ceases to be ideological and takes on the aspect of truth. "What seems possible at any point in the social field, is defined by a series of political determinations," writes philosopher Mark Fisher. "An ideological position can never

[24] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 168.

be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact."[25]

We live today under a hegemon called capital, the modern episteme's preeminent ideological concoction. Privatization and the profit motive drive every facet of our experience, from deciding who lives in peace and who dies in war, to our conception of human worth, and the kind of cities we inhabit. Yet the capitalists have little to say about their system, preferring to credit its booms and busts to the caprices of some vague, almost climatological force they call the economy. They say that a good economy makes for good times, and that a bad economy should be avoided for the hardships it creates. Yet they do so without acknowledging that these cyclical instabilities are inherent in the function of capital, and that the prospect of good times is illusory and generally unattainable for the poor regardless of how the markets perform. This is especially true in what they deem 'developing nations,' a euphemism that masks their own role in the five-hundred-year effort to drain wealth from non-White countries. Much of the trouble in analyzing how capitalism functions thereby falls to the socialists, which is why Karl Marx remains one of the leading theorists of an economic system he sought to advance beyond. The capitalists would prefer for their subjects to believe that capitalism is natural rather than man-made, and an incontrovertible component of modern life. Fisher describes this mentality as "capitalist realism," the "widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it." Or, to draw from an expression that Fisher attributes to Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek: "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism."[26]

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[25] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2009), 16.

[26] Ibid., 2.

One assumes that the world Jameson and Žižek here refer to is the physical Earth on which we live, but we can also read their statement in more metaphorical terms. Modernity itself is a world, an all-encompassing thought-world that orders how people think and behave. The Colombian postcolonial writer Santiago Castro-Gómez leans into this question of the thought-world to ask, "Is there only one world or are there various possible worlds? ...Is it possible to share a world where different ways of knowing that world can coexist and complement each other?" The conclusion he reaches is as certain as it is unsettling:

> Unfortunately, my answer to these questions would be a 'provisional no' because to this day, at least for the last 500 years, it has not been possible to recognize the epistemological plurality of the world. On the contrary, a single way of knowing the world, the scientific-technical-rationality of the Occident, has been postulated as the only valid episteme, that is to say the only *episteme* capable of generating real knowledge about nature, the economy, society, morality and people's happiness. All other ways of knowing the world have been relegated to the sphere of *doxa*, as if they were a part of modern science's *past*, and are even considered an 'epistemological obstacle' to attaining the certainty of knowledge.[27]

Castro-Gómez attributes the unipolarity of the modern episteme to a "'coloniality of power,'" which creates a pecking order of knowledges based on "the European colonial experience, and specifically the idea that the colonizer possesses an *ethnic* and *cognitive superiority* over the colonized." This hierarchization of identities and ways of knowing is a terror, but it is nonetheless helpful for our understanding of how modernity retains its grip on the mind.

Hierarchies by their nature have a top and a bottom, and order, modernity teaches us, has a center, often represented by the halls of state and corporate power. Recognizing this, we can map the modern episteme and locate it in space and time. It is *now*, as the modern is disdainful of what has come before and fearful of what might come next. But it is also *here*, in places like New York's pristine glass office towers. It is everywhere that wealth and the Western pursuit of

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[27] Santiago Castro-Gómez, "The Missing Chapter of Empire," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007), 428.

power resides. Everything else is cast in shadow, kicked away to the margins of space and the backward reaches of time. Castro-Gómez calls this the "hubris of the zero-point," with the "zero-point" demarcating the epistemological center, the position from which "an observer of the social world" can see all things but believes, like the prison guard at the center of Foucault's famous panopticon, that he cannot himself be seen. "Our hypothetical observer," Castro-Gómez states, "would be in a position to adopt a sovereign gaze toward the world, whose power would lie precisely in that it can neither be observed nor represented."[28] This is the zero-point of modernity, the ideology that is not ideological, the artifice that is not artificial. As Walter D. Mignolo writes in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity:*

> Every way of knowing...that [does] not conform to the epistemology and aesthetics of the zero point are cast behind in time and/or in the order of myth, legend, folklore, local knowledge, and the like. Since the zero point is always in the present of time and the center of space, it hides its own local knowledge universally projected. Its imperiality consists precisely in its locality, its geo-historical body location, and in assuming to be universal and thus managing the universality to which everyone has to submit.[29]

All of this is to say that New York is a zero-point, if not *the* zero-point, of the modern world. It is the power center from which the commands of the imperial monolith flow. There are, to be sure, other cities that have their claims to this title. Washington and its vicinity host the White House and Pentagon, the federal intelligence agencies, and the aforementioned children of the Bretton Woods Conference: the IMF and World Bank. London is the financial capital of Europe and the seat of the nineteenth-century's mightiest empire. It is also a literal zero-point, owing to the particularly hubristic placement of the 0.0000° W Prime Meridian in Greenwich. Paris, Tokyo, and Los Angeles have cultural cachet, while Beijing is unmatched in its access to

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[28] Castro-Gómez, *Zero-Point Hubris: Science, Race, and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Latin America*, trans. by George Ciccariello-Mager and Don T. Derre (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 8.

[29] Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 80.

human capital, heretofore known as labor. Hong Kong is a corporate giant and yet itself exploited, having now survived about 150 years of submission at the hands of the British Empire and the mainland Chinese state. Tokyo, Beijing, and Hong Kong are also not White-dominated cities, which matters greatly in modernity's enduring racial caste system. No, it is New York and New York alone. In no other city yet imagined has infrastructure met influence at such scale. In no other city can one find this strong a manifestation of the capitalist vision, and the overwhelming financial resources required to bring that vision to life. Indeed, New York's reputation as the preeminent capitalist city remains much the same today as it was when Leon Trotsky wrote about it in his autobiography almost a century ago:

> Here I was in New York, city of prose and fantasy, of capitalist automatism, its streets a triumph of cubism, its moral philosophy that of the dollar. New York impressed me tremendously because, more than any other city in the world, it is the fullest expression of our modern age.[30]

"Ask New Yorkers where their city is located, and they'll tell you in a minute," proclaims one tourism guidebook. "It's the center of the universe."[31] That assertion may read as a bit of self-centered boasting, but what have the New York elite done if not center the world—the universe, even—around their interests? There is no hyperbole here; the guidebook is correct. Manhattan, a 22.7 square mile sliver of land at the far edge of a continent, is the zero-point of modernity. It is "the island at the center of the world," to borrow from the title of Shorto's book, not a "mere city" but instead what Joan Didion calls the "mysterious nexus of all love and money and power."[32] It is "a world completely rotten with wealth, power...poverty and waste,

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[30] Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2012), 270.

[31] Anita Gates, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to New York City* (New York: Alpha Books, 2008), 4.

[32] Joan Didion, *Slouching Toward Bethlehe (*New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 231.

technological futility and aimless violence," and yet one "cannot help but feel it has about it something of the dawning of the universe," Jean Baudrillard writes. "Perhaps because the entire world continues to dream of New York, even as New York dominates and exploits it."[33]

This duality, equal parts detestable and alluring, has defined New York from its 1624 colonial settlement through the early 2020s, as the monarchical city now enters the fifth century of its reign. It is why this island of despots at the heart of the imperial core appears so incapable of redemption, yet that same tragic strength marks the potential for greatness as well. The beauty of this skyscraper metropolis, the millions of lives it brings together, and the many strange, thrilling encounters that occur between them daily tease what is possible within urban space, even while at the same time representing the worst depravities of modern living. Given this dynamic, we cannot make sense of capitalism's rise nor any conceivable post-capitalist future without first grounding our research here at the center of everything—in New York, the greatest and most terrible of capitalist cities.

But centers have their own peripheries, and so it must be acknowledged that not all of New York exists at the nexus of world power. Inside the city there are many working-class neighborhoods of color being targeted for redevelopment, resident displacement, and eventual reconquest by wealthy White transplants. This ongoing gentrification, covered with greater depth in Chapter 2, mirrors the original seventeenth-century ouster of the Lenape by Dutch and English settlers, signaling that the work of colonization is never finished. Wealth extraction is always a process in motion, though today it need not take the form of an extraneous colonization practiced outside the boundaries of imperialist states. Rather, gentrification and related policies like disinvestment and over-policing have become a mode of internal colonization through which the

[33] Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988), 23.

capitalist state manages control of its surplus populations. I do not mean this as a metaphor, which is to say that gentrification is *like* colonization, but instead that the former is a direct expression of the latter. The geopolitical frontier once associated with indigenous land has moved from without to within, as geographer Neil Smith writes in *The New Urban Frontier*, and so even the zero-point must engage in a constant revanchist war for new territory with itself.[34] My project is therefore not concerned with centers alone, but with centers and peripheries; the powerful and the disempowered. In short, I have chosen to focus on New York not just to marvel at its wealth but also to consider those living at the social margins such wealth creates—and the latent power they possess to someday move against the center and overtake it.

Reviving the Right to the City

This dissertation owes its existence to the contributions of French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, whose dialectical critiques of everyday life point us toward the coming episteme and the hope of a new urban radicalism. As such, a brief appraisal of Lefebvre's life and convictions is imperative, for his thinking on the production of urban space and to whom that space should belong undergirds the entirety of my research. Included in this is an assessment of the ways in which his ideas are being applied, but also misapplied, by a variety of political actors today. By evaluating effective and ineffective uses of his ideas, I hope to provide greater clarity into my own application as one wholly within the Marxist tradition and separate from any reformist attempts to align them with a program of liberalized, state-sponsored privileges. I will invoke other theorists, but no individual is more crucial to my argument than Lefebvre, and no theory holds more weight in my thinking than that of his 'right to the city.'

[34] Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Henri Lefebvre was an historical materialist and an inveterate dissident, whose self-described "youth tormented, rebellious, anarchistic," gave way to "balance around his thirtieth year in and through Marxism."[35] Though his seventy-year-long academic career both predated and eclipsed the span of Foucault's entire life, the two professors often crossed paths, as they published their most admired texts contemporaneously in the late 1960s and early '70s. Lefebvre and Foucault shared an affection for heterotopic space—places marked by social difference—as well as an antipathy toward the prevailing structures of power. Yet Lefebvre was sometimes dismissive of Foucault, referring to him as a "best-seller" whose pessimistic "Nietzschean meditation" on the "death of classical humanism" and the collective loss of meaning verged on nihilism.[36] Lefebvre continued this reproach in *The Survival of Capitalism*, expanding his criticism to include the 1960s-era New Left at large, which he felt concerned itself only with the "social and political peripheries—particularly youth and women, homosexuals, the desperate, the 'mad,' [and] the drugtakers."[37]

This proto-intersectionalist regard for those we now refer to as marginalized people is not bad, Lefebvre contends, and in fact "directly or indirectly prepares, even puts into practice, a critique of power which is more radical than the critique that is addressed solely to the economic." The problem, as he supposes it, is that the Foucauldian tactic of working on the "peripheries and only on the peripheries" results in little more than "a lot of pin-prick operations which are separated from each other in time and space," neglecting the "centres and centrality."

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[35] Henri Lefebvre, "Connaissance et critique sociale," in *L'activité philosophique contemporaine en France et aux États-Unis—Tome Second: La philosophie française*, ed. Marvin Farber (Paris: PUF, 1950), 298. Trans. by Stuart Elden, 2004.

[36] Lefebvre, *Writing on Cities*, trans. by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996), 149.

[37] Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of* Production, trans. by Frank Bryant (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 116.

Lefebvre never doubted the importance of empowering the dispossessed, nor of making room for radicalism at the heterotopic social periphery. His fear was that a lack of attention on the center, the zero-point of modernity where power is reproduced, would lead to a likewise myopic and centerless left. "So long as the centres and centrality remain stable or reconstitute themselves," he warned, "the pin-prick operations can be beaten off one by one." Almost five decades later, it is now reasonable to wonder if Lefebvre's premonition has come true in the capitalist co-optation of feminism and the LGBT rights movement, whole swaths of which have been stripped of their militancy and reduced to fetish.

But what is at the center of Lefebvre's scholarship? It is nothing less than the future, or a series of possible futures, accompanied by a prudent yet joyful optimism. Like Marx himself, Lefebvre was not content with only interpreting the world. He endeavored to change it, seeking a new order in which people are not granted, but rather grant themselves the freedom to direct their own affairs. Lefebvre believed that the concept of autogestion, long defined in socialist thought as worker self-management, could expand to engage all social relations. "Each time a social group refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence, of life, or of survival, each time such a group forces itself not only to understand but to master its own conditions of existence, *autogestion* is occurring," he declared in a 1979 essay. This universalized autogestion would not only bring about the democratization of the city under a dictatorship of the proletariat but would dispel the feelings of alienation that plague life within the capitalist status quo. The tools needed to accomplish this task are already at our disposal, but it is not enough to theorize them. We must take them up and make them useful through struggle. "A magnificent life is waiting just around the corner, and far, far away," he writes. "It is waiting like the cake is waiting when there's

butter, milk, flour and sugar."[38] For now, the potential of that cake remains unrealized, and we are left pondering the boredoms that come with a lifetime of hunger. "And will you be content simply to pick your ironic and philosophical way through all these boredoms?" he asks of us (and, we surmise, of Foucault as well). "No. There are other things to be done. There are things to be created. And let no one say that it is impossible."

This is the revolution-minded framework Lefebvre brought to urban studies, a field he entered unexpectedly but with much enthusiasm at the age of sixty-seven. Instead of viewing the city as a static object in need of deconstruction, Lefebvre understood urbanism as being still in the process of creation, much like his metaphorical cake. The ingredients are present, and though they may at times taste sweet on their own, we have yet to bake them into something new and ever more delicious. Thus, Lefebvre drew a theoretical dividing line between the city that is and the cities that might yet come into being. The city that exists now is the modern city. It is the offspring of capital and industrialization, with resources distributed in accordance with private ownership. This was in line with the mainstream Marxist reading of the city at that time, which offered what Mark Purcell describes as an "economistic view of the city...as mostly the result of the capitalist production process."[39] Where Lefebvre diverged from his fellow Marxists was in his hypothesis that the modern city and the urban are separable. They are two related but distinct entities on a common evolutionary line.

The urban, in its most actualized state, is the city or cities of the post-capitalist future. It is not an engine designed to convert labor into wealth, but instead a living, organic mesh linking

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[38] Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959-May 1961*, trans. by John Moore (London: Verso, 1995), 125.

[39] Mark Purcell, "Possible Worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2014), 148.

the people who reside within it. It is a hub for human connections mapped onto physical space, like a neural network firing its synapses with each encounter, allowing "play, learning, difference, surprise, and novelty" to unfold between neighbors. Lefebvre called this totality of experiences the urban oeuvre, for the urban reflects the complete body of human social interactions in the same way that an artist's oeuvre reflects the complete body of their artistic creations. It is not that novel or surprising encounters are impossible in the modern city, but that the regimentation imposed by capital has left them stunted and diminished, as planners subdivide the urban into specialized tracts and dictate the conditions by which city-dwellers may interface with each other and their environment. Today's New Yorkers are therefore denied the oeuvre and its many unique encounters. They have been saddled instead with lonely, atomized conditions like those Calvino describes in *Invisible Cities*:

> The people who move through the streets are all strangers. At each encounter, they imagine a thousand things about one another; meetings which could take place between them, conversations, surprises, caresses, bites. But no one greets anyone; eyes lock for a second, then dart away, seeking other eyes, never stopping.[40]

In short, capitalism curates the urban. It puts up fences. This may have the perceived positive effect of curtailing the risk of dangerous encounters, but at the cost of sterilizing the city until it is no longer recognizably urban. "The logic of the market has reduced these urban qualities to exchange and suppressed the city as oeuvre," Lefebvre writes.[41] Alienation takes hold, estranging the city-dweller from their home in the same way Marx saw capitalism as estranging the worker from their labor. Though Lefebvre, like most French men of his age, was raised to see Paris as exceptional and above most other cities, he eventually came to understand the modern metropolis as a single, continuously reproduced market product. This essay adheres

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[40] Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 51.

[41] Lefebvre, *Writing on Cities*, 19.

to that view in the sense that all modern cities function in accordance with the same rules, while also maintaining that New York is an exceptionally good case study given its status as the chief exporter and beneficiary of this process. But, in true Lefebvrian analysis, no city is free from the crisis of capitalist alienation.

Lefebvre's solution to this problem is appropriation, the taking back of an urban landscape through collective action. Appropriation means emphasizing the interpersonal needs of the individual and their community above those aspects of the city that prioritize wealth, caste, and liberal conceptions of order. In the language of Marxist theory, we can describe appropriation as the conversion of the city's exchange value into the use value of the urban. Though Lefebvre contends that appropriation will be an indispensable component of any socialist revolution, he does not limit his definition to only events with overt political dimensions, nor does he position appropriation as an abstraction waiting to become real at the moment of rebellion. His genius, and his optimism, comes in his ability to see that appropriation is already happening every day. It might take the form of squatters transforming disused apartments into low-income housing, or urban explorers strengthening their friendships in tunnels far beneath the street. It might also be something as simple as a pickup basketball game in Riverside Park. At base, appropriation is any use of the city that prioritizes community ahead of capital. It is the inextricable urge felt by all city-dwellers to live instead of produce.

This is not too general a characterization. We must recall that the modern city is a machine built for one end: to make wealth. This machine was developed on top of the existing structure of urbanity, which precedes capitalism by thousands of years and several epistemes, to take advantage of the large number of people required to generate this wealth through labor and trade. That cities also accumulate culture is, from a capitalist perspective, almost an accident. It

is a happy accident for the leisure class—another expression of bourgeois luxury—but a bug in the system when enjoyed too much by the proletariat. Culture is a byproduct of this machine, but also a significant manifestation of the urban within the city that no amount of regimentation can excise. When we engage in appropriation, we throw a wrench into the gears of capital. We inscribe new uses and resonances onto city space, just as modernity appropriated older iterations of the urban to inscribe the primacy of markets. This process is always already taking place, unfolding each day at the level of neighbors and neighborhoods. "In the street and through the space it offered, a group (the city itself) took shape, appeared, appropriated places, realized an appropriated space-time," writes Lefebvre. "This appropriation demonstrates that use and use value can dominate exchange and exchange value."[42] Purcell translates this into more geographical language, stating that appropriation is "an act of reorientation," guiding the city "away from its role as an engine of capital accumulation and toward its role as a constitutive element in the web of cooperative social relations among urban inhabitants."[43]

The germ of the urban is forever present within the capitalist city that modernity has constructed around it. It "remains in a state of dispersed and alienated actuality, as kernel and virtuality," Lefebvre tells us, "like the shadow of a future object in the light of a rising sun."[44] Here Lefebvre's love for the quotidian shines brightest. He, more than any other theorist of his time, understands the profundity of everyday life, and the part it will play in the development of a better world. In his design, the urban will emerge from the husk of the city not just through violent upheaval—though this remains essential for the larger task of building communism—but

[42] Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 19.

[43] Purcell, "Possible Worlds," 149.

[44] Lefebvre, *Writing on Cities*, 148.

through the persistence of the ordinary as well. We must "seek and learn to recognize the urban that is all around us but hidden, and nurture it in whatever way we can," Purcell writes. "For Lefebvre the urban constitutes a revolution, but one that requires millions of everyday acts of resistance and creation."[45] Whereas capitalism is a contrivance enforced through state aggression and propped up like a crumbling wall, the urban is a natural feature of our social lives. No gates can pen it in. No dam can hold back its rushing waters. No court can imprison it and no bureaucrat can regulate it out of existence. They can only hope to suppress its power, and even then, just for a little while. "Urban dwellers carry the urban with them," Lefebvre declares, "even if they do not bring planning with them!"[46]

This is the ethic behind Lefebvre's most famous concept, one fundamental to my argument yet frequently misunderstood: the right to the city. By his own acknowledgment, the RttC is not a single entitlement like the right to food or shelter, but more of a slogan or a bundle of ideas, with each tapping into the varied and universal needs shared by all city-dwellers. It is "a cry and a demand" that can "only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life,*" and to the complete oeuvre of social relations that makes up the urban.[47] Counted among these relations are artistic creation, spontaneous action, and even a right to the occasional brushes with danger that become inevitable when so many people cluster together. The RttC is the right to chart one's path through the urban without coercion. As geographer Don Mitchell writes, it is about allowing public space to be produced *by* us rather than *for* us.[48] Marxist geographer David

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[45] Purcell, "Possible Worlds," 151.

[46] Lefebvre, *Writing on Cities*, 158.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), 18.

Harvey is more poetic in his description, stating that the right to the city is "one of the most precious yet neglected of our human rights," the right of previously dispossessed urbanites to "change the world, to change life, and to reinvent the city more after their hearts' desire."[49] The purpose of this right, Harvey explains, is not to add to the list of allowances guaranteed by a government to its citizens, but to recast the urbanite as sovereign within and throughout their city, as a participant co-equal with all around them in that city's continual processes of creation and re-creation. Only when we attain this condition can we take part in an "alternative urban life that is less alienated, more meaningful and playful but, as always with Lefebvre, conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of unknowable novelty."[50]

Lefebvre introduced the right to the city in 1968, at a time of growing radicalism in France. His work found quick purchase with the revolutionaries of the Situationist International, as well as among a cadre of student protesters ready for action. The conditions were in place for an urban revolt that Lefebvre would deem *l'irruption*, an explosion of underclass fury that almost brought about the downfall of the entire Fifth Republic. Though this incident is best remembered for the events of May 1968, it began instead in late March of that year, in the halls of Lefebvre's own sociology department at the Université Paris Nanterre. It began, in fact, one week after the initial publication of *Le droit à la ville*, and there is no doubt that Lefebvre's new theories resonated with the 150 student occupiers who took control of the C Building that day. We can read the influence of those same theories in the decision to leave their satellite campus in the racially and financially segregated suburb of Nanterre and march east to the intellectual zero-

[49] David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), 4, 25.

[50] Ibid., x.

point at the Sorbonne to spread their ideas, creating what Lefebvre calls a "dialectical interaction between marginality and urban centrality" (Fig. 1).[51] The students were not content with living in a planned *banlieue* where the banal, newly manufactured American-style campus ran up against the "hovels of a shantytown housing thousands of predominantly North African workers" who had labored to construct that space.[52] It was a landscape of emptiness and exploitation, and one pressed to the edges of Parisian life. If they were to claim their right to the city, it would require a true mobilization of those living at the margins to strike out against the zero-point.

Fig. 1: The margins take the center in pursuit of the right to the city. Bruno Barbey, Magnum Photos, 1968.

[51] Lefebvre, *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Revolution*, trans. by Alfred Ehrenfeld (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 118.

[52] Tom McDonough, "Invisible Cities: Henri Lefebvre's *The Explosion*," *Artforum* 46, no. 9 (May 2008), artforum.com/print/200805/invisible-cities-henri-lefebvre-s-the-explosion-19960.

In this, Lefebvre noted echoes of the Communard uprising of almost one hundred years prior. "In March 1871, as in May 1968," he writes, "people who had come from the outlying areas into which they had been driven and where they had found nothing but a social void assembled and proceeded together toward the reconquest of the urban centers."[53] Once in the Latin Quarter, the students took to re-appropriating the streets from the bourgeois institutions they had ousted, marking walls with spray-painted slogans like "Run comrade, the old world is behind you!" and "Be realistic, demand the impossible!"[54] As they passed, the throng of students reshaped the city around them in accordance with their desires. "The views, the streets, the Boulevard Saint-Michel which, rid of automobiles, again became a promenade, became a forum," Lefebvre recalls with some degree of wonder. "The old Sorbonne hung with black and red flags took on a transfigured symbolic dimension." It would be erroneous to claim that Lefebvre alone sparked this action, for the students were quite vocal about their three primary inspirations: Marx, Mao Zedong, and Herbert Marcuse. Still, the spirit of his idea was everywhere present in *l'irruption*, guiding its activists on their journey from the far-flung corners of society to the center of national power.

At about the same time, Jane Jacobs was leading the charge for a similarly people-centered reorientation of the urban landscape in the United States. The status of planner, she contended, did not confer any special expertise or power over city space that the everyday New Yorker should not also enjoy. If anything, the crystallization of planning into a degree-based, professional occupation only further proves its impotence. The planning industry does not exist

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[53] Lefebvre, *The Explosion*, 118.

[54] John Lichfield, "Signs of the Times: The Sayings and Slogans of 1968," *The Independent*, February 22, 2008, independent.co.uk/extras/saturday-magazine/features/signs-of-the-times-the-sayings-and-slogans-of-1968-5449812.html.

because it is necessary, but because its credentialed gatekeeping and inscrutable bureaucratic functions serve to alienate individuals from control over their neighborhoods. The city would not crumble into disfunction were power invested into the hands of the people. Rather, it is planning itself that would crumble given how unnecessary it is for the maintenance of urban life. As Jacobs explained in a 1970 lecture at Milwaukee Technical College:

> Why is there such effective resistance to development in a field that so desperately needs it? Perhaps it is too upsetting to the status quo. As one housing commissioner said, seven years ago when the [Lower Manhattan Expressway] scheme was first worked out, 'If we let this neighborhood plan for itself, every neighborhood will want to plan for itself.' I think he was seeing the same thing I can see. That gap-filling city housing policies would make most of the vast federal, state and city housing bureaucracies obsolete. Architects could work directly with the people. Maybe the very idea of a radically new approach emerging from below seems, in and of itself, as frightening as a People's Park or as the slogan Power to the People.[55]

This is the crucial point that Jacobs' critics neglected when they dismissed her as a "militant dame" and a "housewife," unwilling to negotiate with "real planners" and unequipped to speak on matters of city planning at all because she lacked a college degree.[56] "There's nobody against this," Robert Moses bellowed whilst fending off the Jacobs-led challenge to his Lower Manhattan Expressway. "Nobody, nobody, nobody, but a bunch of--a bunch of mothers!"[57] These statements are patently misogynist, but more than that they reveal an insistence on academic prestige, one which supposes that somebody with the right degree and enough industry recommendations should have more say in a neighborhood's future than the people who live there. Professionalization, as always, is meant to act as a class barrier and a defensive rampart to protect bourgeois authority. When men like Moses attacked Jacobs for

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[55] Jacobs, "The Real Problem of Cities," in *Vital Little Plans: The Short Works of Jane Jacobs*, ed. Samuel Zipp and Nathan Storring (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2016), 207.

[56] Alice Sparberg Alexiou, *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 85-86.

[57] Ibid., 56.

being a professional outsider, they inadvertently managed to affirm her *insider* status as a member of the community, thus reinforcing her argument. For whatever contempt Moses and his colleagues felt toward Jacobs, I believe their ill-conceived criticism speaks as much to a genuine fear of the people—a fear of public power and the threat it poses to their make-work profession. Jacobs later commented on the horror with which planners viewed the uncredentialed masses as she helped lead them into a 1968 Board of Estimate meeting. “This threw them into the most incredible tizzy,” she said, “the idea of unarmed, perfectly gentle human beings just coming up and getting in close contact with them. You never saw people so frightened.”[58] Moments later, Jacobs was arrested on orders from the Department of Transportation’s chief engineer. She was threatened with up to four years in prison and booked on charges of obstructing government administration and inciting a riot. For the anxious government planner, so fearful of that ‘great beast’ called public opinion, there may well be no difference between the two.

Jacobs was in many ways the RttC’s ambassador to the United States (and later Canada), whether she knew it or not. She equipped ordinary New Yorkers with the knowledge that they together can *make* urban space, rather than simply utilize it. Her campaign against Moses has become an indelible part of New York history and caused lasting damage to the master builder’s reputation. Her movement succeeded in preventing the destruction of Washington Square Park and the subsequent erection of an interstate over the Lower East Side. She helped keep more than 2,000 families in their homes. Yet it must be acknowledged that Jacobs was never quite as radical as Lefebvre. She did not regard herself as standing in opposition to capitalism, and often positioned Marxists and anarchists as a left-wing extreme no less harmful to good city management than extreme forces on the right. Jacobs saw capital investment and the promotion

[58] Roberta Brandes Gratz, *The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 316.

of small business as key to her mission, affirming a desire to rebuild within the system rather than break apart from it. "She was not afraid to shatter settled thought, but she was set on fitting the shards back together, too, with ideas some of those other Sixties icons would have found altogether bourgeois," Samuel Zipp and Nathan Storring write. "For her, the rallying cry of the 1968 Paris general strikes—'Under the paving stones, the beach!'—wasn't likely to inspire. ...Another world isn't possible, certainly not if it's some eden of plenty and ease, reachable only by revolution or the utopian imagination."[59]

Jacobs remained a believer in the value of markets and public collaboration with the private sector. She shunned those agitating for revolution as utopians, thereby casting herself as the sensible pragmatist (Marxists may object by noting that they are materialists, not idealists, putting them at odds with utopian thinking as well). Jacobs was by any metric a political liberal, albeit one willing to discuss transformational reform within the framework of capital. Yet the liberal Jacobs and the socialist Lefebvre were never so far apart in their thinking as one might imagine. The 'patron saint of American cities' may not have believed that New Yorkers could *build* another world outside capitalism, but she did believe that "a better world is here already, in the streets themselves, waiting to be discovered and brought forth by all of us, not just a radical vanguard," as Zipp and Storring write.[60] This is not so distinct from Lefebvre's metaphorical cake, or from Graeber's insistence that revolution depends on a "continual accumulation" of radical action rather than some communist eschaton at the end of history. It does not seem terribly unlike the French uprising of 1968 either, given that movement was led not by the second coming of the Bolsheviks but by a largely underorganized band of students and blue-

[59] Zipp and Storring, *Vital Little Plans*, xxviii.

[60] Ibid.

collar workers. Jacobs and Lefebvre did not need to see eye-to-eye on all matters to inspire change in New York and Parisian life. They needed only to share a recognition of the beauty in the urban oeuvre and the necessity of neighborhood autonomy. Their common cause was to promote the right to the city loudly and passionately on both sides of the Atlantic. This they did, and for a moment it must have seemed that the right to the city would become a guiding principle in the construction of a renewed NYC and a more lasting Paris Commune. But this was not yet to come. The 1960s passed, *l'irruption* subsided, and the right to the city entered a forty-year conceptual simmer—never forgotten, but no longer at the forefront of urban studies.

That, however, is beginning to change. Over the course of the past twenty years, interest in the RttC as both a theory and a practical objective has renewed, and it is now a hot topic for writers, activists, and even some mainstream planners. The seeds of this new appreciation were planted in 2001, when the right to the city served as the basis for a new federal law in Brazil, known as the City Statute. This law was the result of a lengthy struggle by an "alliance of social housing movements, professionals, squatters, NGOs and academics," and builds on the urban policy functions of Brazil's 1988 constitution to ensure that the collective rights of city-dwellers are not superseded by the property privileges bestowed upon the wealthy by capitalism.[61] The City Statute in turn inspired organizers of the anti-capitalist World Social Forum (WSF) to make the right to the city a conceptual centerpiece at their 2002 meeting in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre. It was at this event that attendees first participated in the "World Seminar on the Right to the City," which would lead to the drafting of a "World Charter for the Right to the City" the following year. By 2005, the right to the city had grown so popular with WSF attendees that more than 700 people participated in the fourth iteration of the seminar, cultivating "grassroots

[61] Alison Brown and Annali Kristiansen, "Urban Policies and the Right to the City: Rights, Responsibilities and Citizenship," *Management of Social Transformations* (UNESCO UN-Habitat, 2008), 20.

activist networks" that engaged in "coalition-building practices among urban justice groups across the US" and beyond.[62] From this, a Brooklyn-based organization called the Right to the City Alliance was born in 2007, with the stated goal of promoting a "new kind of urban politics" in which "everyone, particularly the disenfranchised, not only have a right to the city, but as inhabitants, have a right to shape it, design it, and operationalize an urban human rights agenda."[63] Academics were finding new life in the old idea as well, with geographers like Mitchell and Harvey, and urban theorists like Peter Marcuse, crafting major reexaminations of Lefebvrian urbanism. Even the United Nations took up the right to the city mantel during this time, hosting its own panels on the subject and working to "conceptualize the right to the city as part of a broader agenda for human rights."[64]

Here we find the great dilemma of the right to the city's new relevance. As with all things that threaten capitalism, the right to the city has been co-opted by the liberal order and subsumed within a vague and toothless rights discourse that does little but provide cover for the same forces that threaten those rights. While the WSF and the Right to the City Alliance appear to have a sincere ambition to make cities work for everyone, the United Nations has no such regard for Lefebvre's socialist vision. As Mehmet Bariş Kuymulu notes, the UN's 2002 World Urban Forum (WUF) in Nairobi was "inundated by government officials, ministers, mayors and state secretaries," with the majority of those present representing either a state or financial institution, rather than the working-class.[65] Though both meetings affirmed the usefulness of something

[62] Mehmet Bariş Kuymulu, "The Vortex of Rights: 'Right to the City' at a Crossroads," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 3 (May 2013), 931.

[63] Right to the City Alliance, "Mission & History," righttothecity.org/about/mission-history.

[64] Purcell, "Possible Worlds," 141.

[65] Kuymulu, "The Vortex of Rights," 932.

called a right to the city, the ambitions of the leftist WSF and the liberal WUF could not have been more opposed. Where the WSF denounced "neoliberalism [and] the domination of the world by capital,"[66] the WUF sought a benevolent form of capitalist class structure, one in which "everyone, rich and poor alike, can fully address their Right to the City."[67] This may seem like a good faith attempt to improve the lives of the urban poor, albeit one that ignores the impossibility of achieving that goal while retaining the overall delimitation between wealth and poverty, but the WUF panelists are quick to tip their hand. Kuymulu draws our attention to a rather condescending passage from a report on the 2010 forum in Rio de Janeiro:

> An important relationship was identified by many between participation and citizenship. 'Do the poor have a right to the city,' asked one participant, 'yes, they do if they stand up and be counted and show they can be responsible.' There was a call for a new 'culture of citizenship,' a new civism. As one speaker pointed out, 'we need to teach people how to live in cities.'[68]

These sentiments reveal a severe distortion of the right to the city concept, one which transforms Lefebvre's anti-hierarchical theory into a paternalist, top-down view of urban life. Instead of allowing working-class people to decide their own best use of space, the WUF panelists seek to teach "responsible" city living to the poor, like a capitalist variation on the myth of Prometheus. Peter Marcuse writes that the WUF pays little mind to the everyday struggles of working people, as "Poverty, homelessness, insecurity and disease...were documented, measured, graphed and displayed in powerpoint slides," in prime technocratic fashion, rather than "narrated as part of daily experience," as they were at the leftist conferences he has

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[66] World Social Forum, "Charter of Principles," Porto Alegre, Brazil: 2001, universidadepopular.org/site/media/documentos/WSF_-_charter_of_Principles.pdf.

[67] UN-HABITAT, "First Ever World Urban Forum Successfully Launched," April 29, 2002, mirror.unhabitat.org/print.asp?cid=2609&catid=467&typeid=5.

[68] UN-HABITAT, *Report of the Fifth Session of the World Urban Forum*," Rio de Janeiro: 2010, digitallibrary.un.org/record/694712?ln=en.

attended.[69] "The poor were dealt with as the objects, the beneficiaries of the policies there debated," he recalls. "Inequalities in the distribution of goods was often referred to, inequalities of power rarely." We have seen this narrative before. It is same father-knows-best mentality that produced the White Man's Burden mode of imperialism, and which gave rise to urban renewal and stop-and-frisk police tactics in American cities. The call for a "culture of citizenship" casts the individual and their community as subordinate to institutional planning. Ordinary people can have a say in the direction of that planning, but only by acting through institutional processes. Nevermind that such processes are engineered to minimize the effect of public input, or that the scales are still tipped toward the wishes of those with money and influence.

In framing the right to the city as a matter of formal civic engagement, the WUF panelists reject the city-dweller's natural power to affect change through use. There is no room in this interpretation for street art, music, or the neighborhood block party. To be deemed a responsible citizen, one must obey state regulations on their behavior. The skateboarder can skate, but only in designated parks. The activist can protest injustice, but not if it disrupts traffic. It is a flattening of human beings into what Étienne Balibar terms "citizen subjects," equal by rights with the ruling-class, yet unequal in the "living paradox of an inegalitarian construction of egalitarian citizenship."[70] Responsibility and competency are assumed traits of the bourgeoisie, and this positive bias extends toward their planning organizations as well. It is the working people who must prove themselves worthy of their own cities. "It appears that the poor can

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[69] Peter Marcuse, "Two World Urban Forums, Two Worlds Apart," *Planners Network*, April 14, 2010, plannersnetwork.org/2010/04/two-world-urban-forums-two-worlds-apart.

[70] Étienne Balibar, *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. by Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 27.

participate in urban politics and claim the right to the city," Kuymulu writes, "only after going through such a civilizing enculturation process for becoming responsible subjects."[71]

There have been attempts to introduce a dash of radicalism to the WUF. David Harvey spoke at the 2010 meeting in Rio, splitting time during a panel with representatives from the World Bank and the US federal government. When Harvey stated that there is a direct link between capitalism and inequality, he earned a challenge from Neil Pierce, one of the panel's moderators and a well-known reporter on urban affairs. Pierce stated that markets, despite their inequities, remain an inevitable fact of life and the primary driver of world economic activity. When Harvey responded that markets are an ineffective tool for the distribution of resources and that "most people found the motivation for their actions outside of the market," Marcuse states that "Pierce simply shook his head in disbelief," for the "desirability/inevitability of capitalism was a foundational belief at the WUF."[72] Organizers may have allowed Harvey to walk through the conference doors that day, but his radical approach was so out of step with the governing principle of capitalist realism that it became not just anathematic but almost incomprehensible to the otherwise knowledgeable figures with whom he shared the stage. This is the nature of the World Urban Forum's relationship with the right to the city.

So why would the WUF organizers introduce this anti-capitalist slogan into their capitalist event? I am tempted to suggest that it is an exercise in subversion, with the United Nations consciously appropriating Lefebvre's work in favor of their own diluted interpretation. It is no doubt alarming that "UN agencies have recently attempted to claim credit for the origins of the right to the city," citing Lefebvre not as the RttC's originator but merely as one of the first to

[71] Kuymulu, "The Vortex of Rights," 933.

[72] Marcuse, "Two World Urban Forums, Two Worlds Apart," plannersnetwork.org/2010/04/two-world-urban-forums-two-worlds-apart.

promote the idea.[73] Kuymulu argues that such language was not used in error, but to "construct an unwarranted genealogy of the term, according to which the origins of the right to the city lies in the UN declaration of human rights."[74] This skewing of the right to the city's conceptual history does imply an intent to reorient the idea away from socialism and toward neoliberal ends, or at least to enhance the UN's reputation as a champion of human rights. "If the UN attempts to create a clean lineage between the right to the city and its own declaration of human rights of 1948—by concomitantly bypassing Lefebvre and grassroots activists," Kuymulu writes, "it is probably because the UN wishes to take the concept somewhere else."[75] But I am not sure that we need to ascribe such motivations to the liberal misuse of the right to the city. WUF panelists probably believe, as most liberals do, that they act with the best intentions toward society and the defense of individual liberty. As Pierce's confused response to post-market politics reveals, liberal institutions do not need to engage in nefarious plots to undermine the RttC and "take the concept elsewhere." It is enough for them to misunderstand Lefebvre and, in their bewilderment, launder him through the presumptions of their top-down, market-driven ideology. In either case, nefarious or accidental, the result is the same. The World Urban Forum discards Lefebvre's dream of an autonomous urban oeuvre, and substitutes in more hierarchy. All that is left is the nebulous suggestion that existing and working within cities is some kind of 'right.'

Indeed, what appeals to most liberals about the right to the city is that it is framed as a *right*, making use of the same human rights discourse that has stood at the center of modern politics since John Locke and the early Enlightenment. While socialists are correct in my view

[73] Kuymulu, "The Vortex of Rights," 933.

[74] Ibid., 934.

[75] Ibid.

when they present capitalism as antithetical to the realization of most rights, the ideals of 'free' markets and free people remain tangled together in the popular consciousness. This may be the result of propagandizing, but it is also because capitalism evolved alongside the idea of human rights during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They are intellectual cohorts—in terms of their historical development, at least—and this is the case no matter how incompatible the two are when put into practice. The contradictions that disrupt the WUF's aspirations for a people-centered city *and* the preservation of economic caste mirrors the contradictions between, for example, the rhetoric of freedom and equality expressed by the Declaration of Independence and the fact that Thomas Jefferson bought, enslaved, beat, and raped human beings. Jefferson's revolution may have been a bourgeois uprising against the last gasps of feudalism, but it was still he who wrote that "all men are created equal." Then, as now, the words do not match the deeds.

Capitalism is rich with these contradictions. The capitalist values luxury and order, but to give rise to these in one place he generates pollution and chaos in another. The capitalist supports democracy but leverages his wealth to tilt elections and overthrow governments around the world. He tells the poor that they can become wealthy through hard work, but then installs roadblocks to prevent this while growing idly rich from the labor of others. We should not act surprised when capitalism promotes this kind of doublethink. One could make the claim that these are not contradictions, and that there is a difference between what the capitalist believes and the stories he tells others to temper resistance. This is to say that the ideological mission of capitalism, which is to concentrate power in the hands of the bourgeoisie, remains internally consistent. And yes, at the level of ideology this is true. But most proponents of capitalism long ago managed to indoctrinate themselves, to internalize the fictions they told others until they could not recognize their own sleights of hand. Even the most cynical liberal thinker is sure to

harbor in their mind at least one sincere, unexamined marriage of these kinds of conflicting beliefs, and it is the universality of the rights discourse that allows this to occur. Everyone in the modern episteme 'believes' in human rights, even when their actions tell us differently.

Lefebvre's decision to present access to the urban as a *right* therefore has the benefit of creating mass appeal among socialists and liberals alike, while at the same time opening the door to the appropriation of his ideas. "Such concepts as human rights, democracy and freedom...create a conceptual vortex," Kuymulu writes, "which pulls even discordant political agendas towards itself, for an already-justified shortcut to legitimacy."[76] Because the overwhelming popularity of the rights discourse compels capitalists to present exploitation as liberation, liberal recuperation of the right to the city becomes an unavoidable obstacle. Yet it is important to remember that the RttC, as conceived by Lefebvre, is irreconcilable with the liberal conception of human rights. Lefebvre's right to the city is not equivalent to legal protections like the right to free speech or the right to a fair trial. It is not something bestowed upon the people by the state, and certainly not when those people can only earn that right through "responsible" citizenship. The right to the city is distinct because it is something that people create and defend for themselves, without or even against the involvement of the state. "Lefebvre does not see the right to the city as an incremental addition to existing liberal-democratic rights," says Purcell. "He sees it as an essential element of a wider political struggle for revolution."[77]

The UN and their colleagues in government and business misinterpret the right to the city because they read it through the assumptions of the modern, capitalist episteme, and its state-driven conception of human rights. We must view it a different way. Like Marx and Friedrich

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[76] Ibid., 924.

[77] Purcell, "Possible Worlds," 142.

Engels, Lefebvre asks us to look to another world, one that exists outside the epistemological limits of our time. His right to the city cannot take the form of public policy or a constitutional amendment, and even well-intentioned laws like Brazil's City Statue do not live up to the immensity of his vision. Lefebvre's right to the city was not a law, but a "cry that initiated a radical struggle to move *beyond* both the state and capitalism." It is the urban that we must build from the bones of the old, dying city. It is a future that is ours to make, by and for ourselves. The ingredients we need are laid before us. To quote a well-known anarchist call to arms and the official slogan of the World Social Forum (and with apologies to Jane Jacobs), another world *is* possible. "That possible world is a long way off," Purcell writes, but it is "also, at the same time, right in front of us," like the cake waiting to be baked into reality through the merging of its constituent parts.[78] There may well be another world waiting for us—another, more equitable kind of city—and it is the challenge of the urban to bring it into being for the enjoyment of all. That, at least, is how Henri Lefebvre saw it.

[78] Ibid., 152.

CHAPTER 2: FROM THE ASHES OF THE OLD

The Early History of New York Squats

New York was, prior to the twentieth-century, a city of low roofs and open spaces. It took decades for development to creep its way uptown from Lower Manhattan, or to spread longitudinally to the once-independent Queens County and City of Brooklyn. The technology required to bind these areas into a unified city, namely suspension bridges and a mass transit system, would not arrive until around the turn of the century, whole decades after the one-two punch of industrialization and immigration had resulted in a severe housing shortage across the region, along with historic levels of wealth inequality. Squatter communities were common during this era, and publications like the *New York Times* and *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* document the presence of more than a dozen largescale shantytowns throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens in the late nineteenth-century.[79] Some had evocative names like Slab City and Piggy Hollow, both of which were plotted along the Gowanus Canal near Red Hook. Others, like the Little Dublin shanties in northern Brooklyn, indicate a clear ethnic point of origin and speak to the lack of legal housing available to new migrants. Having no other options, the founders of these improvised communities seized unused land wherever they could find it, always striving to keep a step or two ahead of real estate and the police. "Squatters took over rocky hills, salt flats, and marshes and built settlements, including substantial homes that lasted for decades,

[79] Jason Jindrich, "The Shantytowns of Central Park West: *Fin de Siècle* Squatting in American Cities," *Journal of Urban History* 36, no. 5 (2010), 676.

vigorously defending their settlements when development encroached," Starecheski writes.[80] An 1872 *Daily Eagle* report on the "slums of Red Hook Point" highlights the *ad hoc* design of these squatter villages. Inhabitants of the Slickville squat, they state, are "obliged to row to and from their residences, built on crutches, in boats when the tide is high." Yet this article also keys in on the squatters' ingenuity, so necessary for survival at the fringes of the metropolis. "Not infrequently all the domiciles are built upon wheels," they continue, "so that should the rising waters surprise the inmates they can not only take up their bed but their house and walk."[81]

These early New York squatters were vast in number, accounting for about 1-2% of the city's population. Each time business leaders marked a new tract of land for development they would first have to contend with the squatters who had long ago settled that space. This was true not only along the city's outer boundaries in places like Red Hook, but also in areas now deemed central to New York commerce and culture. The east and west banks of Central Park are today among the wealthiest sections of Manhattan, but the squatters arrived here long before Museum Mile and luxury buildings like the Beresford and San Remo were ever imagined. It is said that millionaire investor Edward Cabot Clark chose to name his grand apartment building the Dakota because, like the Dakota Territory, it was "so far west and so far north" of the general population.[82] This name also helped tether the bourgeoisie's uptown expansion to the westward growth of the nation, generating a psychological link between these two resource-rich frontiers and their not-so-disparate modes of conquest. And, as with the Dakota Territory, this supposedly virgin land soon proved not so uninhabited. When Clark and his construction team arrived at the

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[80] Starecheski, "What Was Squatting and What Comes Next? The Mystery of Property in New York City, 1984-2014." PhD. dissertation, City University of New York, 2014, 15-16.

[81] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, "Red Hook Point: Thirty Years in the Slums," December 2, 1872, 4.

[82] "Dakota, Hotel 50 Yrs., Looks Forward to 100," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 21, 1933, 18.

corner of 72nd Street and Central Park West in the fall of 1880, they discovered that their new property was surrounded by what Stephen Birmingham, New York's most prolific chronicler of upper-class history, describes as "deplorable hovels...shacks built of roofing paper and flattened tins...and their unlovely occupants."[83] It took four years to complete the Dakota but more than two decades to uproot the neighboring squatters who "were scattered on all sides about the hems of the Dakota's lacy skirts" (Fig. 2). When asked how they could justify the squatters' continued presence in their increasingly affluent neighborhood, Clark and the Dakota management team could do nothing more than insist that the squatters carried with them a "'pleasant rural air.'"[84]

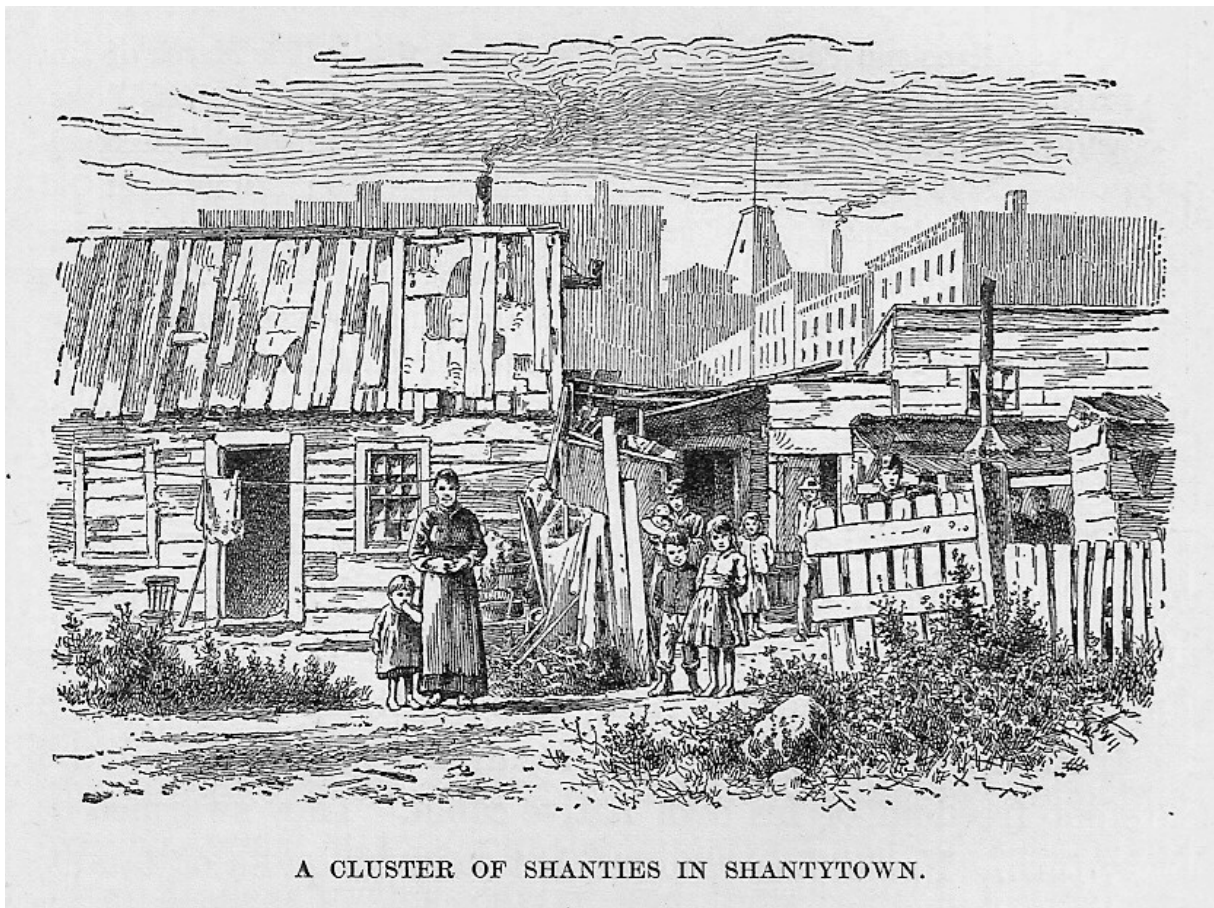

Fig. 2: A shantytown between 62nd and 72nd Streets, 1892.

[83] Stephen Birmingham, *Life at the Dakota: New York's Most Unusual Address* (New York: Random House, 1979), 15.

[84] Ibid., 57.

Clark was not alone in his frustration. The Central Park squatters impeded the construction of almost every park-adjacent project, from the original Mount Sinai Hospital building to the Museum of Natural History. The *New York Times* estimates that in 1880 there were no fewer than 10,000 people squatting around the park south of 100th St., a "population...composed of rag-pickers, pea-nut vendors, street-peddlers, knife-grinders, laborers, idlers, and vagrants."[85] As a demographic, this squatter cohort consisted mainly of recent European immigrants and their families, with individual ethnic groups forming their own distinct clusters within the larger settlement. Some of these, like the Dutch American squatter village of Ashville, featured their own schools, churches, and markets to serve the needs of working families. "As a rule, these people are honest," the *Times* acknowledged. They did not seek to rob landlords of their investments, but instead claimed space that was underutilized at the time they squatted it. This they did out of a will to survive, knowing that there was not enough money or housing to go around under the ruling method of distribution. The Central Park squatters may well have lived in hovels, as Birmingham writes, but they were far from deplorable.

Despite the peacefulness of these communities, early New York squatters were under constant threat of eviction by landowners and their allies in law enforcement. Resistance was a way of life for the squatters, with men and women alike taking part in the battle to protect their homes. One police brigade learned this first-hand in 1883 when they sought to evict a majority-Irish Brooklyn squatter village known as Darby's Patch. "Not a vestige of human occupancy could be discerned until the posse were within fifty feet of the scene," wrote one journalist in his rather colorful rundown of the affair. "Then the hillocks teemed with life, every male inhabitant coming up as if from the ground, armed to the teeth with every conceivable implement, and the

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[85] *New York Times*, "Ten Thousand Squatters," April 20, 1880, 8.

females also equipped with kitchen and other utensils, ready to defend their shanties."[86] An 1889 issue of *Harper's Weekly* further demonstrates the doggedness with which these squatters fought for their land, and the extent to which law and industry struggled to recapture it:

> The New-York squatter is an impassible specimen of humanity, if the behavior of some in the neighborhood of Mount Morris Park may be taken as a characteristic of the species. Upon a knoll of rock at the southwest corner of Madison Avenue and One Hundred and Eighteenth Street are several shanties occupied by a populous community. The owner of the property, in pursuance to a plan for building an eight-story apartment house, made preparations for blasting away the rock and gave the squatters notice to leave. The notice was calmly ignored, and when the contractor...arrived on the field the squatters were still there. ...The community showed no disposition to move, and the aid of the police had to be invoked even to clear the shanties when the cartridges were exploded. Now that the time [has come] for drilling that part of the rock upon which the shanties actually rest, residents of the neighborhood are watching with interest to see which the contractor will find it easier to move, the rock or the squatters.[87]

Landowners knew physical removal was necessary to evict squatters from their properties, whether this was accomplished through police or the contracting of hired goons. But they also understood the importance of winning public support for these efforts, which meant it was imperative that they mount a propaganda campaign to turn other New Yorkers against the squatters. Using the press to amplify their message, the landowners condemned squatters as disease-ridden criminals and ethnically inferior persons who were standing in the way of progress. In her book *Shantytown, USA: Forgotten Landscapes of the Working Poor*, American Studies scholar Lisa Goff notes that squatters and other representatives of the urban proletariat were routinely blamed for epidemics, including the 1832 cholera outbreak that swept across the city.[88] Squatters were so pathologized that they soon came to be viewed as a form of pestilence

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[86] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, "Darby's Patch: Forcible Dethronement of the Squatter Sovereigns," November 16, 1883, 4.

[87] *Harper's Weekly*, "The West Side," January 26, 1889.

[88] Lisa Goff, *Shantytown, USA: Forgotten Landscapes of the Working Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 54.

in their own right, with writers like George Templeton Strong comparing each new shantytown to the emergence of a smallpox pustule.[89] Calls for the streets to be cleansed or purified of squatter filth were common, previewing the language of contamination that would come to underpin eugenics and other homicidal movements for social health.

Elsewhere in the newspapers, squatters were depicted as layabouts and crooks, with reporters warning that "any fool who comes this way at night with money in his pocket may be pretty sure not to keep it very long."[90] Social reformer Charles Loring Brace referred to squatters as members of the "dangerous poor," a population doomed to wretchedness that would pull the rest of society down with them unless guided to good health by the fatherly hand of charitable intervention. "It is from such that come our hordes of thieves and vagabonds and prostitutes," he declared. "They sow seeds of vice and pestilence, amid their hovels of poverty, which scatter wide a terrible harvest among distant abodes of splendor and wealth."[91] An 1867 *Times* piece likewise advocated for all squatters to be rehoused in tenements, arguing with contempt that "By seeking a shelter in tenement houses, the squatter will lose...the privilege of considering himself the monarch of all he surveys, but his descendants will be afforded some insight into the customs of civilized humanity, and the health and appearance of the metropolis will be benefitted." Only through the "total extinction of the [squatter] race," they instruct their readers, could the wide avenues of uptown Manhattan be rendered safe and clean enough for "working people."[92] Their use of the term "race" here is as telling as it is conspicuous, revealing once more the same dehumanizing logic used to justify slavery, Native genocide, and the eugenics movement.

[89] Ibid., 72.

[90] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, "The Squatters," September 29, 1883, 1.

[91] Goff, *Shantytown, USA*, 72.

[92] *New York Times*, "Local Intelligence: Our Squatter Population," July 15, 1867, 8.

These media outlets delighted in portraying the squatters as buffoonish foreigners, wayward Europeans who had come to the United States seeking fortune but who had instead brought the refuse of the Old World along with them. The *Daily Eagle*, for instance, covered the eviction of Darby's Patch not as a serious story about New Yorkers being rendered homeless by the state, but as a comedy of errors about bumbling provincials getting what they deserve. In many of these articles the squatters' Irish dialects are played for a laugh, with each 'indade' and 'bedad' meant to elicit the snickers of Anglo American readers. Cast as the voice of reason and the straight man of this comedy routine was Deputy Sheriff George Hardy, a friend to the *Eagle* and its reporters. When one squatter told Hardy that he would not be able to get inside her home because she had lost the key, Hardy responded, "I won't, eh? Get an ax, boys." Upon hearing this, the squatter knew she was bested and confessed to having the key.[93] Her protestations that Hardy is the true "robber," willing to leave them alone long enough to garner their votes before casting them out "with dinner on the stove," are treated as an afterthought. The punchline is her defeat, and the laughable idea that anyone occupying her economic station could ever stand up to the police. A mocking juxtaposition between wealth and poverty pervades nineteenth-century news articles about squatters, as evidenced by the *Daily Eagle* headline "Forcible Dethronement of the Squatter Sovereigns," which in turn recalls the *Times*' earlier depiction of the squatter as king of the hovels. This was a popular image of the era, exemplified by Edward Harrigan's 1882 Broadway comedy *Squatter Sovereignty* and in the portrayal of squatters as debased monarchs in the "The Irishman's Shanty," a minstrel song of the 1850s:

[93] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, "Darby's Patch."

Did you ever go into an Irishman's shanty?
Ah! there boys you'll find the whiskey so plenty,
With a pipe in his mouth there sits Paddy so free,
No King in his palace is prouder than he.[94]

Even the police were in on the laugh. "Here's an abode fit for the elite," one officer jeered, pulling two elderly women and a child up from the cellar in which they had been hiding. Following this, Hardy tried to calm tensions by informing the crowd that he was their ally and that he was looking out for their best interests. He said that it "gave him pain to oppress the poor," but that he was a "creature of the law" and "had to obey orders." Hoping to forestall a riot, Hardy stated that he would invite everyone out for a drink in the future if they vacate Darby's Patch without trouble. "To [hell] with the beer and them to [sic]," retorted a squatter named Mrs. Carroll, whom the papers then claimed to have seen "running to the nearest saloon with a tin pail." Once more the squatters' Irish identities and impoverishment—the roots of their perceived un-Americanness—position them as the butt of the media's jokes.[95] This association between Anglo American ethnic superiority and the legitimacy of capitalist land ownership persists across time, always contrasted with the image of the foreign and degenerate squatter. It is a reminder that capitalism and colonialism are twin processes, bound together at the core of the modern episteme. Anti-squatter discourse in the United States has always carried with it a touch of White supremacy, even when the squatters in question are White themselves.

"If a stranger should be suddenly set down anywhere in the quarter between Thirty-seventh-street and Fifty-fifth-street," the *Times* wrote in an 1854 article about shanties on the west side of Midtown, "he would hardly suspect that he is in an American city. One's first

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[94] Henry Tucker, *The Irishman's Shanty* (New York: Firth Pond & Co., 1859).

[95] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, "The Squatters."

thought is that he is in a collection of wigwams."[96] It was not unheard of to encounter such comparisons between White squatters and Native Americans, for both were viewed as uncivilized impediments to growth, soon to be swept away by the all-powerful hand of progress. Moreover, the logic of squatting resembled the indigenous perspective on land use, in which property rights are determined not through mercantilist notions of trade and ownership but through the bond fostered over time between people and their environment. Though a historical materialist analysis of imperialism reveals the supreme position of profit relative to all other motives, the bourgeoisie of this time advocated a secondary purpose in the advancement of White civilization. Development, from their perspective, was a form of missionary work, and to 'improve' an underdeveloped plot of land was to spread the gospel of modernity. The recently immigrated squatters may have been settlers themselves, but their foreignness, lack of refinement, and occupation of the urban frontier cast them as metaphorical Natives. And, like the actual Native Americans still at war with the government on the western plains, squatters represented a threat to the capitalist project. Though they lacked individual power, they possessed collective muscle through their numbers. Any such alternative to private ownership challenged the emergence of capitalist realism and therefore could not stand.

This is not to say that White squatters were true equivalents to Native Americans—they were not—but rather that they were framed as such in the press to justify their removal. "A striking element...in the media and popular culture of the late nineteenth-century is the degree to which squatting is reported as an activity of a population equally composed of the poor, the ignorant, and the foreign: groups that simply by their presence impeded progress and retarded property values," Jason Jindrich explains. Like Native Americans and other people of color, they

[96] *New York Times*, "Walks Among the New-York Poor," April 19, 1854, 2.

joined the "typical...crowd of scapegoats...who were not expected to know the rules of property because of their inherent social backwardness."[97] Marking squatters as permanent outsiders had the effect of fracturing any potential for solidarity between squatters and the wider working-class and made them better targets for eviction. "Shanty dwellers are Indians, Creoles, or 'niggers'; 'Celtic' or 'Bohemian' inhabitants of mini-nations within American cities but not part of the great American civilization itself," Goff writes. "Evicting families from their homes and razing their houses was much easier if both had been degraded in the public imagination, and painting shanty dwellers as foreign and un-American helped accomplish this."[98] Lastly, it allowed New York elites to see urban development as being parallel to the supposed civilizing of the continent, a rationale for gentrification that endures into the present day. Neil Smith expands on this concept in the *The New Urban Frontier*:

> The frontier imagery is neither merely decorative nor innocent...but carries considerable ideological weight. Insofar as gentrification infects working-class communities, displaces poor households, and converts whole neighborhoods into bourgeois enclaves, the frontier ideology rationalizes social differentiation and exclusion as natural, inevitable. The poor and working class are all too easily defined as 'uncivil,' on the wrong side of a heroic dividing line, as savages and communists. The substance and consequence of the frontier imagery is to tame the wild city, to socialize a wholly new and therefore challenging set of processes into safe ideological focus. As such, the frontier ideology justifies monstrous incivility in the heart of the city.[99]

Squatters were therefore met with many of the same eliminationist schemes already being perfected against Natives, exemplifying Foucault's theory of an imperial boomerang effect between "colonial models" of domination and the "mechanisms of power in the West" and its

[97] Jindrich, "The Shantytowns of Central Park West," 679.

[98] Goff, *Shantytown, USA*, 78.

[99] Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 16.

cities.[100] Imperialism is a war of riches waged by the center against the peripheries, and capital is a war waged by the top against the bottom. As ‘out there’ and ‘down here’ begin to blend into a singular frontier, it is only a matter of time until the weapons used to slay outside enemies are turned against the dispossessed of the imperial core. “The Squatters as a class,” wrote artist and politician George Caleb Bingham in 1850, must “follow the receding footsteps of the Savage.”[101] Whatever violence is necessary to accomplish this goal becomes justifiable as part of a righteous, civilizing mission and a charity to the incompetent poor.

This principle extended even to some legal communities of color. Seneca Village was a mostly Black neighborhood which existed in present-day Central Park from 1825 until 1857, occupying the area between 81st and 89th Streets that today comprises much of the Great Lawn. The residents of Seneca Village were not squatters. Most were landowners like Andrew Williams and Epiphany Davis, who simultaneously purchased a combined fifteen parcels of land from a White farming family in the 1820s. This acquisition attracted other Black property holders and encouraged institutions like the African American Episcopal Zion Church to invest in the area, spurring on Seneca Village’s creation. By 1850, fourteen of the neighborhood’s 22 census-documented Black heads of household were property holders, with nine of them possessing more than the $250 in real estate required for suffrage under New York law at the time.[102] These fourteen villagers accounted for one-fifth of all Black landowners in the city. Those Seneca Village heads of household who did not own their homes were primarily legal tenants and boarders, leaving only a small percentage in a state of dubious occupancy (including formerly

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[100] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76,* trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), 103.

[101] George C. Bingham to American Art-Union, November 19, 1850.

[102] Diana diZerega Wall, Nan A. Rothschild and Cynthia Copeland. “Seneca Village and Little Africa: Two African American Communities in Antebellum New York,” *Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 1 (2008), 102-105.

enslaved people who had escaped the South via the Underground Railroad). Most Seneca Village houses were single-family homes consisting of two floors and ample living space, with several homeowners also maintaining nearby barns, stables, and gardens—markedly different conditions than those found in crowded squatter homes. Many Seneca Village families were secure enough in their finances to remain in the neighborhood for decades, sometimes even bequeathing land to their children upon their deaths.[103] Such stability was uncommon for Black New Yorkers during this time, and unheard of among the squatting poor. Seneca Village, the data shows, was quite unlike Slab City or Darby's Patch. It was not a collection of makeshift squat houses occupied by impoverished people, but rather the heart of New York's growing Black middle-class. "For Black New Yorkers, Seneca Village was much more than a thriving neighborhood; it was a symbol of the success their people could achieve and their potential destiny in the United States," historian Leslie M. Alexander writes. "Seneca Village represented and embodied a series of ideas: African pride and racial consciousness, the creation of lasting Black institutions, and the potential attainment of political power."[104]

Yet to the White bourgeoisie, Seneca Village was nothing but "Nigger Village," a pejorative tossed around by both the *New York Times* and Tammany Hall boss George Washington Plunkitt, who was raised in Seneca Village—though he would not admit it.[105] That a White political operative could emerge from early New York's most successful Black neighborhood should not surprise. It is, in fact, the very thing that White leadership found most threatening about the community. Seneca Village was among the city's first integrated

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[103] Elizabeth Blackmar and Roy Rosenzweig, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 67-68.

[104] Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American? Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 154-160.

[105] Blackmar and Rosenzweig, *The Park and the People*, 66.

neighborhoods, as 30% of its 1855 population consisted of Irish and German migrants. Black and White residents lived alongside one other, attended church together, helped raise each other's children, and oftentimes married one another as well. Such disregard for the norms of segregated antebellum society not only inflamed White anger, but also raised fears of interracial solidarity between free Black people and marginalized European migrants. Applying tactics like those later used to smear Darby's Patch, newspapers and developers recast Seneca Village from a middle-class enclave into a debauched shantytown and a breeding ground for miscegenation. "A suburb more filthy, squalid and disgusting can hardly be imagined," the newly formed Central Park Board of Commissioners wrote in their third annual report to the city government. "A considerable number of the inhabitants were...nuisances in the eye of the law," they claimed, "[living] in wretched hovels, half hidden among the rocks...heaps of cinders, brick-bats, potsherds, and other rubbish."[106]

The account of Reverend T.M. Peters further demonstrates the invective hurled at Seneca Village and its residents. In an 1873 report, Peters referred to the pre-Central Park area he once knew as a "wilderness of rock and swamp" concealing the "habitations of poor and wretched people of every race and color and nationality." Within "this waste," he wrote, were "many families of colored people with whom consorted and, in many cases, amalgamated, debased and outcast whites." More than this, he falsely depicted Seneca Village as a place in which "poverty abounds" and "many of the inhabitants...had no regular occupation," despite still-existing legal records indicating that almost all adults in the community were employed.[107] It did not matter.

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[106] Central Park Board of Commissioners, *Third Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park* (New York: Bryant & Co., 1860), 34-35.

[107] John Punnett Peters, *Annals of St. Michael's: Being the History of St. Michael's Protestant Episcopal Church, New York, for One Hundred Years 1807-1907* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1907), 446.

Blackness, like poverty and indigeneity, was viewed as uncivilized, and so Seneca Village could not be anything but a shantytown or a squat from the perspective of White businessmen. It was a "waste" of space that composed of homes, schools, churches, and shops. It was a "wilderness" excised in favor of a large, empty lawn that was somehow more exemplary of civilization. The people of Seneca Village were not squatters, but they may well have been. The story ends the same either way. The city government, led by Tammany-supported and virulently pro-slavery mayor Fernando Wood, seized the area through eminent domain in 1855. More than three-hundred law-abiding and even landowning citizens were violently removed from their homes, despite "many a brilliant and stirring fight," as the "supremacy of the law was upheld by the policeman's bludgeons."[108] Then, as now, the punishment for living outside the boundaries of White capitalism was death by gentrification.

For all the resources landowners invested into their war on squatters, in many cases it was the landowning class that had invited them to settle their properties in the first place. Following the Civil War, real estate speculation became a major economic driver in New York—and a bubble. When property values deflated during the Panic of 1873, many businessmen saw little alternative but to rent their lands to low-wage workers, as the *Times* describes:

> New York real estate became a drug on the market. The owners of land found themselves unable to dispose of their choice lots except at great sacrifice. They found themselves burdened by heavy taxes. Under these circumstances they were willing to adopt almost any plan which would relieve themselves of this burden. The readiest means of doing this they found to be the leasing of their lots to these poor tenants to build huts upon. From scattered hovels there grew up at last whole communities within this district.[109]

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[108] Alexander, *African or American?*, 173.

[109] *New York Times*, "Ten Thousand Squatters."

These questionable arrangements often ended in arrears, leaving some landlords to abandon their ownership to the city government, who likewise found it near-impossible to collect rent.[110] Then, once the presence of squatters had sufficiently depressed the value of a given property, new speculators would step in to purchase it at low cost with plans to raise its worth by evicting the current residents. "Clearly, shantytowns participated in the larger world of real estate finance," Goff contends. "While press accounts routinely demonized shanty dwellers themselves, speculators profited from their continued presence on contested sites."[111] This cycle—from speculation, to abandonment, to rehabilitation through squatting, and a second round of capitalist expropriation—demonstrates that squatting is a natural component of urban growth, even under capitalism. As Robert Neuwirth reminds us, "The history of cities teaches that squatters have always been around, that squatting was always the way the poor built homes, that it is a form of urban development."[112] For the landowners, it was either a means by which to profit from poverty or to dump a troublesome asset. For the squatters, it was their chance to build homes under inhospitable circumstances and claim their right to the city.

"Throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn, poor laborers took possession of the urban landscape and molded it to their needs," writes Goff. "In each instance, their actions presented direct opposition to the encroaching grid and the commodified urban land rubric it inscribed."[113] Not all early New York squatters were socialists, but each pushed back against the market forces that sought to crush them. Each exercised resistance, and in so doing gave life to an alternative

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[110] Jindrich, "The Shantytowns of Central Park West," 677.

[111] Goff, *Shantytown, USA*, 68.

[112] Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities,* 179.

[113] Ibid., 85.

conception of how people might best inhabit urban space. These communities spoke to "an ideology of dwelling that expressed the values, needs, and demands of poor migrant laborers," rejecting the notion that only the rich can shape the city.[114] Seen in this light, New York history is no longer a "story of unbroken progress, unfolding in an orderly fashion as the grid marched up Manhattan Island," but one of "survival, adaptation, and transformation," as the poor carved out space for their lives using only the meager tools made available to them. Though the nineteenth-century squatters would not retain their land, they provide a useful narrative mirror to help us understand later squatter movements as well. They, along with the Hoovervilles of the 1930s, show us that squatting is never an aberration but instead a time-honored response to crisis. So too are media denigration, police raids, and the eventual gentrification of squatted properties part of a cyclical counter-response baked into the functions of capitalism.

Operation Move-In

Jimmy Santos was just fifteen years old when he died from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a faulty boiler at his family's home on W. 106th St. For months, his mother Otilia Robles had petitioned their landlord for repairs. She also requested safer housing from the city and state governments, but to no avail. Everyone on the block knew the young man's death had been preventable, and everyone knew exactly which institutions had failed to prevent it. The activist-produced documentary *Rompiendo Puertas* (known in English by the titles *Break and Enter* and *Squatters*) records the scene at the Santos funeral as a large, multiracial crowd of mourners follows his hearse through the streets of the Upper West Side. Many were fellow Nuyoricans, witnesses to the mid-century Puerto Rican diaspora that had so powerfully transformed the city's demographics. They understood the Robles family's pain, as they too were

[114] Ibid., 56.

trapped in substandard housing and beset with power outages, rat infestations, lead paint, broken plumbing, and unreliable heating. “You see what happened to that kid now, don’t you? The one that died?” asked a neighbor featured in the film. “There’s gonna be a lot more like that if they don’t get a lot of people out of these houses.”[115]

This was no ordinary funeral procession, for the attendees had come armed with a plan. Upon arriving at the building where Jimmy Santos had died, a community organizer took to the stoop to announce that two trucks were on their way to collect the family’s belongings. “We will take the furniture to the city’s relocation office and we will demand that they give this family an apartment in one of the buildings that they plan to tear down,” he said. “We must show them that poor people also have rights,” another man shouted, to much applause.[116] The crowd soon moved indoors, working together to empty each room and transport everything the Robles family owned into their trucks. Then, escorted by a single police cruiser, they marched south down Columbus Avenue toward the headquarters of the West Side Urban Renewal Area. Chants broke out, and some expressed their anger through song. “We don’t want no rats," they sang to the tune of “We Shall Overcome.” What began as a funeral had transformed into a movement, and a bedsheet draped across the side of one truck broadcast its name for all to see: *Operation Move-In*.

The decision to march on the offices of an urban renewal program was a strategic one. Rather than aim low by protesting a single negligent landlord, OMI leaders instead targeted the civic powers they deemed most responsible for inadequate housing. The West Side Urban Renewal Area was both a municipal agency (hereafter referred to as WSURA) and that agency’s name for the twenty blocks running from 87th St. to 97th St. between Amsterdam Avenue and

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[115] *Rompiendo Puertas* (1971; New York: Newsreel), youtube.com/watch?v=2cYnh2HVLJg.

[116] Douglas Robinson, “Home Won—After a Death,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1970, 31.

Central Park West. WSURA's purpose was to 'rehabilitate' this space, ridding it of what government officials deemed 'urban blight.' What this meant in practice was gentrification and the eviction of non-White residents. "The notion that a city should invest in urban renewal...remains a good notion in theory," states former city council member, Manhattan borough president, and accomplished housing rights activist Ruth Messinger. "The problem is that the serious powers that be—and in New York City the biggest power to be is always the real estate industry—decide that urban renewal means urban *removal*. Because they decide that some of the people who are there aren't good for the future development of the neighborhood."[117]

Many on the UWS had already suffered through this process during the demolition of the old San Juan Hill neighborhood twenty blocks to the south. San Juan Hill had been one of the largest Black communities in Manhattan, known to history as the birthplace of Thelonious Monk and bebop jazz. Puerto Ricans began moving there in the 1940s and they, along with the preexisting Irish population, gave rise to the multiethnic working-class landscape that inspired the musical *West Side Story*. Yet it appears San Juan Hill was a bit too colorful in Robert Moses' assessment, as he assailed it as one of the worst slums in New York. Moses formed his Committee on Slum Clearance in 1949 and with it he quickly seized control of the entire neighborhood through eminent domain. More than 7,000 apartments were shuttered, forcing the eviction of countless low-income residents. In their place, Moses and his accomplice John D. Rockefeller III built the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, a new home for elite cultural institutions like the Metropolitan Opera and the New York City Ballet. Moses made no effort to rehouse those who were displaced by the construction of Lincoln Center. Of the 4,400 new apartment units he and Rockefeller installed nearby, all but 400 were marketed as luxury

[117] Ruth Messinger, interview with the author, July 25, 2019.

housing.[118] It was an act of racial and class warfare disguised as a public works project. "The scythe of progress must move north," Moses proclaimed in 1956, adding that "the hardships of tenant removal have been exaggerated."[119] Many of those who fled San Juan Hill left Manhattan for the outer boroughs, which is precisely what Moses had desired and anticipated. Those who remained soon faced a second wave of urban renewal on the Upper West Side, as the scythe of progress swept its way northward once more.

WSURA was a product of Moses' urban renewal policies, though he did not oversee it himself. Instead, the program was chaired by James Felt, a millionaire real estate developer and former head of the city planning commission. Felt has been praised by some for emphasizing preservation over demolition, bringing a softer dispensation to the process of urban renewal. Yet while Felt endeavored to protect the aging brownstones that dotted the area (while still demolishing many other structures), OMI activists questioned his commitment to defending the neighborhood's *people* as well. An early WSURA plan presented by Felt to Mayor Robert F. Wagner in 1959 describes the community in proto-progressive terms, but nevertheless carries with it an air of racial hostility. "The diversity in the area, both economic and ethnic, is a decided asset which the urban renewal plan will strive to maintain," the document notes. "But the population changes of recent years have also brought serious problems which require solution." Among these problems they include the "rapid turnover of population...accounted for partly by the replacement of white population by non-white and Puerto Rican families."[120] One area

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[118] Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 1014.

[119] Charles Grutzner, "Stevens Expands Lincoln Sq. Plans," *New York Times*, October 27, 1956, 15.

[120] Urban Renewal Board, "Preliminary Plan: West Side Urban Renewal Area" (New York: The City of New York, 1959), 13.

landlord featured in a 1970 edition of the *New York Times* enunciated the ruling class's objections in more openly racist terms. "Puerto Ricans are not completely civilized," he told reporter David Shipler. "How can a landlord have those people?"[121]

The agency's answer to this apparent dilemma was to construct a series of deluxe apartments towers, thereby pricing undesired people out of the neighborhood rather than forcing their expulsion by way of the wrecking ball. Felt may have been less of a butcher than Moses, but the consequences of renewal for the working people of the UWS were to be the same as those suffered in San Juan Hill. "Wherever the city sets up urban renewal programs, it removes working people and poor people from their homes and replaces them with rich people and big businesses. This is what's happening all over the city. It's paid for by the government," one resident protests in *Rompiendo Puertas*. "They just want to break [the neighborhood] down...so they can fit more people, but only their people—White," adds a young woman interviewed on the steps of her building.

Upon arriving at the WSURA offices, activists demanded that the city government offer new housing to Robles and her four surviving children, all of whom were still hospitalized and recovering from asphyxiation. They argued that the best place to house the family would be in one of the 105 West Side buildings owned by the city government and marked for demolition as part of the urban renewal program. Most of these structures would stand for several more months to a year and were safe to inhabit, yet they had been emptied and sealed shut by the state. Reopening one for the family would allow them time to recuperate and plan for their next relocation without having to fear additional gas leaks or other dangers. Though WSURA officials were at first reluctant to work with the crowd, they soon acquiesced and agreed to reopen a

[121] David K. Shipler, "Shortage of Housing Here Expected to Grow Worse," *New York Times*, August 10, 1970, 1.

disability-accessible first-floor apartment somewhere in the neighborhood. It was a major victory for Operation Move-In, and one scored on their very first day of action. Yet it remained an individual triumph for a community that was desperate for enduring and systemic change. There was still more work to be done.

Later that same night, OMI pried open nine of the 105 sealed buildings that WSURA had prepared for demolition. They again loaded up their trucks, this time with furniture belonging to several dozen more families seeking new homes and began the move-in process. Items which were too large or too heavy to carry up the buildings' stairwells were instead hoisted by rope and pulled in through apartment windows, all while supporters cheered on the burgeoning squatter movement from the sidewalks below. *Rompiendo Puertas* captures this event in magnificent detail, revealing a movement led by women, teenagers, the elderly, and first-time activists, with each of them driven by community spirit as well as need. While White-authored bourgeois newspapers like the *New York Times* would write of rehoused families trudging like "refugees...through the chill rain" and a "gaunt woman cradling a year-old daughter wrapped in faded scarves," *Rompiendo Puertas* never depicts its protagonists as sorrowful or deserving of pity.[122] The scene it presents is instead almost festive, filled with laughter, music, and images of neighbors joined together in common purpose. "I feel wonderful when I'm turning out and moving in a family. I feel beautiful. Like I'm *doing* something," one interviewee states. "I wish I could liberate a whole neighborhood, a whole twenty-block area like the West Side Urban Renewal. Just push those white shirts out of that office so we work at our own thing. We would have community control [because] it's what the people want."

[122] David K. Shipler, "Poor Families Taking Over Condemned Buildings," *New York Times*, April 24, 1970, 37.

In one of the film's more symbolically compelling moments, two men work to strip a metal seal from a doorframe. They use hammers to remove the nails holding the seal in place, and a crowbar to yank it down and jam open the doors. One of these men, sporting the black beret of the radical Puerto Rican nationalist collective known as the Young Lords, then raises the broken seal aloft on a pole. It hangs in the air above him like a flag, even mimicking the way an ordinary flag might flutter in the breeze. Accompanying this scene is a song from the film's soundtrack, recorded live during the occupation, whose lyrics proclaim: "I'm a Puerto Rican, proud as I can be. I'm not asking favors, I'm taking what belongs to me." What better anthem for this new breakaway community on the Upper West Side? What better standard than the broken seal to exalt this mission of urban reconquest? Most flags are only signifiers, but this is a true object of Lefebvrian appropriation. The very device intended to keep them out of this building has now become an emblem of their self-directed mastery over it. There is so much more to squatting than capturing buildings, but few could deny the power of that act. There is a feeling of incredible strength that comes when city-dwellers elevate their well-being above the unjust demands of authority and venture beyond the locked door. It is the embodiment of direct action. It is the demand for a right to the city given muscle and form, and no one knows this better than the squatters themselves. When Bill Price, one of the few White OMI participants, was asked which tool he considers the most effective in securing tenants' rights, he gave a straightforward response. "A crowbar," he said.[123]

This spirit of transgression is similarly captured in a poem by an anonymous author, found posted to a wall in the OMI central office in 1971. Written in the style of the then-

[123] Roberta Gold, "'I Had Not Seen Women Like That Before:' Intergenerational Feminism in New York City's Tenant Movement," in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of US Feminism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 338.

blossoming Nuyorican poetry movement, this work depicts the apartments as living beings joyously greeting their new inhabitants, suggesting what Roberta Gold calls "a deep force, akin to natural law, at work in the takeover."[124] It reads as follows:

> The door was not open
> It was locked, tinned, cinderblocked, nailed, spiked
>   cemented.
> They thought in this way to keep the house empty
>   and silent
> And to keep us in the street and in the gutter.
> But we came--quietly in the evening--
> Boldly in the morning--
> Through the tin--the cinderblocks--the nails--
>   The spikes and the cement
> Through the locked door.
> And the house welcomed us--
> It sheltered and embraced us.
> The laughter of our children echoed in the
>   hallways--
> Love entered the house, and the house rejoiced
> To hear again the long forgotten words--
>   *Mi casa.* Home![125]

The squatters immediately set to work reshaping their new buildings. They pooled their funds to finance repairs and all residents, young and old alike, contributed their labor to this project. They established a wide network of free-to-use services, including schools, childcare and healthcare programs, a grocery co-op and community kitchen, a coffeeshop, and a 'people's library' stocked with a collection of bilingual left-wing literature. They also established enduring green spaces like the 111th St. People's Garden, where locals grow their own fruit and vegetables to this day. Everywhere the air was abuzz with ideas about revolution, Third-Worldism, anti-capitalism, and Puerto Rican liberation, both on the island and across the US mainland. "We

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[124] Roberta Gold, "'I Had Not Seen Women Like That Before:' Intergenerational Feminism in New York City's Tenant Movement," *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2009), 407.

[125] Anonymous, in Mary Anne Brotherton, "Conflict of Interests, Law Enforcement, and Social Change: A Case Study of Squatters on Morningside Heights" (PhD dissertation, Fordham University, 1974), 61.

equated socialism with ending racism and poverty in our communities," recalls organizer Esperanza Martell, who also served as an important fieldwork interlocutor for this project. Esperanza was an early member of El Comité, a radical Puerto Rican youth movement allied with OMI. The El Comité founders were squatters of a kind themselves, as they squatted their headquarters in an abandoned storefront at 577 Columbus Ave. "We believed we could make it happen, transform the capitalist shit around us. ...We were working-class youth who had said '*¡Basta Ya!*' and were living our lives as political activists, working to transform everything around us with revolutionary theory and practice" (Fig. 3).[126] Of course, not everyone in OMI and El Comité were avowed socialists. "There were people who were activists, but not necessarily socialists," Esperanza says. "And then there were us, who were socialists. And some of us were communists. But wherever we were on that spectrum, we were all struggling for our lives. ...Poverty motivates people. ...It's the story of the working-class of New York City."[127]

This was an "urban populist movement" built by and for "people truly at the bottom of the economic and political ladder," Cynthia A. Young writes. "Most of the squatters were first- or second-generation [migrants] from Spanish-speaking countries in the Caribbean and Central America" (and Puerto Rico, which remains an imperial holding of the United States).[128] As such, their political concerns extended beyond matters of local housing ordinance. "The squatters' struggle is concretely linked to—and is understood as a mimetic replay of—the unequal relations between the First and Third Worlds," Young explains. Because the gentrification of Black and

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[126] Esperanza Martell, "'In the Belly of the Beast:' Beyond Survival," in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, ed. José E. Velázquez and Andres Torres (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1998), 178.

[127] Martell, interview with the author, June 25, 2019.

[128] Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of aUS Third World Left* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 142.

Latino neighborhoods operates as a form of internal colonization within the metropole, Black and Latino-led anti-gentrification activism is an implicit form of anti-imperialist activism as well, and the OMI squatters—already versed in the structures of colonialism from their connections with the Global South—saw it in those terms. "In Vietnam the government was bombing villages, and in New York it was destroying good, low-income housing to build high-risers for the rich," writes Esperanza. "For us it was one and the same."[129]

Perhaps no moment in *Rompiendo Puertas* is more illustrative of this dynamic than a scene in which a female guitarist performs a song with strong anti-imperialist themes. "The rich say we have to move. From Saigon to Hanoi, we have to move," she sings in Spanish on a crowded stoop. "From San Juan to Santiago, we have to move." Through this song, she marks the bonds between their impoverishment and those suffering under, and struggling against, American imperial ambitions around the globe. Her choice of the phrase "we have to move" carries a subtle but clear double-meaning, "simultaneously bear[ing] witness to the forced dislocation wrought by Western imperialism and...call[ing] for mobilization against that very dislocation," Young writes.[130] In this context, the name Operation Move-In might also be read as Operation *Movin,'* a cry for those being pushed toward the peripheries to reverse course and move instead against the center, the social and spatial zero-point from which their repression originates—not unlike *l'irruption* which had occurred in Paris and Nanterre just two years prior. It makes sense then that so many first-time organizers who began their activism careers with Operation Move-In would go on to champion the cause of Puerto Rican nationalism and pursue independence from the United States.

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[129] Martell, "'In the Belly of the Beast,'" 177.

[130] Ibid., 143.

Fig. 3: "It means hope for a better life." Organizers rally together at an OMI march. Photo by Máximo Colón, 1971.

One elderly leader makes the link between OMI and the colonized world even more explicit during a community meeting recorded by documentarians:

> When you're tired you have to stand up, even in your last years of life. They only want tax...the longer you work, the more tax they want... You know where the tax goes? To Vietnam and to rockets to the moon... Take that money and put it in housing for us, the poor people. What are they doing in Vietnam? ...They want to put their nose in everything, and they are losing. You see England lose all her [colonies] and the United States is in the same goddamn way.[131]

Her observations are met with a mix of laughter and nodding agreement from those in attendance, a group which primarily consists of Brown and Black women of varying ages. In her analysis of the film, Young points out how *Rompiendo Puertas*' "willingness to foreground the

[131] *Rompiendo Puertas*, 1971.

middle-aged and elderly Puerto Rican women as leaders of this movement" undercuts the "sixties mythology that routinely centers white students and black civil rights workers." In doing so, *Rompiendo Puertas* (and Operation Move-In itself) proposes a new formulation of revolutionary action in which the *entire* community must unite to advance their cause and share in the process of governance.[132] Traditional vanguard parties like the Young Lords played a role in seizing former WSURA property, but the nature of squatting demands community-wide autogestion. It necessitates squatter self-management, communal cohesion, and a collective investment in building maintenance. What this affirms, Young writes, is "the fact that out of people's everyday lived experiences can evolve a sophisticated political analysis perhaps informed but not overdetermined by...Western philosophically driven models of revolution," which is to say Marxism in its most rigid, doctrinal form.[133] Such conditions bring the UWS squatters into even closer alignment with Third-Worldist ideology and the many anarchist squatter movements then being founded worldwide.

Through all of this, Operation Move-In continued to expand its influence and liberate even more properties, eventually populating forty buildings and housing over two-hundred squatter families. Some of these buildings included newly constructed complexes that hadn't yet been opened to tenants. All these properties, new and old, were then placed in an "apartment registry" so that OMI could "equitably distribute newly repaired apartments" to those on their expansive waiting list. The registry also helped them "avoid cronyism" while fulfilling the essential role of resource allocation that they had commandeered from government

[132] Young, *Soul Power*, 142.

[133] Ibid.

bureaucrats.[134] During this time, OMI also inspired other street-level mobilizations, including El Comité. Like OMI, El Comité finds its genesis in small acts of community service. "After a routine pickup softball game in Central Park" in the summer of 1970, a group of mostly Puerto Rican men "collected money from among themselves and local residents and bought ice cream for neighborhood kids," Victor Quintana recalls.[135] Encouraged by this small work of communal aid, the ballplayers went on to clean up a nearby lot and convert the space into an outdoor movie theater, beginning with a free screening of 1968's *Planet of the Apes*. "The softball players were not part of any community group or political movement. They did not participate in tenants' associations or student protests, nor were they students or intellectuals whose activism began on college campuses," writes El Comité historian Rose Muzio. "But when...Operation Move-In erupted in their neighborhood, they spontaneously joined in, embracing the cause of tenant empowerment as their own" and evolving from a small band of likeminded comrades into a full-blown social justice organization.

Esperanza pushes back against this somewhat romantic narrative, noting that Federico Lora López and the other founding members of El Comité weren't *just* a baseball team. They were mostly former Marines who had fought in the Vietnam War, and who had grown discontent with US policy at home and abroad. Lora López, for example, had enlisted with a desire to halt the spread of communism, yet he came to embrace leftist politics after a disillusioning tour of duty, during which time he was wounded twice and poisoned with Agent Orange.[136] He returned home to his wife, Esperanza's cousin Carmen Martell, and became a father while trying to

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[134] Ibid., 141.

[135] Victor Quintana, foreword to *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity: Puerto Rican Political Activism in New York*, ed. Rose Muzio (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017), xi.

[136] Quintana, "Federico Lora López: Fighter for Social Justice and Human Dignity," *Temporal: A Better Puerto Rico is Possible,* September 15, 2019, temporalpr.blogspot.com/2019/09/federico-lora-lopez-fighter-for-social.html?m=0.

rebuild his life after Vietnam. With time, he began to see that war as an extension of the same crimes and exploitation perpetrated against Americans of color. "They were very angry, they were family men," Esperanza says, contrasting El Comité*'s* founders with the mostly teenage members of the Young Lords. "Federico was a learned man. He read Marx, he read all these things. ...He was an amazing person. A visionary," she told me in June 2019, reflecting on Lora López's death less than two weeks prior. Such was the caliber of those leading El Comité and Operation Move-In. "We were not nobodies. We already had an ideology formed by our experiences in the streets of New York City and in the community," Esperanza says. "We are the community fighting for the community."

From then onward, the two movements worked together to stage demonstrations against urban renewal, distribute leaflets, petition advocacy groups for support, and—in a testament to the effectiveness of their tactics—foster interracial solidarity between members of the local working-class. In July 1970, El Comité members helped capture two condemned buildings owned by the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, whose leaders had plans to convert the structures into a luxury nursing home. The occupation quickly earned the ire of the Episcopal Church, including one priest who denounced the squatters during that Sunday's mass. Yet it also won the support of many of St. John the Divine's mostly White parishioners, who walked out of church and began to march alongside the squatters while carrying signs with messages like "Episcopalians for the Poor."[137] OMI and El Comité also developed a strong relationship with student radicals at nearby Columbia University. In December 1970, they and others hosted a Housing Crimes Trial on campus to prosecute Mayor John Lindsay and others *in absentia* on charges of "permitting slum conditions, maintaining firetraps, and criminal neglect, racism, and

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[137] Rose Muzio, *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity*, 34.

harassment."[138] Serving on this 'People's Court' were representatives from OMI and El Comité, the Young Lords, the Black Panthers, Chinatown youth group I Wor Kuen, the Metropolitan Council on Housing, and various other tenants' rights organizations from across the city. UWS residents were permitted to give testimony, and among those who took the stand was a woman who kept awake for long hours almost every night sweeping rats out of her two sons' shared bed, and another whose daughter developed brain damage from eating lead paint chips. "As the trial went on," the *New Yorker* reported, "stories of crumbling ceilings, broken fixtures, injuries, lack of hot water, and illnesses caused by heatless winters began to sound almost routine."

In delivering her sentence, a member of the court's majority-female judicial panel advised that "housing in New York City be made public, with tenant control not only of individual buildings but of the entire housing picture." Those in assembly celebrated the verdict. Later, following a police eviction at 65 W. 90th St., several of the Columbia students who participated in this mock trial offered sanctuary to the evicted in their dorm rooms, attesting to the strength of student/squatter comradeship during this time. The longstanding capitalist strategy of dividing the working-class by race and other subclassifications was beginning to falter on the UWS. "They always keep us fighting amongst each other, because that way we won't get together... I think for the first time people are working together and doing something about changing the system," one OMI participant told filmmakers. "We're all kinds of people from all backgrounds. There's only one thing we all have in common: we're all poor—and we're all working together." Had OMI never aspired to anything more than squatting it would still have been an outrage to the bourgeois state. Now that they had taken up the cause of spreading class

[138] *New Yorker*, "Mock Trial," January 9, 1971, 22.

consciousness throughout the neighborhood, Operation Move-In had become a significant threat to New York real estate and the city government. Retaliation was inevitable.

Muzio writes of this backlash in *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity*, her history of the era. "Initially, the city threatened the squatters with forced eviction and sent squads of maintenance workers to apartments and buildings not yet occupied to break fixtures, remove stoves, refrigerators, and sinks, and wreck electrical wiring in an effort to deter additional move-ins."[139] The police were even said to have released attack dogs in several of these buildings, evoking the still-recent memory of law enforcement abuses against protesters in Alabama. Along with extensive documentation of the damage these raids caused, OMI squatters managed to photograph two high-level employees of the city government's housing authority accompanying the officers in one of the destroyed apartments, eliminating any question of who had ordered these actions. There is also record of at least two evictions carried out by the NYPD. The first of these occurred on W. 87th St. in November 1970, when El Comité co-founder Pedro Rentas and approximately thirty other squatters were expelled from their homes. They were then arrested for criminal trespass by fifty armed members of the Tactical Patrol Force, an elite police squadron tasked with quelling protests and often derided by activists as New York's own version of the Gestapo.[140] The state's position was clear: gentrification would continue as planned, and the government would rather despoil their own properties than allow poor people to live there and make improvements on their own terms. Yet the squatters were not deterred, and they hardened their position in return, insisting that they would not be moved under any circumstances. "If they come in the spring to start demolition, we will barricade ourselves in. If they break down the

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[139] Muzio, *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity*, 30.

[140] Ibid., 37.

barricades, we will drive them out. If they throw in tear gas, we'll pick it up and throw it back at them," one squatter exclaimed during a speech at an OMI meeting. "If they send in demolition equipment, we will lay down in the street with our bodies and we will stop them. ...We will hold our building, and the only way they can get us out is to kill us!"[141]

In response to aggressive policing, the squatters and El Comité coordinated new methods for protecting their homes. Community defense began with watchfulness. Every squatter needed to be cognizant of who belonged in their space and who did not, for the threat of infiltration was too great to allow anything less than total awareness. Sister Anne Brotherton, a Jesuit nun and former doctoral student at Fordham University, describes the UWS squats as a "defended neighborhood" in her 1978 dissertation on the movement. The neighborhood is defended, she says, because it has been "sealed off by sharp boundaries (the...buildings involved) and by a restrictive covenant (screening by the squatter committees of prospective new-comers)."[142] From Brotherton's many interviews with the Morningside Heights squatters—allied with, but distinct from the OMI squatters twenty or so blocks to their south—we can gleam one particularly insightful passage about the relationship between squatters and their screening process:

> In the beginning, we lived in constant fear. There were so many rumors and rumors about rumors—that the police would come in any minute. ...Now, we've just become accustomed to living like this. Why worry about it? If it comes, it comes. The plan of action is there; we know what to do. In the summer, I myself sit in front of the building, talking, drinking beer. Rosa puts the record player in the window, and we dance in the hall and everything. But let a stranger walk in, and somebody's going to stop him and say: "Who are you? Who do you want to see?" We know who belongs here.[143]

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[141] *Rompiendo Puertas*, 1971.

[142] Brotherton, "Conflicts of Interest, Law Enforcement, and Social Change," 184.

[143] Ibid., 77.

When police did arrive to threaten eviction, the squatters would cluster together all through the night on their front steps to bar the cops from entry. They hung banners with slogans like "People Before Property" and sang chants like "Power to the People" to reaffirm their mission. At times these confrontations would turn violent and end in arrests, but the squatters remained committed to their goal. "It was worth it," one man asserted following an eviction depicted in *Rompiendo Puertas*. "And the people from the community...they came up. They heard Operation Move-In is in there, El Comité is in there, let's go fight for them. Because we're the people that are fighting for the community. We're fighting for us." Even when OMI squatters lost control of two buildings, they managed to hold the line against police incursion in thirty-eight others, a remarkably high rate of success for any squatter movement.

Operation Move-In survived for the better part of two years, forcing landlords and the city government to compromise with squatters on several critical matters. Some of the captured buildings were restored and maintained as affordable rentals in accordance with the state's Mitchell-Lama subsidized housing program, while an additional 946 low-income apartments were added to the WSURA redevelopment plan.[144] Among these properties was the heavily contested Mitchell-Lama Site 30 building at Columbus Ave. and W. 90th St., where OMI had established its headquarters and where police once arrested thirty-five squatters in a nighttime raid. "We were able to get many families into the buildings we took over on 87th Street, many of whom are still there. We stopped demolition for Mitchell-Lama on Site 30 until the city [government] agreed to meet the quota that 30 percent of all units would be reserved for low-income applicants," said Carmen Martell, enumerating some of OMI's achievements.[145] In

[144] Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City*, 90.

[145] Muzio, *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity*, 36.

addition to these victories, the Episcopal Church also discarded their nursing home plan and allowed more than 400 of the squatters occupying their buildings to remain as rent-paying tenants. The women and men of Operation Move-In, we find, were not quashed by the police and driven from their homes, but instead achieved the best outcome possible for most squatters within the framework of capitalism—they held their ground, defended their neighborhood, and were rewarded with a more favorable bargaining position and greater say in future housing decisions. Most of all, their actions helped the Robles family and many like them find suitable living space in a city whose government had conspired against their health. Muzio, who as a young activist witnessed OMI's rise and fall first-hand, summarizes its legacy thusly:

> Operation Move-In demonstrated the partial effectiveness of sustained, organized protests that used disruptive tactics, persuasive mobilizing strategies, and broad alliances to assert community-based power and force concessions from elites. ...The reaction of city government to the Squatters Movement reinforced [the public] perception that elected and appointed officials...did not represent their communities and that the excluded and powerless would have to represent themselves.[146]

Operation Move-In also reestablished the squatter village as a viable working-class housing option in New York for the first time since the Great Depression. They created a blueprint which others could use to mount community-based responses to housing injustice through direct action, and inspired similar squatting efforts in Chelsea, Chinatown, and the LES. "By defining the city as a space built by and thus in a fundamental sense for poor people, by asserting that the seizure of abandoned apartments is a morally justifiable and politically legitimate form of activism, by ideologically linking urban renewal and US imperialism, and by showcasing elderly, middle-aged, and young mothers undertaking militant and effective political struggle," Operation Move-in represented what Young calls "a radical politics of place."[147] It is a

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[146] Ibid., 40.

[147] Young, *Soul Power*, 139.

movement which will forever prove what is possible when working people band together and transform the right to the city from concept to reality. As Esperanza says, “It’s not about the theory—it’s about the practice.”

El Comité outlived Operation Move-In by almost ten years and grew into a kind of organizational successor to the Young Lords. They developed chapters in other boroughs, and eventually in other cities like Boston and Camden, New Jersey. In 1975, El Comité members embraced Puerto Rican independence as their specific political objective and transitioned into El Comité-MINP (*Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño*). As representatives of what they now called the Puerto Rican National Left, members of El Comité-MINP became outspoken Marxist-Leninists and held study sessions for key M-L texts like the Spanish-language translation of Vladimir Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done*.[148] All the while, they continued to fight in the streets for the rights and prosperity of Puerto Rican people. In her comments during a 2020 retrospective on the 50th anniversary of El Comité’s founding, Muzio paid tribute to the organization’s accomplishments and ideals:

> For more than a decade, El Comité fought against gentrification and police brutality. It fought for bilingual education programs and responsive community boards. It pushed for access to quality healthcare and higher education. ...El Comité promoted access to good jobs, workers’ rights, union democracy, and also advocated for Latinx representation in the media. The organization’s class analysis guided its work throughout. The power potential for the structural transformation of society lies in the hands of mobilized and purposeful workers.[149]

[148] Martell, “‘In the Belly of the Beast,’” 182.

[149] Rose Muzio, “El Comité-MINP 50th Anniversary - Day of Commemoration and Dialogue,” The People’s Forum NYC, December 13, 2020, youtube.com/watch?v=rumdYR58C34.

Esperanza, now a retired professor who has taught community organizing skills at Hunter College's Silberman School of Social Work, participated in El Comité from January 1971 to October 1972. During this time, she served on the steering committee and as assistant editor of the newspaper *Unidad Latina*. Though her tenure in the organization was short, she looks back on their efforts with pride. "We *did* this. People don't get that these are poor, working-class, traumatized youth. ...And we were able to break through bourgeois ideology, break through the fog, the smoky mirror," she says. "We fucking smashed the smoky mirror of capitalism. In *action*, not in academia. ...It was an unbelievable period."[150] Máximo Colón, a documentary photographer and former squatter, concurs. "We were determined to try to make the revolution. And we thought we were going to make the revolution," he told me during a visit to his apartment with Esperanza. "It was a very dynamic time...people were decolonizing. There were liberation struggles all over the place. ...We made some gains, but capitalism is a big monster."[151] El Comité-MINP, like Operation Move-In before it, would not last forever. It fell victim in the early 1980s to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's COINTELPRO ('counter-intelligence program'), and this infiltration disrupted and eventually broke El Comité-MINP apart in 1981. Capitalism is indeed a big monster, and it will not go down with a fight. But what the OMI squatters and their El Comité comrades demonstrate is that such a fight is possible. They show us that with solidarity and commitment, the working-class can resist gentrification and defend their right to life and right to the city.

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[150] Martell, interview with Andrew Viñales, April 25, 2018, 100 Puerto Ricans Oral History Project, Hunter College Center for Puerto Rican Studies, centroca.hunter.cuny.edu/Detail/objects/15630.

[151] Máximo Colon, interview with the author, June 25, 2019.

I thought on all of this as I walked with Esperanza down Columbus Avenue in June 2019. It was a beautiful summer day, and children raced by shouting or riding their bikes across the hot pavement. Esperanza pointed out the places where she and El Comité once fought for their future, and the apartments OMI held down for months in defiance of unjust laws. I tried to imagine each building we passed draped with banners and awash in protest song and chant. It was difficult though, for so much time had passed. We walked by a Trader Joe's and watched the young, mostly White professionals exit, their tote bags stuffed with organic groceries. "None of this was here. It's been fifty years since the squatter's movement," she said. "The neighborhood's changed," I agreed. "And not haphazardly." Esperanza nodded her head. "No, it's planned," she said. "But people resist and people push back. ...We win in the battles but we [haven't won] the war. But you can't win a war without battles and skirmishes. People talk about taking state power, and that's when you win the war."[152]

I admire Esperanza for her continuing activism and conviction that we must elevate action above theory. She knows that the professional class will never allow for radical change, let alone lead a revolution. They desire these things only to please their youthful ideological interests and treat them as entertainment. Their greater desires are shaped by their class interests, and so all but a rare few will grow up and betray the revolutionary movement in the end. She understands this essential flightiness of the White ideologue, the adventurist, the left-wing academic. I am thankful that she was willing to share these stories with a White, middle-class outsider like me—and one marked, no less, with what she calls the "stamp of the bourgeois institution." Her accomplishments, more than anything I can hope to achieve with this dissertation, speak to the on-the-ground power of the working-class. It will take many more like

[152] Martell, walking tour with the author, June 25, 2019.

Esperanza, and many more organizations like Operation Move-in and El Comité*,* to win in the battle for our cities and the war against capitalism. But I remain hopeful. It is as Esperanza—whose name indeed means 'hope' in Spanish—wrote more than two decades ago: "Together with our youth we will find ways of freeing ourselves from internalized oppression and be the powerful people that we are. Capitalism and colonialism will lose their hold on us. ...It takes time and patience to build a movement and sustain a revolution in our hearts and minds. But I know we can do it because we have been doing it. ...We just need to believe that we will win!"[153]

Legacies of Protest in Tompkins Square Park

As Operation Move-In dissipated, the New York squatter scene began working its way down to Alphabet City, a neighborhood on the Lower East Side which was then undergoing its own form of urban renewal. No OMI squatters supervised this migration, just as there was no obvious connective tissue linking the Central Park squatters of the 1800s and their Upper West Side counterparts a century later. Instead, a new generation of squatters picked up where OMI had left off, driven by the same economic determiners that have long compelled the urban poor to reclaim housing. These Alphabet City squatters quickly took to the front lines in what became a fifteen-year contest between ordinary people and the wealthy for control of the neighborhood. It was a battle that played out in courtrooms, boardrooms, city council meetings, street protests, and in violent confrontations between citizens and the police. In each of these theaters of struggle, the squatters and other working-class activists sometimes secured astonishing victories, yet also suffered terrible and often bloody defeats. Regretfully, I do not have enough room to provide a full accounting of these events, which in their most expansive telling would require an entire book or more to detail. I will do my best, however, to lay out some of the basic facts of

[153] Martell, "'In the Belly of the Beast,'" 191.

this era, and to provide an abbreviated history of both the Alphabet City squats and the gentrification of the Lower East Side writ large. Details about the squat houses themselves appear in the following section of this chapter. For now, we must begin our tale in Tompkins Square Park (TSP), a "10-acre green and forested oasis set in the midst of acres of tenement buildings" between Avenues A and B.[154] While this park may not stand out to the casual observer, it in fact possesses an "explosive history" which "belies its unremarkable form," for it is this park that has served, quite improbably, as one of the most indelible fonts for LES radicalism and reaction over the past 150 years.[155] We might think of the story of TSP as the story of the Alphabet City squatters in microcosm, encompassing so many of their aspirations and so much of the violent repression they faced in the pursuit of their aims.

Tompkins Square (then not yet a park) opened in 1834 and was intended from the start to lift nearby property values, signaling a "brilliant and genteel future" for a part of the city which had previously been, from the capitalist perspective, a profitless bog. Its development was an early act of gentrification, meant to forestall "elite migration" away from Lower Manhattan "and assuage the anxieties of its upper-crust denizens" in the face of a growing immigrant population.[156] As with nearby Washington Square Park, planners hoped that Tompkins Square would help transform the area from an "ugly duckling to a civic swan," with the allocation of city funds toward parklands and public squares leading to the "creation of elite neighborhoods," as Edwin G. Burrow and Mike Wallace write in their history of New York.[157] Instead, Tompkins

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[154] Marci Reaven and Jeanne Houck, "A History of Tompkins Square Park," in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side*, ed. Janet L. Abu-Lughod (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 82.
[155] Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 11.

[156] Jacqueline Shine, "'Open to the People for Their Free Assembly:' Tompkins Square Park, 1850-1880," *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 1 (Fall 2011), 110.

[157] Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 579.

Square and its surrounding area matured into a healthy working-class community of shipbuilders and mechanics known as the Dry Dock District (later called Kleindeutschland*,* or 'Little Germany,' by the many German American inhabitants who began arriving just prior to the Civil War). In 1857, following a financial panic and stock market crash, large numbers of hungry workers took to the square demanding jobs and food. They were met not with economic relief but with police aggression, as officers unleashed the fury of their nightsticks on those assembled. The *New York Herald* asserted its enthusiasm for the violent suppression of protest in an editorial published days before the riot, imploring the police to "shoot down any quantity of Irish or Germans" that they please. "Rioters, like other people, have heads to be broken and bodies to be perforated with ball and steel," the *Herald* wrote.[158] The police agreed.

Tompkins Square remained a protest hotspot for years thereafter. During the height of the Civil War, it acted as a staging area for participants in the infamous 1863 Draft Riots (better framed as an anti-Black race riot), which were then raging up and down First Avenue and across 11th Street to the square's north. An attempt by planners to pacify the site by turning it into a military parade ground in 1866 failed to temper its rowdy nature, and in 1874 a second police riot disrupted a demonstration by 7,000 unemployed laborers. This event was called in response to yet another economic recession, and the workers gathered in the frigid January weather to hear communist speakers offer their solution to the crisis. "If you will unite, we may have here within five years a socialistic republic. Then a lovely morning will break over this darkened land," one orator declared, with an interpreter providing translation for the German speakers in the audience. "Whatever we poor men may not have," the orator continued, "we have free speech,

[158] "Prospects of Riot and Bloodshed," *New York Herald*, November 6, 1857, 4.

and no one can take it from us."[159] It was then, as the esteemed leftist historian Howard Zinn writes in *A People's History of the United States*, that "the police charged, using their clubs." Several officers on horseback swiftly blocked the square's exits, ensuring that few would escape police retaliation.[160] Members of the German Tenth Ward Workingmen's Association fought back in defense of their square, which they called Der Weiße Garten ('The White Garden'), and a tremendous, lopsided battle broke out between the socialists and the well-armed state. The workers put up a fight, but there was little they could do to triumph. Almost two-thirds of the NYPD's men had been summoned for riot duty that day, with a large weapons stockpile positioned at a nearby armory for easy access.[161] The workers may have come to Tompkins Square to protest, but the police arrived ready for a riot—even if they had to supply the aggression themselves. "Mounted police charged the crowd on Eighth Street, riding them down and attacking men, women, and children without discrimination. It was an orgy of brutality," union leader Samuel Gompers wrote decades after of what he saw on the Lower East Side that morning. "I was caught in the crowd on the street and barely saved my head from being cracked by jumping down a cellarway. To this day I cannot think of that wild scene without my blood surging in indignation at the brutality of the police."[162]

The 1874 assemblage was at that time the largest protest in New York's history. It came during a high point in American labor activism, and the old alliance of real estate, government,

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[159] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (London: Longman, 1980), 246.

[160] Neil Smith and Don Mitchell, *Revolting New York: How 400 Years of Riot, Rebellion, Uprising, and Revolution Shaped a City* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 107.

[161] Ibid., 106-107.

[162] Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1925), 96.

media, and the police feared that it might mark the first stirrings of something like a Paris Commune in New York. Their attempt to defang Tompkins Square by turning it into a military parade ground, a symbol of order and nationalist pride, had fizzled. They learned—as the French had learned when Georges-Eugène Haussmann's renovation of Paris failed to put down the Communards three years prior—that planning alone cannot suppress a revolt. There must be violence as well. Even so, there were several more futile attempts at what Neil Smith calls "classic design flattery-cum-optimism," through which the "reorganization of physical space is attempted in order to change its social and political resonance."[163] Tompkins Square was reorganized back into a park in 1878, just four years after the police riot. Parks designer Frederick Law Olmsted installed 450 elm trees, a temperance fountain, and a playground for the neighborhood's youth, all in keeping with the bourgeois moralism of the City Beautiful movement. Robert Moses oversaw a similar redevelopment during the New Deal years of the 1930s, changing the park's layout and adding even more greenery and recreational features like handball and basketball courts. This second redevelopment succeeded in making TSP more like a park, but again failed to decouple the square from its history of radical activism.

As the decades passed, elites watched with anxiety while Tompkins Square Park hosted lectures by the Lower East Side's own 'Red' Emma Goldman and, later, protests against the Vietnam War. They fretted as hippies arrived on the scene while the homeless population swelled. They shuddered to see the park's bandshell become a punk rock venue and a base of operations for anarchists looking to rally the poor, while May Day celebrations brought hundreds into the square each spring to celebrate the persistence of organized labor. Through decades of ghettoization, austerity, redlining, urban renewal, and ever more abuses of urban design,

[163] Smith and Mitchell, *Revolting New York*, 113.

Tompkins Square Park endured. It was the "people's park," Jacqueline Shine writes, "not simply...an arena where everyday New Yorkers challenged...some monolithic political authority," but also a space "where they took on positions of authority and... negotiated the meanings and uses of the places they lived, worked, and played."[164] In this way, the park's nineteenth-century legacy of protest lived on into the twentieth, ensuring an eventual and inevitably violent response from New York elites and their patrolmen.

All of this brings us to the summer of 1988, when the policymakers of Manhattan Community Board 3 decreed a 1:00 am curfew at the park. CB3, as the board is known in shorthand, is an unelected government panel which oversees aspects of zoning and land use on the Lower East Side. They were led in these efforts by board member Antonio Pagán, a doggedly pro-real estate city councilman who acted as the face of the anti-squatter opposition on the Lower East Side for many years. According to their new ordinance, nobody except the homeless could occupy TSP overnight under penalty of arrest, and even the homeless would be restricted to a small, crowded containment zone in the southeast corner of the park known as Tent City.[165] This decision was a victory for lobbying groups like the Avenue A Block Association, which represented neighborhood business interests and members of the newly resettled bourgeoisie. Longtime residents, and especially squatters and their political allies, reacted with disgust. Once

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[164] Shine, "'Open to the People for Their Free Assembly,'" 120.

[165] The creation of Tent City may seem like a small courtesy to the homeless, but the government's intentions were always to remove them as well. Further efforts in this direction were undertaken in the 1990s by Mayor David Dinkins, who closed TSP for over a year as a means of permanently evicting unhoused people from the park grounds. "This park is a park," Dinkins said in 1991. "It is not a place to live. I will not have it any other way." Most homeless residents presumably agreed and would have preferred four walls and a roof. The problem is that the city government's abysmal shelter system had no way to safely and adequately provide this, and many homeless TSP residents stated that they were afraid to return to the shelters. "Once you've had a taste of the real poison you just won't go back to it. It's poison. Real poison," a man named Benjamin August said of the shelters. As such, the homeless were swept out of the park by police with no safe place to go. This process continues today in 2022, as newly elected mayor Eric Adams engages in the same anti-homeless practices as his predecessors, including in Tompkins Square Park. John Kifner, "New York Closes Park to Homeless," *New York Times*, June 4, 1991, A1.

again it seemed the government was snatching their community away and reselling it parcel by parcel to the rich. It was a process they had already seen unfold across the street at Christodora House, a seventeen-story former settlement home for Ukrainian immigrants which developers had scooped up at auction and converted into condominiums in 1986. Now the Christodora loomed over the park like a vampire, both dead itself yet primed for the kill. This old brick tower, which only ten years prior had been squatted by radical organizations like the Black Panthers, the Diggers, and the Young Lords, had become instead a *memento mori* for the entire neighborhood.[166] It was a "glaring totem of privilege in a neighborhood that was still littered with gutted tenements," and a disheartening reminder of the wealthy young professionals then creeping their way toward Tompkins Square Park—and, with it, the heart of Alphabet City.[167]

Stan Mack, a cartoonist and reporter for the *Village Voice*, captures the tension between the park's inhabitants and the "Yups from Christodora" in his illustrated map of Tompkins Square Park (Fig. 4). Here one sees the strange soup TSP had become in 1988, simmering with every flavor of humanity that the city had to offer. Drug users and alcoholics reside catercorner to the neighborhood ballpark. "Jazz musicians," "hippie activists," "dog walkers," "left-wing commies," and others intermingle on the grounds. A "kindhearted parks worker who loves flowers" tends to a garden along Avenue B, but fears making the park too beautiful because then "developers will move in faster." Through his emphasis on Tompkins Square's mixed population, Mack echoes the sentiments of Alphabet City resident later interviewed for a 1992 documentary on the park:

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[166] Bill Weinberg, *Tompkins Square Park: Legacy of Rebellion—A Century and a Half of Protest & Resistance on New York's Lower East Side* (Ithaca, NY: Autumn Leaves, 2008), 22.

[167] Alex Williams, "How the Christodora House Became the Chelsea Hotel of the East Village," *New York Times*, August 31, 2016, nytimes.com/2016/09/01/fashion/christodora-house-east-village-book.html.

> What really made Tompkins Square powerful—what made it work—was the fact that all these different kinds of people were together in one spot. Political activists, homeless people, people from the various youth cultures: punks, hippies, skins. Yeah, everybody was there. It was a place where everybody traded ideas. It made a volatile and powerful cultural mix, which scared the hell out of the authorities. And that's why they had to break it up.[168]

Looking down on all of this were the new residents of Christodora House, who saw this "unsightly mess" and concluded, in Mack's words, that "poverty is okay but not so close to their co-ops." Along the map's perimeter, outside the realm of communal participation, we see also those business owners and government officials who deem the park "disgusting" and call for its closure. "Move 'em out!" Mack's hand-drawn real estate developer declares. It may all appear a little oversimplified, even cartoonish, but Mack's flattened depictions of the speculators are perhaps no more diabolical than their real-life counterparts. A 1984 *New York* cover story on the changing demographics of the East Village features an almost laughably villainous statement from Tom Pollack, a Colorado developer who moved to Alphabet City to cash in on the gentrification boom. "Ethnic businesses and services will gradually be forced out. Anyone else can be paid to leave," Pollack told the magazine. "If you can get rid of rent-controlled tenants, renovate the place, and charge $700 a month, it's worth paying them $10,000 or so just to get them out and raise the rents. They'll all be forced out. They'll be pushed east to the river and given life preservers. It's so clear. I wouldn't have come here if it wasn't."[169]

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[168] *Operation Class War on the Lower East Side*, directed by Jessica Glass and Genevieve Boutet de Monvel (1992; New York: Paper Tiger Television Collective), papertiger.org/tompkins-square-park-operation-class-war-on-the-lower-east-side.

[169] Craig Unger, "The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood," *New York*, May 28, 1984, 40-41.

Fig. 4: "Inside Tompkins Square Park." Illustration by Stan Mack, *Village Voice*, 1988.

Given well-publicized statements like these, it is easy to understand the outrage Community Board 3's curfew engendered among neighborhood residents. Tompkins Square Park was their "collective backyard," as much a part of the place they called home as their own living rooms.[170] They refused to allow needless restrictions on the use of that space, let alone restrictions imposed by the same forces that were driving the working-class away from the community in favor of the rich. "It is clear that those who seek to push the poor out of the park aim to further gentrify our neighborhood," read a flyer posted to area streetlamps and payphones in July 1988. "They will stop at nothing to protect their profits including using the police against the people. We will no longer allow an unrepresentative minority of yuppie developers to dictate to the majority when and under what conditions we can use our park." Activists called for a midnight protest on July 30th, deemed "No Fascist Pig Day" and intended to "demonstrate against [the] park closing anytime at all."[171] It was a modest response, but one which would prove to have major consequences.

Approximately 200-300 people attended the rally, many of them squatters. They played music in the bandshell and commiserated on the lawn. It was a peaceful scene, but a feeling of unease took hold as almost two-dozen NYPD cruisers began assembling at the edges of the park ahead of the curfew. It is unknown exactly how that night's skirmish broke out. Police say they were provoked to action when someone in the crowd threw a glass bottle at an officer. Gerald Wade, a prominent C-Squat resident better known by the name Jerry the Peddler, asserts that the policeman and three others were merely sprayed with foam from a shaken beer can.[172] The

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[170] Kronstadt, "A Short History of Tompkins Square Uprising," 5.

[171] Ibid., 7.

[172] Jerry the Peddler, "The Lower East Side Squatters and the Tompkins Square Uprising" (unpublished manuscript), 7.

details are less important than what happened next. Once more the police charged on the crowd, just as they had in 1857 and 1874, and they battered many in attendance with their nightsticks. A small number of officers were injured according to the NYPD, with one suffering a broken finger. The police assaulted dozens of protesters in retaliation. They arrested four squatters and charged them each with reckless endangerment and incitement to riot, insisting that these men had been the primary agitators. Witnesses were not convinced. A musician named John McDermott told reporters that "police provoked the fight" and that the protesters only started throwing bottles after the fracas was already underway.[173] Such police aggression further emboldened the anti-curfew activists, who then called for a second midnight protest one week later, on the night of August 6-7, 1988.

Almost everyone knew from the jump that this second protest would be a rough affair. The police and punks alike were angry now, and their planned midnight rendezvous felt to many on both sides like a chance at revenge. The NYPD arrived first that "swelteringly hot and stiflingly humid night," with eighty-six officers assembled on foot and eleven on horseback. They had spent the week between protests establishing a "para-military presence in and around the park," including "displays of crowd control techniques with phalanxes of riot cops advancing in special formations," witness and underground journalist Chris Flash wrote in his newspaper *The Shadow*.[174] "It's time to bring a little law and order back to the park and restore it to the legitimate members of the community," police captain Gerald McNamara told reporters as he

[173] Sarah Lyall, "Residents Clash with the Police in Village Park," *New York Times*, August 1, 1988, B3.

[174] Chris Flash, "What Happened One Hot Summer Night in 1988," *The Shadow*, August 1, 2008.

awaited the protest that night. "We don't want to get into a situation where we under-police something like this and it turns into a fiasco."[175]

The protesters marched into the square along St. Mark's Place at approximately 11:30 pm. Though the police claimed they numbered more than 700, *New York Times* reporter Todd Purdum and other observers estimate there were only about 150 to 200 active protesters in total, roughly equivalent to the numbers who had attended the previous street action one week prior. They arrived chanting slogans like "The park belongs to the people!" and "It's our fuckin' park!" (the "usual baloney," in the words of then-mayor Ed Koch)[176]. One man held up a white bedsheet decorated with the international symbol for squatting, an upward-facing, lighting bolt-shaped arrow which is itself modeled on the well-known anarchist Circle-A symbol. Some of the rowdier protesters taunted the police, blew into conch shells, set off M-80 firecrackers, or banged on trash cans and cars. The police kept their composure at first, even after some protesters began hurling bottles at them, but already there were signs that retribution was on its way. Many of the officers present that night either covered their badge numbers with black tape or wore no badges at all—an ominous sign of things to come.

Among those out on the streets of Alphabet City that night was Clayton Patterson, a thirty-nine-year-old fashion designer and documentarian from Canada. He carried with him a handheld video camera, with which he intended to capture a performance at a popular drag cabaret called the Pyramid Club. Instead, he was drawn toward the commotion in Tompkins Square Park. Patterson joined the crowd at the corner of St. Mark's and Avenue A and began

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[175] Todd Purdum, "Melee in Tompkins Sq. Park: Violence and Its Provocation," *New York Times*, August 14, 1988, 38.

[176] *Captured*, directed by Daniel Levin and Ben Solomon (2009; New York: E1 Entertainment), youtube.com/watch?v=puVDQ5bo6zw.

filming. He would keep the camera rolling until sunrise the next morning using new 8mm cassette tapes and batteries supplied by his wife and professional co-creator Elsa Rensaa, ultimately producing a 3.5-hour video documentary entitled “Tompkins Square Police Riot.” This recording would prove the strongest evidence of NYPD aggression during the ensuing investigation, the best primary source material on the subject available for researchers today, and a direct precursor to the many smartphone videos of police brutality that would fuel the Black Lives Matter movement in later decades.[177] I base my account of the 1988 Tompkins Square Park Riot on a combination of his footage and various newspaper sources, with an emphasis on the former and the on-the-ground perspective that it provides.

The early sequences of Patterson’s video demonstrate how the NYPD initiated most of the night’s violence. Things are calm enough during the first fifteen minutes of the film. “This is kind of boring actually,” says a man speaking with Patterson near the TSP bandshell. “Everybody’s just walking around, cops are doing nothing.” But Patterson is astute enough to see where things are headed. “Wait until 1 o’clock,” he says. “Yeah, wait until 1 o’clock,” the man responds. “The fun starts then.” Just as Patterson had predicted, the police charge the unarmed crowd at the instant the 1:00 curfew takes effect, attacking them with helmets, horses, and batons. One can see how swiftly the atmosphere in the park changes during curfew around the film’s 18:00 minute mark, with chants and cheers abruptly giving way to sirens and screams of terror as the police advance on the crowd.[178] This timing suggests that police planned and scheduled these actions ahead of the protest, and they were therefore not provoked into action as

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[177] The *New Yorker* makes the link between Patterson’s film, the Rodney King video, and Black Lives Matter explicit in Emily Raboteau, “The Long, Vital History of Bystander Recordings,” *New Yorker*, August 11, 2016, newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/a-new-exhibit-highlights-the-long-vital-history-of-bystander-recordings.

[178] Clayton Patterson, *Tompkins Square Police Riot*, VHS, August 6-7, 1988, *Squatters’ Collective Oral Histories Collection (OH.068)*, The Tamiment Library, New York University.

many officers claimed. It was also around this time that Deputy Chief Thomas Darcy, the second most powerful officer in Lower Manhattan and a former member of the counter-socialist Tactical Patrol Force, deserted the scene to go "take a leak" back at headquarters, as Jerry the Peddler describes it.[179] Deputy Inspector Joseph Wodarski, next in the chain of command, was "recently assigned to the borough and unfamiliar with the history of the park and its current difficulties," according to the official NYPD report on the "Tompkins Square Park Incident" produced later that month. As such, the senior ranking Wodarski "deferred to Captain McNamara on tactical decisions,"[180] leaving McNamara in charge and free to issue a "10-85 Forthwith" call for immediate reinforcement. "This call is widely interpreted as being of an extreme emergency nature," the report states. "Over the next several hours...officers from all over the city responded. The random nature of this response meant that officers who had not been briefed about the event, who were not equipped for such an encounter...and who were not under direct supervision of a superior officer, responded directly to the scene of the confrontation," the report continues.

Somewhere between 300 and 350 additional officers from roughly fifty different units around the city descended on TSP. It was not long before the cops outnumbered the protesters by about two to one, yet McNamara either failed or refused to cancel the call for reinforcements, violating departmental protocol. He also made no effort to organize his new backup and provide them with specific orders, a decision which led to an "uncontrolled, unstructured atmosphere...conducive to independent action and...police misconduct."[181] This was not just an

[179] Jerry the Peddler, "The Lower East Side Squatters and the Tompkins Square Uprising," 7.

[180] Robert J. Johnston, Jr., *NYPD Report on Tompkins Square Park Incident*, Law Enforcement News Archives, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, August 23, 1988, dc.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/804, 10.

[181] Ibid., 10.

unorthodox strategy, it was a dangerous, illegal, and—most of all—unnecessary one. This excessive show of force exhibits the weight that officers like McNamara placed on their meeting with anti-curfew demonstrators. They did not go into that evening thinking of it as just another street protest, but rather as direct engagement with an enemy force that must be quelled, even squashed if necessary. This *mattered* to them. "We can't afford to lose this one," McNamara told Father George Kuhn of St. Brigid's Roman Catholic Church in the hours before the riot, acknowledging the intensity with which he perceived the affair.[182] "This was not about the closing of the park and the enforcement of a curfew," Patterson wrote in a retrospective essay on the riot published in 2005. "No! It was plain and simple revenge. ...It was a selective curfew geared only to anyone who fit the profile of an 'anarchist.' ...The police had planned this attack on the community for days."[183]

Consequentially, I feel compelled to ask: Did McNamara understand his own class positionality? Did he recognize the conflict as one between gentrifiers and the poor, with himself acting as agent and enforcer for capital? In other words, did the police riot stem from a specific class-conscious desire to root out working-class activists in favor of private profit? While we cannot know with certainty why McNamara and the other supervising officers chose to act as they did, I would speculate that the answer is a mix of the latter and the adage that 'familiarity breeds contempt.' There can be little doubt that McNamara was influenced by his unspoken status as a defender of bourgeois wealth, and that he understood the importance of wresting back control of the park for the upper classes. We can observe this in his stated desire to "restore [Tompkins Square Park] to the legitimate members of the community," as previously noted.

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[182] Smith and Mitchell, *Revolting New York*, 226.

[183] Clayton Patterson, "Tompkins Square Park Police Riot Tape and the Road to Victory," *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 436-437.

Such a statement supposes a long-term project and a desire to engage in population control for the purposes of gentrification. Yet I believe that August 6th was also as much a kind of ‘last straw’ for the police as it was for the protesters. Recall that McNamara was precinct captain for the East Village, meaning that Tompkins Square Park was part of his beat. He would have been well-acquainted with the squatters and other neighborhood radicals revolting against him that night, including a rather fresh memory of the scuffle between cops and protesters on July 30th. As such, the follow-up meeting between the two groups on August 6th represented the culmination of an intense and longstanding personal conflict as well. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that McNamara and his unit simply harbored too much animosity toward those bottle-tossing anarchists to engage them with dispassion. This factor, combined with the NYPD’s general pro-real estate class dynamics and the decision to issue an hours-long standing call for reinforcements, helps articulate why this demonstration metastasized into a police riot. All the resentment which had developed over the years between cops and squatters—itself an extension of the nineteenth-century riots and the many decades of elite disgust toward Alphabet City that preceded them—burst like a blister that night, collapsing whatever already thin barrier exists to separate responsible uses of state violence from police barbarism. And it was men like Darcy, Wodarski, and McNamara, whose conduct suggests an indifference to public safety at best and outright malice at worst, who enabled the horrors that followed.

Patterson tracks the action as it unfolds in fits and starts through the night. At one moment he captures a cop lodging his nightstick between the spokes of a passing bicycle, knocking the cyclist to the ground without cause. The cyclist is then handcuffed while multiple officers batter him with their clubs. At another moment, he interviews a young woman who is on the verge of tears while she describes what has happened to her friend. “She’s a girl! And they

just fucking hit her for no fucking reason," she says. "She was just standing there...and they fucking hit her with a billy club!"[184] Elsewhere in the video, we see a woman named Tisha Pryor bleeding and crying on the sidewalk. Pryor had been out for a walk with a friend when an officer nudged her from behind and said, "Move along, black nigger bitch." As Pyror turned to record the offending officer's badge number both she and her friend, a *Downtown Magazine* reporter named Jeff Dean Kuipers, were attacked with nightsticks. Pyror was struck in the neck while multiple officers hit Kuipers in the chest and shoulder. "They were fighting very dirty, slamming my head against the ground," Kuipers said. "I had one cop laying right on top of me. I got bruises all over and am still getting nosebleeds."[185] A college student named Daniel Muller, meanwhile, experienced similar unprovoked violence after wandering into the area by chance, unaware at first of the chaos breaking out in Alphabet City. "Just before I reached the corner of Ninth and First, a mounted officer came alongside of me...and they started dragging me by my hair across the street, where a group of five police officers knocked me into the side of a parked car and then into the gutter," Muller says. "They beat me with their nightsticks and kicked me. They shattered the tip of my right index finger. ...They were yelling things like, 'You think it's cool to throw bottles?' Each time I tried to say I didn't do it, they got more vicious."[186]

As Patterson traverses the area, he encounters numerous witnesses astonished by the scene playing out before them. "They're not kidding around," Patterson says to a man who identifies himself as a "freelance reporter" named Tex. "We're gonna hear a lot of shit tomorrow," Tex says. "A lot of news reporters were getting beat up with press cards on. A lot of

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[184] Ibid.

[185] Purdum, "Melee in Tompkins Sq. Park."

[186] Ibid.

innocent people getting beat up for no apparent reason. They're not assaulting the ones that are actually starting the trouble," he says. "You saw news guys getting their cameras [taken]?" Patterson asks. "News guys have been getting beat up in the street," Tex affirms. "One guy had his press card on, he got trampled, his lenses got broken up. A news lady...got hit in the head with a nightstick by a police officer. I'm a witness and I've seen it." Helicopter blades whir loudly above their heads, kicking up debris and clouds of dust. The police have taken to the air to ward bottle-throwers off various rooftops, but instead they "hovered at too low an altitude for too long, causing...more onlookers to gather" and further adding to the confusion on the street.[187] "Why are they doing this? This is our park!" one woman asks as a squadron of riot cops form rank behind her. "This is crazy," her friend adds. "It is," another man agrees, "but [the police] are doing it. They are doing it. Look!" Patterson zooms in as the man speaks. He pans his camera over to a far wall in time to spot an officer slam a bystander against the side of a building. The sound of shattered glass rings out in the distance. "Who is paying these fucking people?" the man asks. "We are. That's the most ridiculous part."

The police, having lost the ability to distinguish between protesters and spectators, continued to attack people at random for hours. "The cops seemed bizarrely out of control, levitating with some hatred I didn't understand," wrote C. Carr for the *Village Voice*.[188] "They ran into the crowds with horses. I saw residents pulled off their stoops. ...They cracked my friend's head open. It didn't matter if you were a journalist or a resident or a storekeeper," Kuipers told *Newsday*.[189] "The police panicked and were beating up bystanders who had done

[187] Johnston, Jr., *NYPD Report on Tompkins Square Park Incident*, 6.

[188] C. Carr, "Night Clubbing," *Village Voice*, August 16, 1988, 10.

[189] Manuel Perez-Rivas, "Koch Suspends Park Curfew Following Bloody Clash in Tompkins Square," *Newsday*, August 8, 1988, 5.

nothing wrong and were just observing," legendary Beat poet Allen Ginsberg affirmed.[190] Ginsberg was a decades-long Lower East Sider and one among the many hundreds of onlookers unaffiliated with the protests who found themselves drawn toward the riot by curiosity. Even his houseguest at the time, a young man visiting from Kansas and therefore oblivious to the politics of Alphabet City, was assaulted by six officers with nightsticks. The randomness of this violence and the lack of control exerted by the NYPD over its own officers shocked Patterson, perhaps even more than the beatings themselves. "One of the most critical shots in the whole video was when the white shirts, the brass, the captains and their superiors, chased the blue shirts, the patrolmen, down the street," Patterson writes. It was this moment when he realized that even those police who desired to stop the rampage, or at least to reassert discipline within their ranks, were powerless to do so. "The brass were yelling, screaming, waving and whistling to get the men to come back as they ran amuck with nightsticks swinging. ...It opened up the city like an oozing sore for everyone to see. Witnessing how the cops acted as a gang, and treating civilians with a gang mentality. Is this a paramilitary organization? Where is the chain of command? ...The police had lost control of the police."[191]

Blood is everywhere in the Patterson video, flowing down people's faces and soaking through their clothing. At one point, the protesters raise up a blood-stained shirt and march it through the street like a banner to emphasize the harm inflicted by the NYPD. Yet the bloodiest sequence by far comes near the film's end, when Patterson spots a dazed looking man in a tank top wandering through an intersection. "Hey, come here man," Patterson says. "What happened? Hey, you better go to the hospital," he advises. Though unclear at first in the dark, grainy

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[190] Robert D. McFadden, "Park Curfew Protest Erupts into a Battle and 38 Are Injured," *New York Times*, August 8, 1988, B2.

[191] Patterson, "Tompkins Square Park Police Riot Tape and the Road to Victory," 436.

footage, viewers can soon identify the extent of his injuries. There is blood gushing from a massive wound above the man's left eye, dripping down—and possibly out of—his nose and splattered across his chest. A crowd forms around Patterson and the bleeding man, who is later identified as a twenty-nine-year-old travel photographer named Kenneth Fish. "Oh my gosh," a woman gasps. "Somebody call an ambulance! This guy's hurt bad!" a man shouts. "The world is watching!" someone declares with indignation toward the "fascist Nazi cops," who stand by watching but do little to assist. Fish stumbles past them in silence, clutching at his head, and then slumps against a wall. "I'm alright, I'm alright," he insists, his words terribly slurred.

"You're not alright!" the crowd responds. A woman with short blonde hair helps remove Fish's shirt and presses it against his head to staunch the bleeding. One man rushes off to locate medical personnel while the others continue to treat his lacerations as best they can. They inquire as to how exactly he was injured but Fish, concussed and struggling with short-term memory loss, does not know and cannot answer. "I was just standing there watching," Fish would recall in the days after the riot. "The next thing that I remember is seeing the stick, and then a young woman who was helping me."[192] Patterson keeps filming as Fish is placed onto a stretcher and carried away to the hospital, where he would receive almost fifty stitches to close the three-inch gash on his forehead.[193] For all the talk of mob mentality and the depravity of crowds during riot situations, this film depicts a tremendous amount of solidarity between the civilians gathered that night. While they could have chosen to disregard this unknown, suffering man or flee for their own safety, they acted instead with compassion. It is, I think, a poignant display of mutual aid

[192] Purdum, "Melee in Tompkins Sq. Park."

[193] Ibid.

amidst state aggression. If there is evidence of a violent mob mentality present in Patterson's video, then we can say with confidence that it is not coming from the protesters or bystanders.

A lull in the action developed sometime around 2:00 am. Some police remained mobilized and at the ready, but many others drifted around Avenue A without clear purpose. One officer in the video, sporting what appears to be an obscured badge number, threatens Patterson by falsely stating that it is illegal to record without a press permit. Another policeman fields questions from a civilian. "My friends got beat trying to get out of the park. I mean, is that right?" the man asks. "They're making an announcement: 'Please leave the park.' Nobody just beats people," the officer says in a sarcastic tone, deflecting blame away from the police and onto those assaulted. Several dozen protesters positioned themselves sit-in style on the ground in front of a row of shielded policemen, maintaining a show of resilience while also helping to deescalate the violent atmosphere. One of these protesters gestures toward Patterson upon seeing his camera. "Photograph them," he implores, pointing toward the police. "Take pictures of them. Show their faces. Show them to their mothers, show them what they're doing for a living."

It was at this time that political moderates like Father Kuhn sought to open negotiations between civilians and the NYPD. The police proposed a public meeting "in the next five days," during which time community members could gather to "talk over what happened," as Kuhn phrases it in the Patterson video. This proposition was met with anger from some, and one man noted that "They had a meeting on Tuesday [August 2nd]" in response to the July 30th protest, "where they didn't allow access to people who did not support the police's point of view." Someone speaks up to suggest that these meetings exist not to benefit those who live in the neighborhood but instead to satisfy the media, garnering agreement from some gathered around the priest. Soon McNamara arrives to parlay with Kuhn, and the priest then elects a handful of

representatives to speak on behalf of the people. These representatives are "cool heads, not crazies," Kuhn assures the police, drawing a rhetorical line between Alphabet City's respectable centrist population and its less reputable squatters and anarchists. One of these "cool heads," a business-owner named Marsha Coffman who identifies herself as "not a radical person, by all means," helps arrange a meeting for Wednesday, August 10th (after some squabbling with McNamara over which date best fits his schedule). Kuhn and Coffman then use an NYPD loudspeaker to inform the crowd that a meeting has been set. Their pronouncement is met with loud boos and cries of discontent. "There's gonna be a meeting!" Kuhn assures the protesters. "Are you on our side or not?" a man covered in blood asks. "The enemy is there," he says, pointing to the police. "The enemy is there." Bottles once again start flying as Coffman begs in vain for an end to the conflict.

While the moderates were content to transpose the issue of neighborhood defense from the streets to a conference chamber, the radical faction that began the protest felt any such meeting would be a fruitless enterprise. "The park is ours! There's no dialogue," the blood-stained man asserts. "Why the hell would you talk to fascists? Would you talk to Hitler? Would you talk to Mussolini? We shouldn't talk to these people. There is no dialogue." His comparison between the NYPD and fascist dictators is a bit hyperbolic but may nevertheless provide useful insight.[194] It was the one-sided, rather dictatorial discourse of bureaucracy which had brought them to this point after all, beginning with the city planners' decision to subject the Lower East Side to planned shrinkage during the 1970s, straight through to the CB3 meeting which had produced the much-hated curfew. Did ordinary people have a voice in these discussions? If they

[194] It should be stated that while policing is vital to the implementation of fascism, it is also quite vital for the implementation of liberal capitalism. Comparisons to Hitler are unnecessary when the enforcement of the present system is so bloody in its own right.

did, their voice was meager in comparison to the collective bluster of cops and landlords. Meetings were home turf for the ruling institutions, their means of disarming protest via endless rounds of inquiry and parliamentary procedure. Those objecting to Kuhn and Coffman's effort to broker peace seemed to recognize that their strength lay in the disruption of bureaucratic order.

Besides, what was there to discuss? If the park belonged to the people, as the protesters insisted, that meant there was no need to haggle over its use with outside actors like the NYPD—and especially not when it was the NYPD who had chosen to behave as "crazies" rather than "cool heads." The radical protesters were not asking for an end to the curfew, nor even an end to gentrification. They were *demanding* it. They were demanding a right to autonomy over their own community, rather than kowtowing to uptown gentrifiers and police officers who commuted in from Staten Island each morning. They were demanding nothing less than their right to the city. The cops were outsiders in this space, yet they operated at the center of political power. The people represented the core of the neighborhood, yet they had been marginalized in its governance. In this we see again Lefebvre's distinction between the people-powered world of the urban and the modern city, dominated as ever by law enforcement and planning. What was true during the May 68 riots in Paris remained true twenty years later in Tompkins Square Park: one of the best ways to win back the right to the city is to mobilize those on the periphery against capitalist systems of power and assert their ownership of urban space through direct action.

Around 6:00 am, as dawn broke over the Lower East Side and police began to retreat with curfew's end, the more radical protesters decided to put their theory of direct action into practice. They marched triumphantly through Tompkins Square Park, now returned to them after a long night of police occupation, and arrived on the other side at Christodora House. In many regards, this building—by far the greatest structural emblem of Alphabet City class conflict—

was the "one logical place for [the riot] to end up," as the *New York Times* states (Fig. 5). "Around 6 in the morning, there was all this energy in the street, with nowhere to go. So a faction headed right over," Patterson says. "'Christodora! Christodora! Christodora!' was the chant."[195] Though the protesters had spent almost five hours at that point tussling with cops, they had not lost sight of the greater threat: the real estate developers and wealthy transplants who benefitted most from working-class displacement. "Wake up!" they shouted at those living up above, chastising the tenants for sleeping through the chaos while the poor struggled through the night beneath them. They broke apart wooden barricades and used them to batter through the building's front door, all the while chanting "Die, yuppie scum!"

Included among them was Jerry the Peddler, dressed appropriately in a black t-shirt which also read "Die Yuppie Scum" in bold, stenciled letters. Jerry was and remains an old-school hippie, from the time when hippies "fought back" as he phrases it, rather than acquiesce to power in the name of peace and love. He has the sort of criminal résumé one would expect from a seasoned leftist rabble-rouser, beginning with an arrest for going AWOL during the Vietnam War and leading up through his involvement with Abbie Hoffman's Youth International Party (otherwise known as the Yippies). "I've been arrested probably 200 times," Jerry says.[196] He also possesses a great talent for firing up crowds—a useful ability for any protest organizer. "Jerry's skill was that he could lead a chaotic mob," Patterson told *AM New York* in 2007.[197] Jerry put that talent on display as he helped lead approximately twenty-five protesters into the Christodora lobby, where they destroyed developer property and stole a potted tree. They then

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[195] Williams, "How the Christodora House Became the Chelsea Hotel of the East Village."

[196] Lincoln Anderson, "Jerry the Peddler Makes Pitch for Permit, But Parks Isn't Buying," *AM New York*, July 31, 2007, amny.com/news/jerry-the-peddler-makes-pitch-for-permit-but-parks-isnt-buying.

[197] Ibid.

took this tree into the park and replanted it in a patch of soil, signifying their communal ownership of the neighborhood and everything within it, including TSP and Christodora House. One might read this expropriated tree as a symbol of reclamation, suggesting that what the bourgeoisie have taken from Alphabet City can not only be taken back but made new again, liberated from past conditions, and even reshaped in accordance with the community's wishes. Freed from the constraints of its pot, the tree now had room to stretch out and prosper in its own space. Through this metaphorical act, the protesters proved that they were not out to make trouble for trouble's sake as some objectors might suppose. Nor were they reacting against the curfew alone. Jerry and his comrades made the class-conscious dimensions of their movement clear through a banner that they hung on the Christodora's exterior wall: "Gentrification is class warfare—Fight back." They would adopt another, even more confident rallying cry in the days to follow, proclaiming "Tompkins Square Everywhere!" with the hopes that the Alphabet City riot would spark a new, globalized campaign against gentrification. Was this a realistic expectation? Perhaps not, but the protesters' exuberance appeared justified at the time. Standing there, in the refuse-cluttered lobby of the Christodora, watching the police scramble away in retreat, it must have seemed to the protesters that they had won.

Fig. 5: Protest at Christodora House. Photo by Clayton Patterson, 1988. This photo was not taken during the TSP Riot but depicts a similar display of dissatisfaction with the gentrification of Christodora House.

With that last show of defiance, the Tompkins Square Park Riot concluded. Approximately fifty civilians sustained injuries, most of them "individuals who had nothing to do with political movements or giving the police the finger the week before" Patterson writes, including some who had previously supported the NYPD. "A lot of good it did them," he quipped.[198] The asymmetrical use of violence between baton-wielding officers and weaponless citizens (or, at most, bottle throwers) generated outrage across the city, despite police efforts to frame their actions as self-defense. Riot victims filed more than 100 complaints of police brutality with the city government, while Patterson's video made the rounds on television news and allowed viewers to witness what occurred with a degree of first-hand intimacy that had not

[198] Patterson, "Tompkins Square Park Police Riot Tape and the Road to Victory," 437.

been possible prior to the advent of home video cameras. New Yorkers by and large sympathized with the protesters, and even the typically pro-police *New York Times* published an editorial with the headline "Yes, a Police Riot."[199] There were those who attempted to defend the cops. Antonio Pagán appeared on television the day after the riot to "totally support police actions in the name of Community Board 3," a unilateral decision which prompted censure from the other members of the board.[200] Pagán also leaned into his connections with the *New York Post* to lambast demonstrators in the press, decrying them as phony anarchists and "squatters from the suburbs who specialize in throwing bottles at the police," rather than "ordinary people" just trying to "work, pay rent, and raise families.[201] The people of Alphabet City were not persuaded. They were already mostly unified in their opposition to the curfew, and now police overreach had brought about a degree of consensus rarely witnessed in American political life.

"The riot brought together people with very different interests," said sociologist Janet Abu-Lughod, "The homeless, squatters, the old-timers. There were the Yippies, there were the druggies, and there were my graduate students," she says.[202] Phil Van Aver, a member of Community Board 3, witnessed this coming together in real-time on the night of the riot. "The streets were full of people who I see coming out of their houses every morning with briefcases. I mean people who work on Wall Street, and they're standing in the street screaming 'Kill the pigs!'" he said, signaling the profound degree to which police overreach had brought together Alphabet City residents, even including (somehow) the yuppies. "The police, by acting in the

[199] "Yes, a Police Riot," *New York Times*, August 26, 1988, A30.

[200] *Operation Class War on the Lower East Side*, 1992.

[201] Ibid.

[202] *Captured*, Levin and Solomon.

brutal fashion that they did, managed to link a small group of crazies to the legitimate sentiments of opposition to gentrification," said Valerio Orselli, head of a non-profit housing agency called the Cooper Square Committee. Whatever real estate aims the police were seeking to achieve with their defense of the park proved immaterial after the riot. Instead, the NYPD accomplished something far more impressive: they compelled the "cool headed" liberals and the leftist "crazies" to agree on something, if only for a New York minute. An LES local named Lisa Napoli summarized the prevailing post-riot attitude toward developers and the police in this August 1988 letter to the editor published by the *New York Times*:

> There is tremendous anger. People in this city and specifically the people of the Lower East Side feel the city leadership has taken away their rights and is in turn empowering the speculators, the developers and the wealthy. If an elected official had come to negotiate with us Saturday night, there would have been no bloodshed. Instead, we were told to disperse, but were denied access to our homes; we were told to move on, but were beaten on the back of the knees with nightsticks; we were told to abide by the law, but saw bystanders clubbed to the ground.[203]

All this backlash added up to a public relations disaster for the city's already weakened mayor, Ed Koch, who was nearing the end of his term in office and was away on vacation in the Hamptons when the riot took place. Koch and the police tried to place blame for the riot on "anarchists" and an "insipid conglomeration of human misfits and societal parasites," as the president of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association phrased it, but this approach found little favor with the public.[204] NYPD Commissioner Benjamin Ward then identified the three ranking officers Darcy, Wodarski, and McNamara as being the most culpable within their ranks, with particular antipathy toward Darcy's decision to recuse himself from the park to use the

[203] Lisa Napoli, "Letter to the Editor: Gentrification's Price," *New York Times*, August 27, 1988, 24.

[204] David E. Pitt, "P.B.A. Leader Assails Report on Tompkins Square Melee," *New York Times*, April 21, 1989, B2; Smith, *The New Urban Frontier,* 4.

bathroom. Darcy was forced into retirement, while Wodarski was reassigned from Midtown South to a lower-profile district. McNamara, the officer most at fault for the riot in my estimation, was asked to resign before being rehired to the same position one year later because Ward felt he had "acted in good faith and made judgments that were within his level of his experience."[205] McNamara continued to work for the "Fighting 9th," as the precinct is fittingly known within police circles, for years to follow. It would be easy to say that NYPD leadership scapegoated these supervising officers to protect their institution, but scapegoats usually get punished. McNamara received no such treatment.

Rather, the state reserved its acrimony for Clayton Patterson, whose tapes had become a major thorn in their side in the aftermath of the police riot. While Patterson was quick to go to the press with the footage, sharing his tapes with the *Times'* Purdum and other journalists, he refused to surrender any video evidence to the courts, despite a subpoena issued by District Attorney Robert Morgenthau. Patterson feared that the tapes would be altered to benefit the NYPD's standing in court, as had occurred with another incident of videotaped police violence in 1986.[206] He also worried that police would destroy the footage at the end of their investigation, which he saw as a potential infringement of his rights as an artist. For this insubordination he was sentenced to ninety days in the Bronx House of Detention, a penalty that would recur until he relinquished his tapes. "I was put in jail under central monitoring," Patterson writes. "I was taken to court in a special van that was built like a vault, and had a special little cage. Another time I was in a large Bluebird bus with a special one-man cage, separated from all the other

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[205] Todd Purdum, "Findings on Tompkins Sq. Prompt 2 Police Supervisors to Lose Posts," *New York Times*, August 25, 1988, B6.

[206] See the case of Raphael Escano, mentioned in Patterson, "Tompkins Square Park Police Riot Tape and the Road to Victory," 438.

prisoners. I wore grey coveralls, leg and wrist shackles. All this for taking pictures of the cops doing the wrong things?"[207] Patterson began a ten-day hunger strike, garnering significant media attention for his case. His legal team (including Chicago Seven attorney William Kunstler, fellow lawyer and talk radio host Ron Kuby, and advisor Al Sharpton) were ultimately able to broker a deal in which the court system could make copies of the tapes for use as evidence, while the originals would be returned to their author. An exuberant Patterson appeared in a 1989 episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, hoisting up his camera and declaring "This is a revolutionary tool! Little Brother is watching Big Brother."[208] Patterson was not the only person videotaping the riot that night—another artist named Paul Garrin recorded less substantial footage that nevertheless garnered him several death threats—but he was among the first to bring video evidence of police brutality to national attention. Many more have since followed. Patterson's experiences may be more commonplace today due to the proliferation of digital cameras, but this case remains noteworthy for the extent to which the state attempted to criminalize his work as a documentarian, and for the resolve with which he rebuffed their efforts. In the end, as *Shadow* contributor and LES historian Bill Weinberg writes, "several officers were disciplined by the department in the wake of the riot" and its accompanying video evidence, yet "none were convicted of any crime."[209]

There would be future quarrels in the park between leftists and the NYPD, including during events marking the anniversary of the 1988 riot. Police arrested twenty-nine protesters at the Resist 2 Exist festival on May Day 1990, another seven during the 1992 anniversary event,

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[207] Ibid.

[208] *Captured*, Levin and Solomon.

[209] Weinberg, *Tompkins Square Park*, 28.

and six more following a tussle between the two sides during a concert by C-Squat's premier in-house punk band Leftöver Crack in 2004.[210] Tent City expanded after the riot, formalizing into an organized political unit which sent representatives to the 1989 "Housing Now!" rally in Washington, DC. Father Kuhn, an ally to the unhoused despite his moderate leanings, served food to those living in Tent City and was arrested that same year for "crossing police lines" to deliver meals to the ABC Center squat.[211] Authorities evicted Tent City residents in December 1989, "on the coldest day of the winter...their belongings and fifty shanties hauled away into a queue of Sanitation Department garbage trucks," and then forced those who returned out for good in the early 1990s.[212] They closed the park entirely from June 1991 through July 1992, during which time they razed the bandshell, a spot popular with squatters and anarchists, to stave off further radicalism. The curfew, retired in the aftermath of the riot but quietly reinstated in the years thereafter, not only endures but was moved up to midnight and eventually a 10:00 pm closing time in June 2021.[213] These decisions have not been popular, yet for whatever reason—fatalism, fatigue, demographic change creating a neighborhood less inclined toward political demonstration—the controversy surrounding Tompkins Square Park would never again spill over into mass protest.

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[210] "7 Arrested at Park Protest," *New York Times*, August 9, 1992, 44; Thomas J. Lueck and Colin Moynihan, "5 Arrested in Clash at East Village Rock Concert," *New York Times*, November 7, 2004, nytimes.com/2004/11/07/nyregion/5-arrested-in-clash-at-east-village-rock-concert.html.

[211] Weinberg, *Tompkins Square Park*, 29.

[212] Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 5.

[213] This new 10:00 curfew has likewise been enforced by police in riot gear, a development condemned by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. See Jake Offenhartz, "As NYPD Sets New Park Curfews, a Battle for Public Space is Brewing in Manhattan," *Gothamist*, June 7, 2021, gothamist.com/news/nypd-sets-new-park-curfews-battle-public-space-brewing-manhattan. I can speak to the aggressiveness with which the curfew is enforced from my own experience as I was evicted from TSP one summer evening in 2012, long before I knew of the park's history. I was shocked to witness police SUVs driving straight through the pedestrian walkways and blaring at us to disperse through their loudspeakers. If only I knew then what I know now.

What happened that hot summer night in 1988 was an overdetermined historical moment. It was a predictable response to systemic problems, but unique in circumstance. It remains a milestone in Lower East Side lore, remembered as the moment when the old, gritty Alphabet City ran up against its own gentrified future and exploded. It has been frequently mourned, commemorated, and dramatized, including an on-site reenactment staged during May Day in 2014 for the film *Ten Thousand Saints*.[214] The riot is also alluded to off-stage in the musical *Rent*, with accidental squatter protagonist Mark Cohen filling Patterson's shoes as riot videographer (for which he is rewarded with a job offer, not disciplined with jail time). Jonathan Larson, the show's playwright, has obvious affection for the lower-class anarchists and queers who populated the neighborhood, though he too often romanticizes them as free-spirited representatives of "La Vie Bohème," rather than poor people struggling to survive. Several of his characters are, like himself, resettled White Westchester County suburbanites with a passion for art but little interest in class politics. The list of supposedly counter-cultural commodities they reel off during a toast to the subversive ("To hand-crafted beers made in local breweries, to yoga, to yogurt, to rice and beans and cheese") today sounds more like an average Sunday brunch and afternoon fitness session in one of New York's many yuppified neighborhoods. Ironically enough, it is *Rent*'s nefarious landlord character Benny, the "enemy of Avenue A," who is most realistic about the pre- and post-riot state of Alphabet City. "Was the yuppie scum stomped?" he sneers. "Or do you really want a neighborhood where people piss on your stoop every night? ...Bohemia's a fallacy in your head. This is Calcutta," he declares. "Bohemia is dead."[215]

[214] Daniel Maurer, "The Tompkins Riot Was Reenacted for a Movie and We Captured It All," *Bedford + Bowery*, May 2, 2014, bedfordandbowery.com/2014/05/the-tompkins-riot-was-reenacted-for-a-film-and-we-captured-it-all.

[215] Jonathan Larson, Evelyn McDonnell, Kathy Silberger, Larry Fink, Stewart Ferebee, Kate Giel, *Rent* (New York: Rob Weisbach Books, 1997), 60-63.

But were the squatters and other Alphabet City radicals ever searching for Bohemia? Did they long for that fantastical world of artists, tramps, and norm-flaunting hipster *bons vivants*? Were they the bleeding edge of 1990s boho-chic, leading a fashionable rebellion against the squares at the top and all the while "going against the grain...hating convention, hating pretension," but loving "anything taboo," as Larson writes?[216] I do not think so. Nor did they seek to replicate the slums of Kolkata, or endure a miserable life surrounded by urinating vagrants. The squatters were neither tourists to the inner-city nor filth fetishists and agents of chaos, though both mischaracterizations have popped up again and again in media. They did not want Alphabet City to remain in disarray, but they also rejected any plans for its improvement that necessitated the dispossession of their neighbors. "Blighted or gentrified?" squatter Rolando Politi asked during a conversation between us in January 2019. "It should not be either one!"[217] Instead, squatters like Rolando wanted to rebuild on the community's terms, which is precisely the sort of work that the squatters had been doing in their own buildings for years. Their aim was never to celebrate poverty but to resist the cruel impositions of outside wealth. If Alphabet City was to have a prosperous future, then it should be one that they construct together for their own collective benefit and not for the benefit of those already well-off. This pursuit of self-determination sits at the very heart of the right to the city as Lefebvre envisioned it.

The gentrifiers were the ones dreaming of Bohemia. It was they who sought to appropriate a sense of working-class cultural legitimacy by simply moving in and claiming Alphabet City's history as their own. This, sadly, has become one of the legacies of the Tompkins Square Park Riot. It is now seen by some as quaint, a relic of the neighborhood's

[216] Ibid., 62-64.

[217] Rolando Politi, interview with the author, January 5, 2019.

radical past that can be packaged and sold to newcomers in the same way that the Apollo Theater and the whitewashed legacy of communist poet Langston Hughes have helped market Harlem to White homebuyers. Because there is little risk of something like the 1988 riot happening again (at least in the foreseeable future), gentrifiers are free to embrace its memory as an eccentricity, something that lends their ZIP code a little bit of bark, but minimal bite. The arrival of the supposed 'creative class' (as though working-class people do not create things) helped facilitate this transition away from the hazards of urban precarity and toward a "mock pretense of exotic but benign danger," as Neil Smith terms it. "Gentrification and art came hand in hand. ...Block by block, building by building, the area was converted to a landscape of glamour and chic spiced with just a hint of danger," he writes. "For the real estate industry, art tamed the neighborhood. ...It depicted the East Village as rising from low life to high brow."[218]

Smith's depiction of artists as tools of the real estate offers a helpful means of thinking about the planned dynamics of gentrification. "The story of the East Village's newest bohemian efflorescence...can also be read as an episode in New York's real-estate history—that is, as the deployment of a force of gentrifying artists in lower Manhattan's last slum," *Art in America* observed in 1984.[219] While realtors and developers cannot dictate where these young artists live, let alone mobilize them as one would mobilize an army, they nevertheless retain a powerful hold over this population through advertising. There is an entire euphemistic lexicon designed to sell Bohemia to those who seek it, one which reframes dilapidation into a mark of affordable authenticity and radicalism into a "hip culture and edgy attitude," as reads one 2021 real estate

[218] Smith, *The New Urban Frontier*, 18.

[219] Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, "Slouching toward Avenue D," *Art in America* 72, no. 6 (Summer 1984), 135.

profile.[220] "With an established music and art scene, funky shops, bars and an eclectic palette, the East Village truly defines what it means to be hip," says the profile by Piere Michel, a self-described "boutique real estate firm" based out of the Financial District. Alphabet City has become a "bohemian neighborhood with a softer edge," and one that "appeals to iconoclasts who reject the city's newfound love of big-box stores," the toney *New York Times* real estate section stated in 2004. Here they turn to the same sanitized language utilized by Piere Michel and other realtors to pitch the neighborhood as a pleasant set of contradictions: *avant-garde* yet welcoming, gritty yet clean, adventurous yet safe enough for relocated suburbanites. "Shiny low-rise buildings have risen from the piles of rubble. Sidewalk homeless camps have given way to farmers' markets. ...Nowadays, Tompkins Square is more likely to be the scene of large-scale arts events than demonstrations," the article declares to its young, affluent readership.

As Smith suggests, few rhetorical tools are more useful in catering to yuppie desires than an emphasis on art, and so art is everywhere in the selling of the East Village. A "Millennial Guide to the East Village," published by international real estate agency New York Habitat, speaks of the neighborhood's "artistic essence," assuring its audience that "everywhere you go, art is present."[221] Once again, art becomes a means of sanitizing Alphabet City and making it palatable to bohemians, while at the same time sanding down its rougher edges until they appear more cool than dangerous. Even that name itself—the "East Village," rather than the Lower East Side or Alphabet City—is a means of tying the neighborhood to art. It is the product of mid-century gentrification, coined by advertisers in the 1950s to link the area with the trendy,

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[220] "West Village, East Village, NoHo & Meatpacking District," Piere Michel, pieremichel.com/neighborhoods/west-village-east-village-noho-and-meatpacking-district.

[221] "A Millennial Guide to: The East Village (Part 1)," New York Habitat, November 21, 2017, nyhabitat.com/blog/2017/11/21/millennial-guide-east-village-apartment-roommates-part-1.

beatnik-friendly Greenwich Village neighborhood to its west. This rather obvious attempt at rebranding did not go unnoticed at the time. “Artists, poets and promoters of coffeehouses from Greenwich Village are trying to remelt the [LES melting pot] under the high-sounding name of ‘East Village,’” notes gossip columnist Earl Wilson in his 1964 tourist guidebook, *Earl Wilson’s New York.* “Even the name ‘Village East’ causes grumblings on the part of the Russian-Ukrainian-Italian elements. The people feel the Lower East Side has a rich tradition and history of its own, without the artists encroaching on that,” Wilson observes, noting neighborhood discontent with the “younger Bohemian types” and “more affluent artists” alike.[222]

“At least ten art galleries have established themselves on Tenth Street and environs,” the *Herald Tribune* similarly reported in 1962 of the area just north of Astor Place.[223] “It is inevitable that social haunts,” they wrote, “would follow in a self-styled intellectual bohemia.” Gentrification took root faster around Astor Place and Cooper Square than it did in Alphabet City, leading to the balkanization of the Lower East Side and the creation of the wealthy NoHo district. Locals bristled at these attempts to turn sections of the LES into a series of gentrified breakaway republics. “Real estate agents may use the term East Village to tempt clients into the area,” the *Herald Tribune* article continues, “but in the words of one young shopkeeper, ‘It’s still the Lower East Side, no matter what you say.’” Yet art, marketing, and time would prove the shopkeeper wrong, as realtors and New York media worked together to push the gentry into what had once been the northwest corner of the LES.

A final question remains: who ‘won’ the Tompkins Square Park Riot and the battle for Alphabet City? The standard narrative is that while the police riot was a black eye for the NYPD,

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[222] Earl Wilson, *Earl Wilson’s New York* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964), 172-178.

[223] Ann Geracimos, “Renaissance on the Lower East Side,” *New York Herald Tribune*, January 12, 1962, 16.

it was also the old neighborhood's last stand, a pyrrhic victory for the radicals that did little to stave off gentrification in the long run. To some degree this is correct. Gentrification did indeed sweep across the East Village, littering 1st Ave. and Avenue A with coffeehouses and patio restaurants. Housing costs went up, a new class of resident moved in, and "lower Manhattan's last slum" has become a slightly less posh facsimile of NoHo, SoHo, TriBeCa, and all the other manufactured communities of Lower Manhattan. This narrative appeals to the 'house always wins' fatalist sensibilities of capitalist realism, while granting the riot enhanced historical significance as the dividing line between the pre- and post-yuppie eras. Yet the work of gentrification is never finished, destined always to remain in a cycle of conquest and loss while the nation's subaltern populations continue their acts of resistance, as argued in Chapter 1. The tug-of-war between workers and the rich over TSP continues into the present day and did not conclude with the riot or its aftermath. The neighborhood's old guard still come together each August to mark the riot's anniversary with music and dance, and the day-to-day crowd who gather at TSP remains an eclectic mix of humanity, including unhoused people.

The ruling powers have similarly maintained their efforts to establish total control over the space. The NYPD has in recent years, for example, installed a new guard post and SkyWatch surveillance tower to monitor homeless people in the park. These measures were spurred on in part by a 2015 article in the *Observer*, which was owned at the time by real estate investor Jared Kushner and his wife, Ivanka Trump. Kushner is best known for his role as a White House advisor under President Donald Trump but, like his famous father-in-law, he is a considerably powerful landlord in his own right. The essay, whose byline is attributed simply to "The Editors," implores its readers to "take back" the park—and by extension the neighborhood—

from the poor. It insists that Tompkins Square's rightful heritage lies not in its radicalism, but as a landmark for bougie comforts like artisanal breakfast foods:

> Tompkins Square Park has been an accurate barometer of where the city is headed. Known for decades as "Needle Park," its disarray and lawlessness reflected a dysfunctional, ungovernable city. The restoration of its beauty over the last 20 years has heralded an era where residents and a vibrant collection of small businesses near the park—is there a single better food in all of New York City than the jalapeno cheddar cream cheese at Tompkins Square Bagels?—have thrived. Let's not allow that progress to slip through our fingers. ... It's time to take back Tompkins Square Park and beyond. Before it's too late.[224]

Kushner, as it turns out, owned a majority of the apartment buildings surrounding the park and had by that time secured his status as the "largest landlord in the East Village."[225] The conflict of interest was obvious, but not enough to dissuade the police from setting up their new command center in the park within a week of the article's publication. As with Pagán and the *New York Post* in 1988, Kushner and the *Observer* once more married planning, media, and law enforcement to assist with the recapture of valuable real estate, and this time there was no riot or chain of anarchists linked arm in arm to meet them. "Has the Lower East Side reached the proverbial 'end of history?'" Weinberg asks. "Has the cycle of rebellion, repression and redevelopment that stretches back to the antebellum period reached a terminus?"[226] The evidence suggests that it has not. The very fact that Kushner felt it necessary to summon this alliance as late as 2015 proves that the 1988 police riot did not represent a definitive end to the "bad old days," as the *Observer* calls them, but rather one event in an historic continuum. The gentrifiers would not need guard towers had they managed a lasting victory, and so their efforts to push

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[224] "Take Back Tompkins Square Park. And New York City." *The Observer*, July 14, 2015, observer.com/2015/07/take-back-tomkins-square-park-and-new-york-city.

[225] Adam Pincus, "Kushner's East Village Play," *The Real Deal*, February 15, 2013, therealdeal.com/2013/02/15/kushners-east-village-play-breaking-down-the-numbers-on-the-450-unit-acquisition.

[226] Weinberg, *Tompkins Square Park*, 35.

undesirables out of TSP are also a partial admission of defeat. The article itself appears to concede as much, warning that twenty years of "progress" are about to be undone as homeless communities usher the city back into a state of "filth and fear" and "Dickensian despair." As such, the narrative that gentrification 'won' on the Lower East Side is not wrong but, like the gentrification process itself, incomplete.

There is one other indicator that the colonization of Alphabet City remains unfinished: the squatters. They were part of the struggle that night in Tompkins Square Park, and they continued to fight for their homes and neighbors throughout the aggressively anti-poor municipal 'clean-up' years of the 1990s. Now, even after being granted legal ownership of their buildings, they remain steadfast in their activism and commitment to safeguarding the neighborhood's working-class personality. The squatters may not be the only reason that Alphabet City is still a little edgier and more affordable than its surrounding neighborhoods, but their contributions to communal self-defense are undeniable. I will analyze their enduring successes—and occasional failures—in the following section.

The Alphabet City Uprising

There was a time when the building had no name. It was known then, in the early 1980s, as 292 E. 3rd Street, a dilapidated brick tenement discarded by its owner and left to rot in the slums of the Lower East Side. The city government had claimed possession of the building and then swiftly boarded up each bedroom window and filled the larger windows at street level with layers of cinderblock. Inside, there were holes gouged through the boiler, large patches of flooring removed, and cracks in the roof through which rainwater flowed. The rain was the last source of running water in the building, for the plumbing had been "ripped out and sold for scrap" in what squatter Maggie Wrigley calls an act of "the city as vandal."[227] The building had a history that went back to 1867. For over a century, it housed wave after wave of migrant families upon their arrival to New York. Irish, Italians, Jewish, Ukrainians—it housed them. Black migrants from the South—it housed them. Puerto Ricans and Dominicans—it housed them. The building's foundation was strong. It could have remained housing for many years to come, providing a home for working-class people who needed one. But that wasn't profitable anymore, and so the building died. It became a cenotaph, a five-story tombstone standing in memoriam to itself. "The only occupants were rats, fleas, and sometimes the junkies or homeless of a derelict neighborhood," Maggie writes. "So much for the American dream."

Buildings like 292 E. 3rd had fallen victim to a particularly tragic stage in the gentrification cycle: planned shrinkage. This process, also known in some contexts as spatial deconcentration, benign neglect, or municipal disinvestment, operates as a counterpart and precursor to urban renewal. Just as Robert Moses' renewal efforts on the UWS were presaged by

[227] Maggie Wrigley, "Bullet Space: Home as An Act of Resistance," in *The Architecture of Change: Building a Better* World, ed. Jerilou Hammett and Maggie Wrigley (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 121.

a calculated decline in housing standards, so too did the city government withdraw services from the LES to prepare the neighborhood for future redevelopment. Using fear of Black social advancement and the 1970s NYC fiscal crisis to justify their actions, men like Democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and housing administrator Roger Starr (a former Trotskyite turned early neoliberal and eventual neoconservative) agitated for the defunding of public services in impoverished minority neighborhoods. Schools were closed, subway stations demolished, and the fire department allowed blazes to burn unchecked across the South Bronx. All of this was again meant to force undesirables into a state of migration, though this time not merely to the outer boroughs as Moses intended but clear of the city entirely. Jerry the Peddler describes this process in his manuscript on the history of the LES squatter movement:

> How do you get hundreds of thousands if not millions of people to leave their homes? The answer was surprisingly simple—you cut off services. The first thing you do is cut off funding for housing...then you close schools and hospitals; you scale back on police and fire departments. You don't bring the drugs in, you just turn a blind eye as they ravage neighborhoods and destroy families and lives. You sacrifice one or two generations of mostly black and latino youth to years or lifetimes in prison, or you let them die in the gutter.[228]

Those areas designated for shrinkage were declared dead, incapable of supporting life, as though the thousands of human beings who lived there were themselves unworthy of life. "The role of the city planner is not to originate the trend of abandonment but to observe and use it so that public investment will be hoarded for those areas where it will sustain life," Starr wrote in 1976. "Better a thriving city of five million than a Calcutta of seven," he concluded, evoking the specter of the crowded, impoverished, and dark-skinned Third World.[229] Starr's thinking proved ahead of its time, for the exoticization of impoverished neighborhoods would soon become a

[228] Jerry the Peddler, "The Lower East Side Squatters and the Tompkins Square Uprising," 21.

[229] Roger Starr, "Making New York Smaller," *New York Times*, November 14, 1976, 105-106.

popular media trope. It was not long before the papers began calling Alphabet City a "Calcutta on the Hudson," orientalizing the poverty wrought by planned shrinkage and highlighting the Lower East Side as a target for internal colonization.[230]

As public services receded, landlords began abandoning their properties in these condemned neighborhoods *en mass* to mitigate losses. 292 E. 3rd's final owner, a tax evading slumlord and convicted rent gouger named Harry J. Shapolsky, bailed on the building without warning in the mid-1970s.[231] Others followed suit until the streets of Alphabet City were so barren that they more closely resembled the surface of Mars than a neighborhood in America's most densely populated city. Police, outraged by the possibility of layoffs and the loss of power and income that accompanied planned shrinkage, warned that a city neglected by its government would soon find itself governed by criminals instead. In 1975, they published a leaflet entitled *Welcome to Fear City*, which billed itself as a survival guide for tourists. It advised visitors to keep away from the outer boroughs, never to take the subway, and to avoid walking the streets after sundown. The text also refers to the South Bronx as "Fort Apache," recalling the predictably racist imagery of frontier lawmen beset on all sides by 'vicious' and 'uncivilized' enemies (and presaging the thematically related 1981 Paul Newman film *Fort Apache, The Bronx*). "The incidence of crime and violence in New York City is shockingly high, and is getting worse every day," the leaflet warns. "Nevertheless, some New Yorkers do manage to survive and even keep their property intact. ...Good luck." Beneath this grim imperative, as on the leaflet's front cover, they printed the grinning, skeletal image of Death itself.[232]

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[230] Josh Getlin, "Nobody's Park: In New York City, It Was Residents vs. the Homeless and Everybody Lost," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 1991, latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-06-13-vw-837-story.html.

[231] Wrigley, "Bullet Space," 121.

[232] Council for Public Safety, *Welcome to Fear City: A Survival Guide for Visitors to the City of New York* (New York: New York City Police Department, 1975), 1-3.

The assumption presented in this document is that a neighborhood without the controlling presence of law enforcement cannot help but fall into chaos. Stability comes from on high, the leaflet supposes, and cannot be derived from communal self-direction. And, for a time, this assumption appeared to prove itself correct on the Lower East Side, as families moved out and drug-dealing street gangs moved in. "The LES which in the '50s and '60s had been a poor, working class neighborhood now looked like a bombed-out war zone, with dozens of empty, burned-out buildings, garbange [sic] and burned out stolen cars lined the streets, vacant lots covered with rubble and garbage, people living in shanties or sleeping in piss-stinking doorways," Jerry the Peddler writes, describing the area as he and others once knew it.[233] Through their policy of planned shrinkage, the finance, insurance, and real estate industries (or "FIRE," as the squatters called them, "to remind us of the great wave of landlord arson") strangled the life out of a once pleasant, if poor urban community.[234] Working in concert to serve their interests, the FIRE industries transformed Alphabet City into what David Nye deems an "anti-landscape," an element of the built environment that "once served as infrastructure for collective existence but that has ceased to do so."[235] As squatter poet Will Sales writes in his 1993 piece "Death of a Neighborhood:"

[233] Jerry the Peddler, "The Lower East Side Squatters and the Tompkins Square Uprising," 21.

[234] A. Kronstadt, "A Short History of Tompkins Square Uprising, 1988-1991," Jerry 'The Peddler' Wade Papers on Squatters' Rights (TAM.366), Folder 28, The Tamiment Library, New York University.

[235] David Nye, *When the Lights Went Out: A History of Blackouts in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 131.

Scattered through the graveyard of wasted city blocks
are the snaggled tooth, hollow eyed shells
of abandoned buildings,
standing like old wounded animals waiting to die.

'What the hell happened here?' you say to a passerby
who looks you dead in the eyes, and replies:

'They raped and murdered another neighborhood.
First they withdrew support. Banks, schools,
hospitals, stores all closed down
and relocated across town.

Landlords – strangled their buildings to death
by cutting off gas, electric, heat.
Turning the once happy tenants into homeless refugees
left to wander the graveyard streets

Fear, hunger and hate take hold: crime becomes king.
Another poor neighborhood shot through the head
and left for the dead.[236]

Yet with crisis comes opportunity, and amidst all this terror there were some who saw the potential for a reimagining of urban space. Alphabet City during this time was a "neighborhood ready for the taking," squatter Rolando Politi says, a place where "one could do anything they wanted to." Jerry the Peddler could see it too. "This neighborhood was ripe for taking over. It really was," he recalls. "We were sitting down here and trying to organize people, showing people how they could get control of their lives again...take over buildings and homes...without the help of the system."[237] Rolando, Jerry, and other likeminded LES revolutionaries would become squatters, taking back these properties that the state and landlords had destroyed and rebuilding them to lay claim to their right to the city. "Squatting is the antidote to forced

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[236] Will Sales, "Death of a Neighborhood," *Your House is Mine: 1988-1992, An Act of Resistance* (New York: Bullet Space, 1993).

[237] Jerry the Peddler, interview with the author, August 8, 2019.

removal," movement leader Frank Morales says. It is a "means of community self-defense as well as a means, through use of abandoned spaces, to meet the necessity of a home, and build solidarity and power on the grass roots."[238] These were ambitious goals, and ones that would take many years and the formation of a hard-working, unified community to accomplish, yet Rolando, Jerry, Frank, and others knew it could be done.

One of the first tests of this vision began back at 292 E. 3rd St. during the evening of January 30th, 1986—ten years after the building's initial abandonment (see map in Fig. 6). On a cold, clear night, a team of squatters crept into the building's back lot. They carried with them a handful of tools, including a ten-pound sledgehammer concealed in a guitar case. Among them was their principal organizer, a twenty-two-year-old Canadian photographer named Tenesh Webber. Webber had spent months scouting the building and assessing its viability as a squat, and now she and her friends were prepared to put their plan into action. Somebody—their identity is disputed—grabbed hold of the hammer.[239] They squared up in front of a blocked doorway and took their first swing. The thud echoed down the empty street. They swung again, and again, while the others watched expectantly. It was not long before they had smashed open a small entryway, just large enough to crawl through. The team returned the next day accompanied by more squatters, including the young poet Andrew Castrucci and his architect brother Paul. They began by removing trash and cleaning debris from the roof.[240] "Group work cleared rubble

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[238] Cari Luna, "Squatters of the Lower East Side," *Jacobin*, April 3, 2014, jacobinmag.com/2014/04/squatters-of-the-lower-east-side.

[239] See the debate between squatters held in the comments section of a 2010 news article, in which Andrew Castrucci says that "It is a little absurd at this point to say who's [sic] foot print was the first to step on the moon:" Colin Moynihan, "A Tenement Transformed Tells the Lives of Its Squatters," *New York Times*, January 29, 2010, cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/29/squat.

[240] As an intriguing aside, their first visit to the roof that day included a terse and unexpected encounter with drug enforcement police who had established a camp there. The police left the scene after the squatters arrived.

and garbage from the building that would have filled more than twelve dumpsters," says Maggie. "But a dumpster rented for $400, so [squatters] carried it out bucket by bucket. The backyard was ten feet deep in rubble from the house."[241] They worked all day, every day, often by flashlight and candle. Rolando describes the smell of these newly cracked squat houses as "pretty horrible," reeking of "mold and mildew...[and] sometimes of dead animals, that kind of nauseating smell. Plus excrement. Dried-up ones, some not so dried up ones."[242] It took three months to render the building habitable, at which point six residents officially moved in.

These squatters gave 292 E. 3rd its first proper name: 6 O'Clock Squat, selected in honor of a local artists' collective. They later changed it to Bullet Space, named irreverently after a brand of heroin that had taken hold in the neighborhood. From within the newly renamed squat they could hear the dealers marching up and down the block, shouting "Bullet! Bullet! Bullet!" in a sing-song cadence. The chant was so regular that it became a "soundtrack to everyday life."[243] I am told that the name Bullet Space was Andrew's idea. "[He] felt compelled to call it that, appropriating that name but kind of turning it on its head and using it as a weapon of art-making, versus acute destruction of the self," says his wife, the painter Alexandra Rojas. That idea was reflected in Bullet Space's rule against hard drug use, as well as in its logo: an image of the Empire State Building flipped upside-down to resemble a heroin needle. The tip of that needle points towards the squat's *raison d'être*, printed in bold letters: "An Act of Resistance."

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[241] Wrigley, "Bullet Space," 122.

[242] Politi, interview with Starecheski, December 11, 2010, *Squatters' Collective Oral Histories Collection.*

[243] Alexandra Rojas, interview with the author, March 17, 2019.

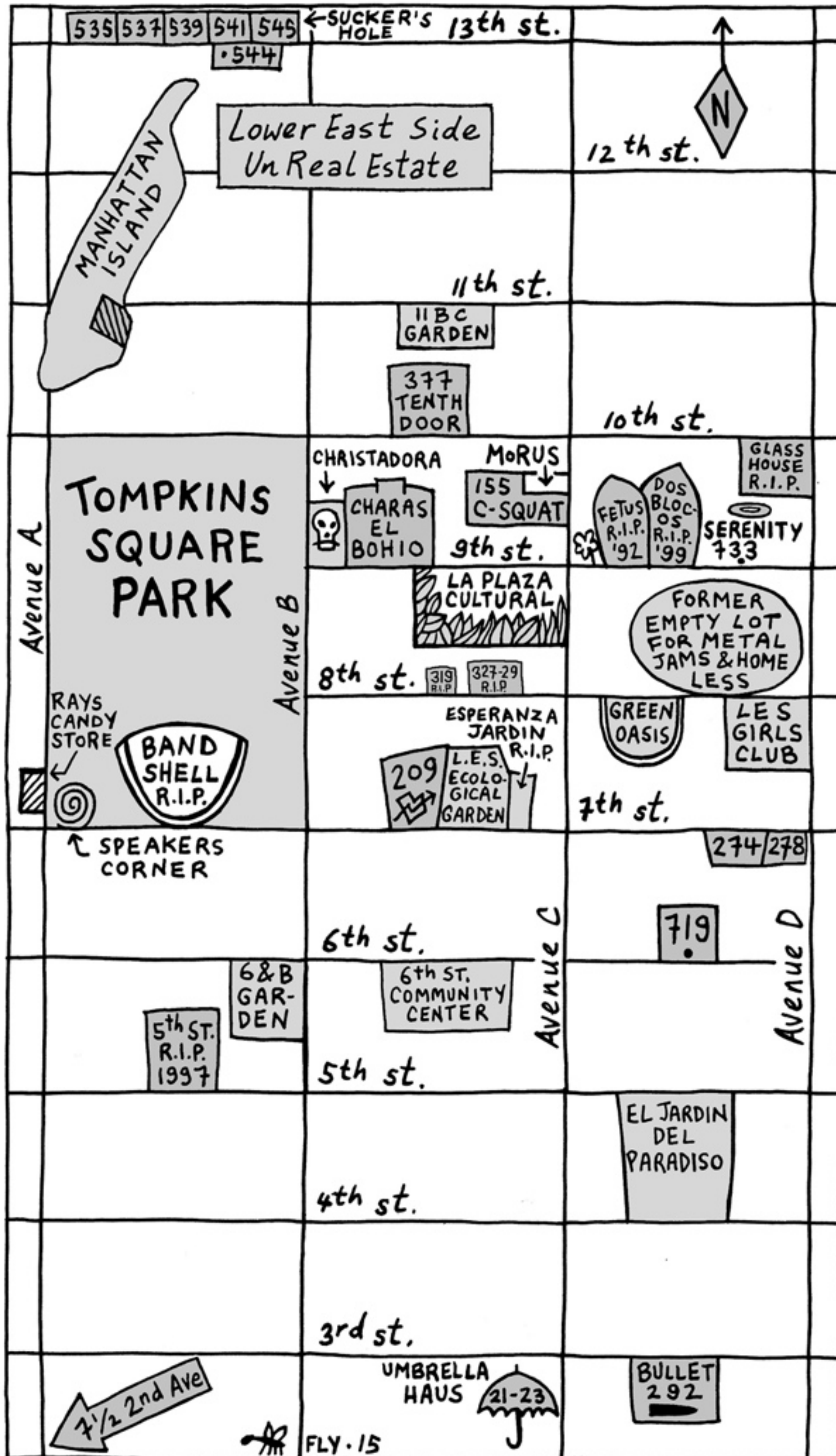

Fig. 6: A map of "Lower East Side UnReal Estate." Illustration by Fly Orr, 2015.
This map displays the most important Alphabet City squats, including some that are now lost.

The early days were difficult. The squatters had inherited a building with no electricity, no heating, nor even a front door. All of this would have to be replaced, but without legal access to the utility networks. Specialized skills were imperative. Those with training as electricians, carpenters, or even blacksmiths ranked among the most valuable members of the community. Robert Parker, a blacksmith who lived ten blocks north at the Sucker's Hole squat, oversaw the construction of a community forge. There the squatters converted broken water heaters into Bullet Space's two wood-burning stoves, which they fueled with whatever loose material they could gather. "I would go under the Brooklyn Bridge and pick up driftwood from the East River," Andrew told the *New York Times* in 2010. "And when that ran out we'd take wooden pallets off the street in Chinatown."[244] Homemade wiring drew in power from the Con Ed grid, sometimes by pirating it from nearby streetlamps. The squatters installed windows and hung blackout curtains to prevent passersby from seeing their lights turned on at night. They hijacked a fire hydrant for water and used a pump to build a small bathroom in the cellar. Residents of all seven apartments shared this bathroom, and when the improvised plumbing failed the waste had to be removed by hand and bucket. This experience became a recurring point of frustration, leading one exasperated squatter to scribble "Anarchists please learn to flush" on the toilet seat in permanent marker.[245] Worse still, there was only a single radiator to provide heat during the cold New York winters. "My dog's bowl would freeze. My shampoo would freeze. Everything would freeze in the house," Maggie recounts. "It was bitter. It was very bitter."[246]

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[244] Moynihan, "Exhibit Celebrates a Tenement and Squatters Who Made It a Home."

[245] Detailed in "Piss Bucket Brigade," a one-page document framed on the wall in Bullet Space's basement. This slogan also inspired a 1987 art installation by Andrew Castrucci.

[246] Wrigley, interview with Starecheski, January 26, 2012, *Squatters' Collective Oral Histories Collection.*

Conditions were no better in other Alphabet City squats, like the E. 7th St. building where comix artist and musician Fly Orr lived—and still lives to this day. "You're talking February, and you'd have gaping holes in your building with the wind whistling through," she says. "When I moved into this building in 1992 this whole stack was gutted. It didn't exist. It was just completely burnt out," such that she and other residents would have to leap between wooden beams just to move from room to room. "The day that I had a floor put down was like the day that the angels sang to me," she laughs.[247] It took months to even make her room livable, let alone convert it into a place that might someday begin to feel like a home. There were pigeons in the walls to excise and many layers of insulation to install. Yet Fly was ready for the task of living with and improving on these conditions. She had been raised by a handyman father and grew up attracted to the do-it-yourself nature of fixing up old homes. She still holds onto photographs from those early days, many depicting her armed with hammers and drills, always working on some big restoration project. "There were a few years where I was working every single day on my space. I would get up at nine in the morning and work sometimes until nine at night," she says. "It was endless cement work and hauling rubble. Bucket after bucket. Rubble, rubble, rubble. Whenever there was a dumpster in the neighborhood, you'd have to sneak out at night and dump your rubble into someone else's dumpster! And we would go through dumpsters to try to find building materials, like finding copper pipe or plumbing stuff. I learned how to build a tenement apartment from *nothing*."

Not everyone who passed through the squats could handle this kind of workload, but those who could flourished. Jerry the Peddler has witnessed this dynamic often during his decades-long stay at C-Squat. "When I first came in the late '80s they were punks," he says of

[247] Fly, interview with the author, September 15, 2019.

his younger housemates. "They were all in their late teens to mid-twenties. There was no roof, there were no stairs; they had a series of cargo nets that they used to climb up to get from floor to floor, mind you. They taught themselves carpentry, and plumbing, and electric. Nowadays when they need money, they go out and find themselves a construction job."[248] Those who lacked the skills needed to survive developed them quickly. They had no other choice. "I learned it by necessity," says Rolando, who first squatted along 13th St. and later at Bullet Space. "I must say necessity is the best creative force everywhere. ...My cousin...he knew nothing when he came in. He was like a street kid from the West Side blown over here. ...He learned a lot of skills from squatting. He became a master electrician from that."[249]

Maggie, today Rolando's downstairs neighbor, agrees. "All these skills...knowing how to fix stuff or having the willingness to do it. It changes things for people," she told me in an August 2019 interview. "It changed things for me. I didn't know how to build anything. I didn't know how to sheetrock. I barely knew how to hold a hammer. You learn skills. You share skills. You share tools."[250] Even some who entered the scene as addicts or beset by other struggles could find a path forward through the invaluable hardships of squatting. "Honestly, that whole acquiring of building construction skills and getting a skill set was the thing that probably saved my life," poet and 13th St. squatter Peter Spagnuolo says. "Because I went from being someone who was an IV drug user and deeply in the drug trade, and because I had to do all this work and I had to be functional...it transitioned me out of being a drug addict. ...I started getting jobs as a carpenter, commercial jobs. ...That whole process of having to get decent or learn how to do

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[248] DW Gibson, "Don't Call This the East Village," *Guernica,* March 11, 2015, guernicamag.com/dw-gibson-dont-call-this-the-east-village.

[249] Politi, interview with Starecheski.

[250] Maggie Wrigley, interview with the author, August 1, 2019.

things was...critical for me because it made me turn my life around and get off drugs."[251] It is clear to me that the Lower East Side squatters were not just rebuilding old tenements, or even a neighborhood. They were remaking themselves as well.

There are few contractors in this collaborative framework, save for the occasional sympathetic tradesman willing to lend free drywall or offer *pro bono* lessons in carpentry or plumbing. Everyone was responsible for the health and preservation of their squat house. The duties of building supervisor rotated monthly, with each resident taking turns handling the extra work and leading cooperative meetings. With time, all came to fill the roles of both master and apprentice in a dozen or more crafts. "It was a stressful way to live," Maggie acknowledges, "but you were becoming empowered. ...You were building community." This is what squatters mean when they talk about sweat equity. The residents of 292 E. 3rd St. may not have owned their building by law at first, but they invested countless hours of unpaid labor into its rehabilitation, breathing life back into what had been nothing more than a gutted ruin. "We did everything up to code as well," Fly says. "Our intentions were, however far-fetched, to eventually own the building. We weren't thinking in a transient way."

Through this hard work, these squatters managed to elevate Bullet Space's use value and exchange value alike, and played a role in reclaiming the LES from the squalor brought on by planned shrinkage. Critics tend to portray those who squat as freeloaders, as though their relationship with the city were not reciprocal but one in which squatters only take and never give in return. The conservative *New York Post*, for instance, has disparaged the LES squatters as "space invaders," "urban parasites," and "middle-class 'revolutionaries' [who] behave like

[251] Amy Starecheski, *Ours to Lose: When Squatters Became Homeowners in New York City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 167.

common criminals."[252] The squatters are well accustomed to these accusations, and they often respond through the language of sacrifice. "It's not free housing!" says 13th St. squatter Rick Klemann. "When people say it's free housing, they don't know what they're talking about. We pay for it with blood, sweat, and tears."[253] Fly echoes this idea as she describes her history with the former "rat hole" known as the Seventh Street Squat. "My *blood* is in this building," she says. "It is such an intense thing to work so hard and fight so hard for your space. It is not just about the physical space. It's about being in control of your living space."[254]

Given these challenges, we must ask an important question: who in their right mind becomes a squatter? On the Lower East Side, at least, there is no prototype. Those who squatted Bullet Space and buildings like it were a complex and heterogenous bunch, consisting of artists, punk kids, undocumented migrants, teenage runaways, the recently homeless, and those who otherwise had nowhere else to turn. The result was a collection of disparate personalities all tossed into the same crucible, compelled to work as partners to ensure each other's survival. "I was homeless," says King Luck, a New York beatbox legend who passed away in 2020. "You need a place to stay, you do the work."[255] King Luck, formerly known as Kid Lucky, bounced between squats like ABC No Rio, Dos Blockos, and Serenity House over the years, sometimes moving voluntarily and sometimes expelled by the state, as with the 3:00 am eviction of Glass House in 1994. Though he came to squatting to escape homelessness, King Luck says he soon

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[252] Ginger Adams Otis, "Space Invaders Pay Diddly Squat," *New York Post*, May 17, 2009, nypost.com/2009/05/17/space-invaders-pay-diddly-squat; Andrea Peyser, "Urban Parasites Just Hit the Jackpot," *New York Post*, August 21, 2002, nypost.com/2002/08/21/urban-parasites-just-hit-the-jackpot; Editorial Board, "Middle-Class 'Revolutionaries,'" *New York Post*, July 6, 1995, 20.

[253] Rick Klemann, interview with Starecheski, July 13, 2012, *Squatters' Collective Oral Histories Collection*.

[254] Starecheski, "Squatters Make History in New York: Property, History, and Collective Claims on the City," *American Ethnologist* 46, no. 1 (February 2019), 65-66.

[255] King Luck, interview with the author, January 3, 2019.

got involved in leftist politics and served as a necessary voice for Black squatters in a LES scene frequently dominated by White class reductionism. Maggie, meanwhile, was living with her boyfriend in an expensive warehouse apartment in Brooklyn. They were paying double the cost of rent to their roommate, who in turn paid back their slumlord for the privilege of occupying a building with no heat or water. Friends invited Maggie and her boyfriend into Bullet Space and they made the journey in a broken-down car that fell apart the moment it reached E. 3rd St. She was greeted with immediate questions about her ideological allegiance. "We came to a meeting and somebody's asking us, well, are you politically committed? Are you political? Because it's a political movement," she says. "We're a [functionally] homeless interracial couple. Our lives are fairly [political] already. What do you want us to say about being political?"[256]

Squatter politics were indeed a tricky subject in this fledgling community of punks and vagabonds, all of whom shared similar class interests but not always the same stated beliefs. "We had people in there who literally didn't want anything to do with the ideological struggle and we had people who were there specifically because of it," Peter recalls.[257] Whatever their motivation, each squatter's safety depended upon their willingness to protect one another and improve their buildings, even when personal conflicts erupted between them. It was like a high stake, far more 'real' version of MTV's *The Real World*, and there was something thrilling about that dynamic. "The scene was amazing. It was just a constant hive of energy, a very excitable bunch," Peter says. "The freedom of squatting...meant that you got people who were sort of already rolling and tumbling through American life. They were people who had kind of come

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[256] Wrigley, interview with Starecheski.

[257] Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 78. Excerpts from this conversation also appear in this excellent podcast: Delaney Hall, "Squatters of the Lower East Side," *99% Invisible*, podcast audio, May 30, 2017, 99percentinvisible.org/episode/squatters-lower-east-side.

loose in some way or another." That lack of rootedness came to define the squatting experience, as housemates would move in and then drift away, while others bounced from one squat to another. Long-term residents cycled through roommates constantly. In some buildings, guests might spend days or weeks camped out on a spare couch in the basement and then vanish before half the occupants had even learned their name. There was a feeling of flux that could not be replicated within the confines of traditional tenancy, the sensation that nothing was fixed and everything fell within the squatter's inimitable power to remake the world around them.

"You didn't feel alone because everybody supported you ...Everybody was very connected. ...They'd drive you crazy," Maggie laughs. "It was like a mad, dysfunctional family that we're now stuck with forever. ...You have to be a little bit crazy to live that way." Other squatters too came to see their relationships as familial in nature, either despite or *because* of the tensions that sometimes existed between them. "That's a pretty good analogy, actually, for the social structure of this building, is that we're sort of like family," C-Squatter Erin Williams says. "We are all stuck with each other, [and] there's nothing we can do about it. There definitely are some crazy people in the family, some people you actually just don't like. ...You may freaking hate their guts one minute, but you really know that you're all in the same boat together at the end of the day."[258] These spats could at times boil over into feuds or even outright violence, but that was the give and take of life in a squatting community. Tina Hammersmark, an urbexer who lived at C-Squat in the early 2000s says she prefers this unpredictable dynamic to the "superficial conversations" between neighbors that exist outside the urban oeuvre:

[258] Erin Williams, interview with Starecheski, April 1, 2012, *Squatters' Collective Oral Histories Collection.*

> There was a lot of things I liked about C-Squat. There was a lot of feuds. The person who was in this room didn't like the person who was in that room or doesn't like the person who lives above them for something that happened fifteen years ago. But everyone made it work, which I appreciated. ...Everyone would have house meetings, and even if they hated each other, they'll talk it out. There were times with screaming and yelling in the hallways, and maybe even a little bit of violence here and there, but I really appreciated that everyone was there to look out for each other. ...It was just the sense of community that stands out to me about C-Squat.[259]

I have deployed the word 'community' often throughout this paper, perhaps even in circumstances where a group did not quite live up to the standards of true mutual care and interdependency. Not so for the LES squatters. These were people who experienced all the highs and lows of living with and *for* others. The prospect of needing other people can seem jarring to those of us accustomed to life in an atomized culture, one where our fundamental connectedness as human beings is denied everywhere except through Facebook. Relying on neighbors to keep your building afloat, gathering together for co-labor or house meetings, and intimately knowing those around you when the rest of the city gets by on a state of perpetually assumed anonymity is an uncanny thing. It is not always easy. For the squatters to accomplish this while Margaret Thatcher was busy declaring "There is no such thing [as society]," only "individual men and women" is quite radical.[260] LES writer Lucy Sante captures the disruptive flavor of squatter communitas in her foreword to Seth Tobocman's *War in the Neighborhood,* an excellent illustrated history of the era (Fig. 8):

[259] Tina Hammersmark, interview with the author, September 11, 2019.

[260] Douglas Key, "AIDS, Education and the Year 2000!" *Woman's Own*, October 31, 1987, 9.

> Since a community is actually a bunch of people whose intimate lives rub against one another's on a daily basis, who possess a common purpose not unmarred by conflict of all sizes, who are thus forced to negotiate their way across every potential decision, it's not surprising that most people who live in apartments or houses have never experienced community, except at the microscopic level, with parents or partners. The notion of people flung together by necessity making up a living community, and one that is under continual siege at that, sounds like ancestral memory or something, an impossibility in the cities of the Western world as it stands.[261]

Not all squatters were represented equally during house meetings, however. King Luck points to the persistent racism expressed by some White squatters, which often made him feel ostracized and unappreciated within his house. "Of course there's racism in the squats," he told me. "That's why I don't subscribe to the 'poor White people can't be racist' thing," he says, referring to the idea that class oppression alone makes impoverished Whites natural allies to Black people. Nor were all White squatters poor, he points out. "There's a lot of them coming from the Midwest," he says. "Some of them are daddy's kids, you know? Trust fund babies. ...Some of them would just rebel against the system, put tattoos on themselves so they can't go back. But they still come from money." King Luck compares these privileged, pseudo-rebellious squatters to "the people who would date a Black person because it would piss their parents off." This is not to say that every White squatter was middle-class, as is often claimed. Many White squatters were as poor and financially adrift as anyone else in the buildings. Yet it is important to recognize that those squatters who did come from comfortable backgrounds were overwhelmingly—if not entirely—White, and that these racial and class distinctions mattered in determining the effectiveness of squatter cohesion.

Sexist attitudes, lack of familiarity or patience with neurodivergence, and prejudices against the homeless were other complicating factors that created a wedge between more

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[261] Lucy Sante, "Introduction," in *War in the Neighborhood*, ed. Seth Tobocman (Union City, NJ: Autonomedia, 1999), 9.

privileged White male squatters and the most marginalized figures in Alphabet City. “There were real problems with integrating people into our communities who were homeless, and some of those were around race,” says Tauno Biltsted, a resident of Umbrella House on Avenue C who today works as a conflict resolution coach.[262] “Homeless people tended to be African American and [while] there were plenty of Black folks in the squats, the [White squatters] didn’t have those kinds of backgrounds. ...There were all kinds of abusive behaviors...including patriarchal stuff. That was complicated. But we didn’t really have the tools or the analysis to call it out.” The squatters, as we can see, were not immune to the same biases and power imbalances that infect our wider society. This was a weakness inherent in the Alphabet City movement’s mostly White leadership, which negatively contrasts with the race-conscious Black and Latino/Latina leaders overseeing Operation Move-In. Even so, most LES squatters did their best to foster community and make things work. “I mean we suffered contradictions: sexism, racism, all the usual stuff. Homophobia, it was all happening,” Frank Morales says. “It was no different, the contradictions were still there. But at least I think [in] my experience...they were brought to bear and made explicit in a very overt way. Not without contentiousness and fighting. That was the thing though—when you're in that kind of setting it frees you up...with the baggage that you bring. So it's not an easy thing.[263]

Another risk factor that threatened the community was drug addiction. Some who took to squatting struggled with dependency and, though this was less of a concern at sober squats like Bullet Space, the *laissez-faire* attitude toward substances that predominated at punk squats like ABC No Rio exacerbated these conditions. “There was a lot of dope in the building,” Jerry the

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[262] Tauno Biltsted, interview with the author, August 17, 2019.

[263] Frank Morales, interview with Starecheski, July 19, 2009, *Squatters’ Collective Oral Histories Collection*.

Peddler says about C-Squat, where he has lived since the 1980s. "I would get up and go to work every day [and my roommate] would turn my apartment into a shooting gallery. Literally, I would come in at night and find dope bags all over the house. ...We're too carefree when it comes to our drugs." This problem led most squats to adopt rules against hard drug use, along with a housemate screening system to weed out bad influences before they could move in. These screenings represent one of the more bureaucratic functions present within squatting, bringing their house meetings closer in line with a communalist vision of self-governance. In Starecheski's analysis, screenings also demonstrate that "squatters had dominion over the buildings in the sense that they had the power to include and exclude," even while they lacked the legal authority derived from capitalist ownership.[264] "We had rules, certain guidelines...you couldn't do certain drugs in the building, no racism and sexism and abuse along those lines," says Lawrence VanAbemma, who lives in Umbrella House. "We tried to have rules...that politically got us in the right direction. People actually wanted to live in the building."[265]

One current C-Squat resident who requests anonymity lays out some of the concerns they brought to applicant screenings. Note the emphasis they place on the prospective squatter's ability to lend their time to the cause:

[264] Ibid., 107.

[265] Lawrene VanAbemma, interview with Starecheski, August 14, 2012, *Squatters' Collective Oral Histories Collection.*

> Are they a positive influence on the building, are they helpful, do they do work? Are they taking care of things that they're supposed to be taking care of? Can they hold it down, can they handle living here? This is a weird scene to be in. Some people lose their minds and think, 'I can do whatever I want, I'll never have to work again, and I can do all the drugs I need, yeah!' And then there's just these fucking losers that just get wasted on drugs, and it's like, 'Wow, you're not going to make it. You can't handle this kind of living. Because it's too hard for you.' I think that's a big one for me. When I'm looking at other people and thinking maybe they have a chance to get a spot—no, they're wasted every day because they don't have any responsibilities.[266]

Once more we see the importance of being an active contributor, rather than simply going along for the ride. There is a dichotomy at play here. The squatter is defined by their dedication to hard work, and this is what differentiates them from the "fucking loser" or the hanger-on. This valorization of labor superficially mirrors the cult of hard work that capitalism has constructed within the larger culture but differs in one key regard. Squatters do not sell their labor to an employer for the benefit of the wealthy. Squatters work to improve their community for the benefit of *themselves*. They sow together, and in time they reap together as well.

That is why they must be so cautious when admitting new members. The squatters' goal during the screening process was never to deprive applicants of shelter or elevate themselves to the status of landlord, but to ensure that invitations only went out to those willing to embrace the responsibilities of squatter life. By doing this, they sought to avoid what Klemann calls "problem tenants," those would-be squatters who disrupt, rather than enhance, the social functions of the community. "Problem tenants, you know we've had so many," Klemann says. "Everything from drug addicts to people that just move in with somebody and try to take over. When you're living in a squat it's basically a lawless building. ...And there has to be a few people that step in and say enough is enough, you're out of here."[267] In this sense, the squatters appropriate the duties of

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[266] Anonymous, cited in Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 218.

[267] Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 79-80.

police officers and landlords but reshape them into a cooperative schema in which the risks and benefits of operating a "lawless building" are assumed by all. It should be said that the squatters never restricted space in their buildings to only perfect, upstanding citizens. What was at issue was the inability to engage in necessary work and make sacrifices for the good of the house. "The work is not going to do itself," Alfa Diallo of the 544 E. 13th St. squat says. "If you are not living by yourself you are living with people and you should take those people into consideration. Otherwise it becomes *pagaille*—chaos."[268]

"We attracted the best and worst people," Andrew says. "A lot of good people, a lot of bad people, and a lot of freeloaders." Screenings and even eviction votes to remove problem tenants helped keep buildings healthy, and Andrew attributes Bullet Space's success to the high expectations they set for new residents. "The reason why we got legalized had a lot to do with what we produced here," he told me. "We weren't a bunch of drug dealers or runaway kids. We weren't a bunch of riffraff."[269] The rules at Bullet Space were simple, Andrew says. "No drugs, no dealing drugs, no violence, and you had to do work days and pay your dues. And if you didn't do it, we kicked you out. We policed ourselves." During my interview with Andrew, I picked up on an enduring sense of resentment toward those he saw as corrupting the squatter movement through laziness or a lack of real commitment to its ideals. Again and again, he drew a rhetorical line between those who were serious about squatting and those who only wanted to screw around or find a temporary escape from paying rent. "A lot of people bullshit, so be careful," he said. "Some people squat for the summer, then they go get hooked on heroin and go back to their mommy and daddy. There's so many transient runaway kids, and then there's the people that

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[268] Alfa Diallo, interview with Starecheski, July 30, 2012, *Squatters' Collective Oral Histories Collection.*

[269] Andrew Castrucci, interview with the author, March 17, 2019.

were squatting for twenty or thirty years, fixing up a building." Bullet Space has always prioritized its mission as an art studio, with aspirations extending far further up the hierarchy of needs than shelter and survival alone. This vision depends on a fruitful collaboration between squatters. Selfishness, listlessness, and the pursuit of individual pleasure is toxic to Bullet Space's whole cause. I was therefore not surprised to encounter Andrew's hostility toward the popular depiction of squatters as "skinheads and cannibals...and thieves," as he puts it.[270]

This distinction between "squatting [as] an art form" and the "lot of people [who] bullshit" recalls the common leftist allegations of 'lifestylism' or 'adventurism,' which have been decried by thinkers as varied as Lenin and Murray Bookchin. These might seem like mild insults or a means of fluffing up one's own radical credentials at the expense of others, but as charges they connote a meaningful gap between collective action and the toothless individualism of the rebel without a cause. "If anarchism loses its socialist core and collectivist goal," Bookchin warns, "it will come to represent not social regeneration and a revolutionary vision but social decay and a petulant egoistic rebellion."[271] To Bookchin, the lone anarchist cannot help but prioritize self-actualization and personal desire. They act without theory or concern for the needs of the masses, making them little more than a dirtied-up yuppie. "Today we are turning inward: we are looking for personal definition, personal improvement, personal achievement, and personal enlightenment," he writes. "In lifestyle anarchism...the ego is counterposed to the collective; the self, to society; the personal, to the communal."[272] These are the dangers of

[270] The popularly imagined link between squatters and cannibals comes from Daniel Rakowitz, an Alphabet City murderer who killed and purportedly ate his girlfriend in the late 1980s. Rakowitz never lived in a squat but maintained casual friendships with some squatters prior to the murder and he sometimes attended squatter meetings. The squatters, needless to say, did not approve of his actions.

[271] Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1995), 54.

[272] Ibid., 9-10.

squatting as lifestyle, rather than a *way of life*, and it is a distinction that Andrew has never forgotten. He, like other squatters, asks of his comrades only what he asks of himself: a commitment to the hard work of communal self-improvement.

As the Alphabet City squatting campaign grew, it came to encompass an array of different assets and resources throughout the Lower East Side. "I've often said that at our height, over a period of fifteen, almost twenty years, we had over thirty buildings, two different bookstores, our own newspaper, and our own radio station," Jerry the Peddler boasts. "Very few people can say that."[273] Included within this budding squatting empire was a series of community gardens, each of which were built on the vacant plots of land left rotting in the wake of planned shrinkage. Squatters and other LES residents spent weeks hauling trash out of these spaces before reshaping them into green and fertile terraces that locals could use to grow their own crops. "When the gardeners moved in here, this was a big field full of rubble, broken brick and plaster, a breeding ground for rats, junkies using it to shoot up. A dangerous, unsightly space," Bill Weinberg says. "The gardeners came in and they chased off the junkies, they cleared off the rubble. They brought in soil and started planting trees and flowers and started turning what had been a dangerous, ugly, blighted, blitzed vacant lot into a pleasant community garden where people could get together and grow vegetables and flowers...and begin to reconnect with their neighbors and restore a sense of community in this neighborhood."[274]

Among the largest of these gardens was La Plaza Cultural, founded in 1976 and located within walking distance of C-Squat at 9th St. and Avenue C. La Plaza featured a vegetable garden, a lounge area for meditation and personal restoration, and even a greenhouse constructed

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[273] Jerry the Peddler, interview with Starecheski.

[274] Weinberg, walking tour with the author, December 23, 2018.

within a geodesic dome. That dome was provided as a gift from inventor and urban reform advocate Buckminster Fuller, who saw great value in La Plaza and the wider community gardens movement of the 1970s. The dome collapsed under the weight of heavy snowfall several years later, but it has since been replaced with an amphitheater used in the performance of communal theater projects. Forward-thinking and ecology-minded gardeners utilized La Plaza to pioneer successful recycling, compost, and even rainwater collection programs, years before the city government accepted that such things were possible in an urban setting. Muralists decorated La Plaza's walls with paintings meant to express the garden's purpose and political ideals. One featured the Chinese *Yin Yang* symbol, with half of the *tao* representing "the old society in a state of collapse: drugs, crime, police brutality, landlord arson, and evictions," while the other side displayed "the new society coming into fruition: people fixing up their abandoned buildings and creating community gardens."[275] That mural was painted over by landlords in the 1990s, but another work of art remains present on the garden's far west side, albeit now faded and difficult to read. "*La lucha continua,*" it declares, above the chipped image of a Latino soldier and indigenous mother and farmer. *The struggle continues*. "The original ethic behind the community gardening movement at that time was really a revolutionary one," Weinberg tells me. "It was building a new society in the vacant lots of the old. [That] was the slogan of the day, and exactly the gardeners who built this place were trying to do."

For a period of about twenty years, the fence posts surrounding La Plaza were decorated with a series of plastic and scrap metal objects, each manipulated by hand to resemble sunflowers and other naturalistic designs. These were Rolando's "Winter Flowers," part of a sprawling, decades-long undertaking meant to beautify the neighborhood and protest the ugly

[275] Ibid.

wastefulness of capital. Rolando assembles each flower through a process he calls gleaning, the same term used by European peasant farmers as they scavenged for food in the refuse left after harvest. He collects old coffee tins, gallon jugs of laundry detergent, and other supposed garbage to make something new out of the byproducts of corporate mass production. Perhaps this is the meaning behind the title “Winter Flowers,” for—like the stubborn sprig poking its way through the cracks between two slabs of pavement—these sculptures represent a neighborhood that refuses to die, even through capitalism’s coldest winters. The city government was in the process of removing Rolando’s art from La Plaza when I first arrived in Alphabet City, and by mid-2019 they were gone entirely, replaced with plain, black metal bars. Yet it takes more than bureaucratic interference to keep squatter artists down. Already these flowers have begun to blossom once more, now affixed to the top of the new La Plaza fence. Rolando considers these works his masterpiece, and I cannot disagree.

While the gardens thrived throughout the 1990s, hosting concerts, activist meetings, reading series, and cultural events, they and the squats themselves remained under constant threat of eviction. The state and its police were determined to force them out, even if it meant turning to the same violent, extrajudicial methods demonstrated during the riot at Tompkins Square Park. Some, like Chris Flash of the *Shadow*, saw a direct line between the government’s actions at TSP and their treatment of squatters during the late 1980s and ’90s, as though the latter were in some way an act of vengeance carried out in response to the former. “The August 6, 1988, Tompkins Square Riot included many from the squatter community who objected to the gentrification and yuppification of our community,” Flash says. “I believe that the not-so-mysterious fires at various squats that took place in the months following the riot were due to the city and NYPD desiring to remove a major element of opposition to the city’s plan to change the

demographics of the Lower East Side. In most cases, fire fighters stood by doing nothing as squats continued burning."[276] In other instances, as with one fire at Bullet Space, emergency service officials would "smash all the windows up and down the building, which was one of the ways they'd get you out," Maggie says. Squatters were then left scrambling to repair the damage as swiftly as they could, before the city government could declare their squat house uninhabitable. "The building was crawling with people fixing things and finding windows to put in," she remembers, as many non-squatter neighbors raced off to search their own basements for spare tools and supplies. "There would always be something," Maggie says. "The city was so proactive in trying to empty the buildings and get us out."

To counter this aggression, the squatters maintained an Eviction Watch mailing list and emergency telephone tree, through which they could disseminate warnings about police activity quickly across different squat houses. Their pirate radio station, Steal This Radio on 88.7 FM, also served as an alert system in addition to its regular use as a neighborhood news platform and creative outlet for music and audio dramas. Squatter broadcasters used their illegal micro transmitter to keep everyone within a ten-block radius abreast of the NYPD's next moves. The squatters assembled defense forces, barricading their fire escapes with old bicycles and debris. They came together to form what they called Piss Bucket Brigades, filling old tins with urine and other aversives to spill down on the cops from above. "There was an onslaught of attacks on the squats. ...Helicopters putting search lights in your windows. ...The city would be demoing the place next door and they'd be trying to crack your building and getting you out that way. It was this constant battle of survival against the city. They hated us. The cops hated us," Maggie says. "I guess it just made us more determined to hold on. ...You do what you can, and you do it on the

[276] Luna, "Squatters of the Lower East Side."

grassroots level. You chain yourself to the building. You use your piss bucket, and nobody's going to try to come near you. It's vile, but hey, you got guns, we got piss buckets."[277]

Still, there were losses. Police evicted multiple squats in the dead of night, forcing their occupants out into the cold, dark streets with nowhere else to go. When developers came to tear down the Jardin de la Esperanza ('Garden of Hope') on 7th St. in 2000 to make way for a luxury condo, 150 activists turned out to chain themselves to the garden's fence in defiance of Giuliani's bulldozers. They erected a massive orange frog sculpture, modeled on the Puerto Rican *coquí* that has long served as a symbol of Taíno resistance against colonialism. Yet the *coquí* was more than symbolic. It also contained a small shelter, allowing at least one person to sleep in and keep watch over the garden at all hours. This was a clever tactic, but one that mattered little in the end. The squatters and other activists were rousted from the park, pried loose from their fenceposts with NYPD bolt cutters and shipped off in paddy wagons to the nearest jail. Today the former Jardin de la Esperanza is a luxury apartment building, its doors kept secure with an electronic keypad and CCTV camera.

The most disastrous LES squatter eviction occurred in late 1994, when Antonio Pagán and his real estate partners targeted five buildings on E. 13th St., up at the far northern edge of Alphabet City's semi-autonomous zone (See map in Fig. 6). Their aim was to replace these squats with a series of high-cost studio apartments. The squatters filed suit against the city government in defense of these buildings, claiming ownership by way of adverse possession—a squatter's rights principle that reassigns title and deed to anyone who occupies an otherwise unoccupied space continuously for years. Justice Elliott Wilk of the New York State Supreme Court proved sympathetic to the squatters' plight and issued a temporary stay on the eviction.

[277] Wrigley, interview with Starecheski.

When the Department of Buildings ordered the residents of 541 and 545 E. 13th to evacuate in April 1995, based on the spurious and eventually discredited claim that their lower floors were on the verge of collapse, Justice Wilk put a halt to the charade and demanded that the government pay for the cost of these repairs. Yet Wilk's favorable rulings were soon overturned on appeal, and the destruction of the 13th Street squats proceeded as planned.

But this was no ordinary eviction. It was instead "carried out with massive militaristic force, costing an estimated $1 million," Cari Luna writes for *Jacobin*. "Riot police, SWAT teams, snipers, police helicopters, and—most outlandishly and unbelievably—an armored tanker used to evict forty people from two buildings they'd called home for years" (Fig. 7)[278] Just as in Tompkins Square Park, or at Operation Move-In, or even Darby's Patch before that, the weapons and stratagem of foreign imperial warfare were turned against the interior, subaltern poor—all to prove the supremacy of private ownership. "It was a theater of insurgency...apocalyptic," Peter says, "complete with the Clash blasting from somebody's speakers on the fire escape while punks in the street turned over a car."[279] Lines of riot cops advanced toward the buildings as canisters of tear gas sailed through the air. The squatters put up the best fight that they could, but the cops were more organized that morning than they were in Tompkins Square, and the squatters lacked the numbers to push them back. The police entered the building, smashing through the many booby traps residents had configured to keep them out. "After they arrested all the people in the street, they cut through the welds on the door with gasoline-powered grinders," Peter says. "Then it took them another two or three hours to get past the first landing, which had been covered with plywood, two refrigerators turned on their backs and filled with water—about

[278] Luna, "Squatters of the Lower East Side."

[279] Ibid.

1,000 pounds of water. ...Then they got to my apartment door...and that was it. Waves of sadness poured over me. Even though I had plenty of time to prepare for the end, when it came it was like being suffocated." All five buildings fell that day, with more soon to follow on 8th St. and 5th St. in the years to come.

Today, just eleven former squats remain on the Lower East Side, down from the more than thirty buildings that were salvaged during the 1980s and '90s (See Fig. 6). The last squatters who remain—the residents of Bullet Space, C-Squat, Umbrella House, and eight other buildings spread throughout Alphabet City—are now legal homeowners, having purchased their properties from the City of New York in 2002 (purportedly for only a dollar each, though in truth residents took on a debt load of $35,000 to $135,000 per unit). These remaining buildings secured their legal status through collaboration with the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board, an anti-gentrification non-profit founded in 1974 by veterans and supporters of the Operation Move-In campaign, demonstrating a fascinating continuity between housing rights movements across the city. The Michael Bloomberg administration's decision to divest itself of the squat house deeds was unpopular with many New York conservatives. Right-wing commentator Andrea Peyser declared that the city government had "quietly hand[ed] the keys of the asylum to the lunatics" in a 2002 column for the *Post*. "The homesteaders have been transformed into homeowners—simply by refusing to leave," she bemoaned. "For a buck, I'd gladly pierce my tongue, take up finger-painting and change my name to 'Fly' or some other irritating insect."[280]

[280] Peyser, "Urban Parasites."

Fig. 7: “Police bring in tank to remove squatters.” Photo by David Handschuh, *New York Daily News*, 1995.

What the critics miss is that sweat equity is not just the means through which squatters lay claim to their homes, it is also an investment in the neighborhood itself. Just as studio artists acted as unwitting vanguards for the gentrification of SoHo in the 1970s, so too did the LES squatters help make their once-blighted neighborhood safe enough to attract real estate development. “In the 1980s, the idea that Avenue C would eventually be home to condo developments with names like Boutique 67 would have sent most local residents into a fit of laughter and possibly a fit of rage,” the real estate blog *Cityrealty* wrote in 2018, noting that the toniest apartments on “a stretch of Avenue C that was once considered even too dangerous for the NYPD” now sell for between $950,000 and $2,000,000. “There is no question that much of what makes Alphabet City a desirable destination today...can be attributed to the labor and

commitment of local residents—and that includes those who arrived as squatters."[281] At the same time, squatters also shielded their buildings from gentrification, ensuring that these structures would remain low-income housing in perpetuity, providing safe haven for working-class people as the cost of rent continues to rise all around them.

"A lot of people like to blame us for the gentrification, but there was no one here. We didn't put anyone out. We didn't move into functioning buildings, we *created* buildings. We made homes that will always be...affordable housing," Maggie says. "We [were] the proof that you don't have to gentrify to make it a good and safe neighborhood. We are the proof of that. You can do it with sweat equity, you can keep poor people in place. None of the buildings that survived fell to gentrification, and the squatters are the ones that stopped it from happening." Once again, the squatters and landowners engage in a complex dance, one in which markets and the human need for housing react against one another, each rising and falling in response to the other's movements. When prices fall and austerity sets in, restricting the invisible hand's ability to distribute shelter, squatters connect people with homes and keep the city alive. Then, when the bourgeoisie seeks to colonize a rehabilitated neighborhood, the squatters hold their ground against the land grab and defend the proletarian character of their community. Squatters are not parasites, no matter what Peyser and other critics might say. They are a necessary force in the cultivation of urban space, even under capitalism. "Yes, we own it," Maggie says of Bullet Space, once a crumbling, nameless ruin at 292 E. 3rd St. all those years ago. "But we're also just minding it for the next generation of people in affordable housing. It all gets passed on."

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[281] Cait Etherington, "The Neighbors Who Arrived First: C-Squat at 155 Avenue C," *Cityrealty*, October 25, 2018, cityrealty.com/nyc/market-insight/features/get-to-know/the-neighbors-who-arrived-first-c-squat-155-avenue-c/5645.

Fig. 8: "War in the Neighborhood." Illustration by Seth Tobocman, from an acclaimed graphic novel by the same name, 1999.

The Alphabet City squatters remain proud of their work to this day. They do not consider themselves sell-outs, or fallen rebels, or victims of the system, but instead speak with pride about the stand they took against New York real estate and their NYPD goon squad. “New York City is my community. I fought against tanks here. I fought the police here. I fought against gentrifiers here. I fought against yuppies here,” King Luck says. “I have blood, sweat, and tears here on the Lower East Side and the East Village. This is my town. This is my city.” Jerry the Peddler is similarly effusive as he proclaims squatter victory. “We won. Not much more to say. We won,” he beams. “We lost a lot of squats and we lost a lot of battles. And we won a lot of battles. But that doesn’t matter. We won. I’ve always said there’s two things to remember about revolution: One, they’re going to kick our ass; Two, we’re going to win. And we did.” Just like Operation Move-In before them, the LES squatters fought for their lives and material interests against the violence of the modern city. They called upon all their powers of Lefebvrian appropriation to carve out space for themselves, to make room to be human rather than mere tools of bourgeois capital. “If you want it in revolutionary terms,” Jerry says, “New York City squatters held more land, longer than any of the leftist organizations anywhere in the country. And holding land is what revolution is all about.”

Legalization has changed much for those squatters still kicking around the Lower East Side, as has the passage of time. Most of the folks I interviewed for this project are in their 60s or even their 70s today, and many now enjoy something they never expected to have during those perilous “Squat or Rot” years of their youth: peace. A calm has fallen over Avenue C. There are fewer hard drugs on the street, no barricades, no armored tanks. Both the squatters and I lament the degree to which this is attributable to gentrification, but I can at least say that I am happy they got the chance to rest on their laurels. It is not often that firebrands and crust punks make it

to retirement, and even rarer still that a squatting movement can claim lasting victory like this. Some Alphabet City squatters look back on what happened and the neighborhood they used to know with an almost romantic feeling of bittersweet loss. "If you wanted New York at that time, that was *here*. Downtown was just this creative, amazing [place]," Maggie says. "And then it became a fight for so many things. You were fighting for your friends. AIDS was happening. You were fighting for everybody's lives. We were fighting for housing. We were fighting for survival, in more ways than one. ...Everything about this neighborhood and these people were worth fighting for. I don't think I really questioned it...drinking a lot, doing drugs...going mad, running around, love affairs...we just kind of did it."

"I think that there is a sense of nostalgia for the old days, mixed with a nostalgia for when we were young," Tauno says. Yet he cautions against sentimentality and buying in wholesale to the notion that the Alphabet City of the '80s and '90s is gone. "It hasn't *completely* transformed here. There's still vestiges of what it was. And living vestiges," he adds, perhaps alluding to his squatter community. "I appreciate that. I spend more time appreciating that than regretting what's been lost." Others look back on the past with befuddlement, still trying to make sense of the wildest days of their lives. Michelle Shocked, a former squatter and songwriter who made the Billboard Hot 100 in 1988 with her single "Anchorage," compares the memory of squatting to coming down off LSD. "It perfectly mirrored the sense of what happens when you're on a trip, which is that you cannot order a trip. The trip orders you," she told me over coffee in a Greenwich Village café. "And so after the trip, you kind of scratch your head and go, 'What was that all about?' ...And that's how I process my sojourn as a squatter. What *was* that all about?"[282]

[282] Michelle Shocked, interview with the author, January 19, 2019.

Many ordinary New Yorkers have wondered the same thing. What *is* squatting all about? What is its purpose? How and why do people squat? Because of their longevity, and because they are no longer busy playing defense against the city fathers, the LES squatters now possess a unique opportunity to formulate answers to these questions and gift their insights to the public. In 2012, Umbrella House resident Bill DiPaola and squatting ethnographer Laurie Mittelmann launched the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS). This small but innovative two-floor museum is intended to serve as what they call a "living archive of urban activism." It contains numerous exhibits championing the virtue of LES radicals, from a shrine to cyclist resistance against car culture, to a history of COINTELPRO surveillance cleverly told through faux security cameras mounted in the bathroom. Most visitors come to learn about the squats, which is only natural given that MoRUS is located inside C-Squat. But me? I went to learn from the museum's real assets—the squatters themselves.

Drop in on any given afternoon and you may find them there. It might be Fly swinging by to drop off her latest comix, or Maggie checking in to say hello. You might catch Jerry the Peddler lounging on the stoop outside, or the ever-knowledgeable Bill Weinberg guiding his tour groups toward La Plaza. Even if you aren't lucky enough to catch them in-person, their contributions are everywhere. Seth's agitprop art has been stenciled into the floor. Maggie's book *The Architecture of Change* is on sale alongside Amy Starecheski's *Ours to Lose* and a variety of squatter zines. Rolando's replica NYPD tank rests in a sunny front window. It is a light blue miniature lovingly referred to as "Little Rudy." There is less need for the residents of different buildings to communicate with each other in this post-Eviction Watch era, and so MoRUS now provides the vital service of bringing everyone together. It has become a clubhouse for Alphabet City's squatting alumni, and a place where they can share their lives with the

public. I arrived at MoRUS during the beginning stages of my fieldwork and was, at that time, oblivious to the intricacies of New York squatter history. I can genuinely say that I learned more in two weeks of volunteer service behind that desk than I did from any book or documentary.

On New Year's Eve 2018/19, I helped Bill and others set up the museum's "Future Positive NYE Party" in the C-Squat basement. It was a space I had already seen a million times before in print, from photographs of raucous concerts by bands like Choking Victim to that time in the '90s when someone installed a skateboard halfpipe down there. It felt like a kind of temple—a dirty, heavily graffitied cathedral reeking of stale beer. Families began to file in and take their seats. There were children running around playing, and old folks greeting one another for the last, and possibly the first time all year. The squatters went up to the stage. King Luck beatboxed while Fly narrated her experiences over a slideshow of vintage photographs. Seth read a passage from *War in the Neighborhood*. Michelle played the guitar and *New Yorker* cover artist Eric Drooker regaled the room with stories set to a saxophone arrangement by an old-school C-Squatter named Popeye. It was a surprisingly sedate and educational start to the evening, and not at all what I expected from a venue whose reputation for mayhem preceded it. Then, of course, the clock drew closer to midnight and an anarchist marching band called the Rude Mechanical Orchestra began to play. They clanged cymbals and blared into trumpets while exclaiming "No borders! No nations! Stop the deportations!" Everyone was on their feet dancing and shouting. Strangers kissed. Confetti fell. A drunk woman ran up to me and screamed "Oh my god, you are so beautiful!" in my face. It was a real New York party, or at least it was good enough for me.

I left C-Squat, grabbed a slice of pizza, and settled in at the decrepit apartment across the street that someone had offered to me for the evening. I thought on how tragic it was that so much of this history has already begun to ossify. I could tell that these were narratives the

squatters have unspooled many times, and that each retelling was beginning to sound more and more like the last. They have become well-versed in self-mythology. They know what people want to hear and they know how to give it to them. But I also thought about how miraculous it is that this remains a living history, and more—that it is still alive, right here on the Lower East Side. Does the opening of a squatter museum mean that the battle is over, and that the day-to-day knowledge of that time has become institutionalized? Yes, and this dissertation has its own small part to play in that process. But the fact is that, for now at least, MoRUS is less about enshrining the past and more about celebrating the present-day version of Alphabet City that these squatters helped to create. It is yet another sign that working-class people do not need city planners to build things. They can develop communities, challenge gentrification, and reclaim urban space all on their own. They can do it, and they *have* done it, even in this wretched capital of capitalism. "I think it's the last time that anything like this could happen in a city like this. For New York City to be able to create a community, make real change—physically change the landscape—it was the creation of something that could never happen here again," Maggie says. "It was just an amazing achievement, really, [and one] that rolls on. People are still helping each other and move it forward."

Alphabet City in the 1970s and '80s was a chewed-up, burned-out, ground-down, ripped-apart, and desiccated ghost of a neighborhood. Yet through their sacrifice and struggle, the LES squatters imbued that dying landscape with new life, changing the face of the city as they changed their own lives. Thus, we must conclude our examination of New York squatter history with the second half of Will Sales' poem "Death of a Neighborhood," an appropriate coda to this tale of proletarian resistance. Where the first part of Sales' work is mournful and pessimistic, his

conclusion can only be described as a gleeful declaration of triumph—a battle cry issued on behalf of the always inevitable, yet still unfinished victory of the working-class urbanite:

> Rebirth!
>
> Then up from the wounded streets comes the cry:
> this neighborhood ain't ready to die,
> 'cause we've got songs that are yet to be sung.
> Balled up fists with blows to be flung
> homes to be built for housing our elders
>   and raising our young
>
> [...]
> No, this neighborhood ain't ready to give up the ghost
> we're planning on living our lives to the very utmost.
> To live, not die – to live![283]

[283] Sales, "Death of a Neighborhood," *Your House is Mine.*

CHAPTER 3: THE WONDERS WE HAVE MADE

Stealing the Sovereign Gaze

We were 130 stories above W. 57th Street, a little buzzed on liquor and Coors Light, and I was dressed in my Halloween finest. We had been exploring all night, ever since we left the costume party at Lucy's place. It began with a trip to the top of the Paramount Building in Times Square, where my compatriots pushed me to confront my fear of heights by lounging on a narrow, 400-foot-high ledge. There was nothing mean-spirited about it. They only wanted me to witness the urban sublime and push myself to become a better, more courageous explorer. The bravest (and drunkest) among us was a college student named Adam, who had enrolled at a New York university primarily because he wanted to be closer to the city's hyper-vertical exploration scene. Adam had a passion for climbing, so much so that he had raced off to scale Grace Church on Broadway and 10th St. before the rest of us had even finished saying our goodbyes to the other partygoers. We had to shout him down from the buttresses because the spot was just too visible. But Adam was raring for action, and so he pulled off his greatest stunt yet at the Paramount Building, where he hung from the side of a giant clock like Harold Lloyd in the silent film *Safety Last*. He gripped so tightly to that clock that the hour hand began to droop beneath him. When at last we returned to street level and looked back up at where we had been, we found that the whole building was now running on West Coast time. I have never met anyone whose *joie de vivre* so closely resembled a death drive, nor anyone so willing to surf the top of a freight elevator down the side of a skyscraper in broad daylight. I could not help but worry for and admire this foolhardy amateur Spider-Man, then only twenty-one-years-old.

Now we were someplace altogether different and even more nerve-wracking. It had taken almost 45 minutes to climb the 98 floors that lead to the top of Central Park Tower (CPT), New York's latest and greatest multi-billion-dollar engineering project. There were no windows this far up the tower. They hadn't been installed yet. We could feel the wind sweep in from all around us, whipping orange safety nets against concrete walls and rattling through the bones of steel machinery. Adam once told me that the wind blows ten times harder at 1,500 feet than it does on the ground. I do not know how exact that figure is, but I can say that when you are up there, preparing to ascend a construction crane on a stormy night, it sure seems true. I must admit that I felt a little paranoid. We knew there was only one guard in the building and that he was all the way down on the ground floor, but still the anxiety lingered. When you allow yourself to think about getting caught, every creak begins to sound like footsteps, and each gust of wind is like someone shouting at you from a distance. But we were in it then, too far gone for second thoughts. The only way out was up.

"Hey, take a look at this," Thelma LaMay called out from the elevators. Thelma is male, despite his feminine codename, and one of the most decorated urbexers working today. He is, as his friend Marguerite describes him, an "incredibly accomplished global explorer, artist, intellectual, activist...and a skilled navigator of the passages between worlds."[284] One gets the impression that if there were an Urbex Hall of Fame then Thelma would be enshrined on the first ballot, no question. He also has an eye for the little details in the environment, the sort of things that many other explorers would miss. I hurried over to see what he had discovered. There, stapled to a sheet of plywood, was a laminated floor plan. It was a crowded diagram, filled with information relevant to the building's construction but indecipherable to laypeople like us. What

[284] Marguerite Carmel Mills, introduction to the keynote address by Thelma LaMay, Symposium to Celebrate the Life and Work of Kevin Ehrman-Solberg (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 12, 2021).

we could read were the labels assigned to each room on that floor: LIBRARY, OBSERVATORY, STAFF ROOM, GRAND SALON. The floor plan confirmed what we already suspected. We were standing in one of the three floors that make up CPT's 15,898 square foot penthouse. The apartment is expected to sell for over $100 million, making it one of the most expensive residences in the history of the New York real estate market.[285] It will also be the world's highest apartment, located at the summit of one of the tallest structures in the Western Hemisphere. There are just nine buildings in the world that can boast a higher occupied floor, all of them in Asia, including the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. The only New York skyscraper taller than CPT is One World Trade Center, but that building's claim to the title depends on its 408-foot-tall decorative spire. Central Park Tower stands alone at such heights when it comes to usable floor space in this city, or in this country, or on this side of the planet. For all practical purposes, we had reached urban America's ceiling. $100 million is a lot to spend on housing, even in New York, but to some billionaires it may be worth that price just to look down on everyone else.

I snapped a photo of the floorplan with my phone and traipsed around the penthouse, noting each time I passed from one room to another. I tried to picture what the apartment will look like when completed, but it is difficult to conceive of such outrageous standards of luxury, let alone superimpose them atop what was then nothing but an empty cement chamber. "Can you imagine living here?" someone in our party asked, gazing up at the Grand Salon's thirty-foot ceiling. "No," I said. "I really can't." There is no way to conceive of it. Even the renderings on the developer's website do not help. They promise perfect lighting, perfect cleanliness, and furnishings that on their own cost more than most can afford in monthly rent. In one photograph, a model and her finely groomed Afghan Hound lay upon a bed, the rooftops of Hell's Kitchen

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[285] Hana R. Alberts, "World's Tallest Residential Tower Unveils Views for First Time," *New York Post*, September 17, 2019, nypost.com/2019/09/17/worlds-tallest-residential-tower-unveils-views-for-first-time.

rolled out like a carpet behind them. Their eyes are turned toward the camera, as if beckoning in some disembodied figure, the master of this space.[286]

Is this what a billionaire's life is like? I expect not. Advertising sells fantasies to us all. What matters is that at this level of power, the ordinary cannot tell fact and fantasy apart. There is so little about those images that is recognizable to me as an everyday life like my own. I could not reconcile such luxury with the crowded city I lived in, the filthy subway stations, or the unhoused men sleeping on sidewalks. I could not even reconcile it with my own tiny yet comfortable bedroom in Astoria. There is a dissonance here. The ideas do not fit together experientially any more than the image of the penthouse under construction fits with the penthouse as finished product. Yet in both cases we understand there is a bond. The workers build the tower so a billionaire can live there. The billionaire lives far above the homeless person, and yet through their hoarding of resources they are responsible in part for the homeless person's suffering. It is still true, as Victor Hugo wrote back in 1869, that "the paradise of the rich is made out of the hell of the poor."[287] Maybe the best thing I can say about exploring New York's tallest construction site is that it allows us to peer into the liminal and see the connections between wealth, development, and place as they are in the process of being formed.

We stopped for a minute at the foot of a ladder. Above us, many stories up, was the jib of a massive crane. It was exciting to do something dangerous again after all that time in the stairs, and yet I was afraid. I didn't know why—this was not even my first expedition to the top of Central Park Tower. I had ventured up there once before, two weeks prior, and completely on my

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[286] Extell Development, "Central Park Tower: The Residences," centralparktower.com/residences.

[287] Victor Hugo, *The Man Who Laughs* (Paris: A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven & Cie., 1869; Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 2012), 402.

own.[288] Now I had returned to guide my collaborators up the crane, in an odd reversal of the usual ethnographic relationship. Yet still here I was, shaking with anxiety as though I had never seen a ladder in my life. It seemed the ledge at the Paramount Building had done little to quell my fear of heights. Moses Gates, author of the exploring memoir *Hidden Cities*, paced back and forth to build courage. He was one of the most experienced urbexers among us, a veteran of the highly illegal climb up the Great Pyramid of Giza, and even he was nervous. I found this comforting, but also a little alarming. Gates is another Urbex Hall of Famer, but he has always been open about his nervousness when it comes to exploring. I thought back to what he wrote in *Hidden Cities*, about how there's a "fine balancing act involved in trying to get where you're not supposed to go," and how that balancing act "involves not giving in to your fears but at the same time not being a clueless idiot."[289] Was I being a clueless idiot? Was this whole (mis)adventure a pointless exercise in self-endangerment? I did not think so. I took an inventory of my feelings and knew that I felt alive and happy to be somewhere so exceptional, and with such exceptional people. Their presence lent me a courage I could not possess on my own, and I was grateful for it. It is, after all, the people who make the journey. As Moses writes in his memoir:

> My entire process is predicated on putting myself in the right place at the right time with the right people—people who I know will get me over the final barrier in a timely manner. When the moment comes, I know I don't have to go through the torturous process of gathering my nerve and pushing myself beyond my mental limits, like I did that first time I grabbed my right leg and shoved it past the red metal sign at the end of the subway platform. Instead, I can just relax and go with the flow I've created.[290]

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[288] A humorous and somewhat off-color video I assembled following this climb, entitled "Maxine vs. the Skyscraper," can be viewed at youtu.be/TEzHh65HLjI.

[289] Moses Gates, *Hidden Cities: Travels to the Secret Corners of the World's Great Metropolises—A Memoir of Urban Exploration* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2013), 8.

[290] Ibid., 213

We began to climb. My palms were coated in sweat, but I tried to act cool in front of the other explorers. Cold rain fell down upon us as we emerged above the roofline, and the wind blew harder with no walls holding it back. Each rung of the ladder felt slicker and more difficult to grip than the one that came before it. There were occasional landings on which to rest between stretches of climbing, and so a fall would probably not have meant death, but from a psychological standpoint it almost did not matter. We were ~1,600 feet above Times Square and there was nothing around us now but the 3:00 am sky and the sparkling lights of Midtown. You could see all of Manhattan from up there, and the outer boroughs, and even out to the black shadow of the ocean. Thousands of buildings, millions of people, some of the most famous places on Earth—and all of it was far, far beneath our feet.

We reached the crane's central platform and took shelter from the wind in the operator's cab. It was a small, squarish booth with a translucent floor and just enough room to fit one chair and three people. The operator had left several of his personal effects behind over the weekend, which we observed but did not touch. There was an ashtray, an empty Big Gulp mug from 7-Eleven, and photographs of loved ones taped to the wall. It was a good reminder that while this building will someday serve as a cluster of part-time retreats or speculative investments for the wealthy, it was in that moment still a blue-collar worksite. I wondered where the operator lived. What kind of home did he go back to at night? How did he feel knowing that the extravagance of Central Park Tower will someday be foreclosed to him, even though it was his labor that made this building's construction possible? I thought too about the people working the overnight shift in the Nordstrom's downstairs, racing ahead of its grand opening to fill the racks with designer goods that they will never be able to afford.

What about Harry Ramnauth, the CPT security guard who was crushed to death under a 2,300-pound plate glass window in 2018? He was sixty-seven years old when he died. Shouldn't he have been enjoying retirement instead of risking his life for property developers and private equity corporations? Extell Development Company and their insurers were not even willing to compensate Ramnauth's family for their loss, forcing them into a protracted court case to prove that his death had been painful enough to warrant payment. "They're selling condos for $30 million, and they don't want to pay his family. Under New York law, a quick death isn't worth as much as a slow, agonizing death. A quick death isn't worth much in New York," the Ramnauths' lawyer told the *Daily News* in 2019.[291] "Why should Mr. Ramnauth's life be valued at less than anyone else's?" asked Brad Hoylman, a Democratic state senator whose district covers CPT and most of Midtown. Hoylman questioned why New York gives no consideration to a family's anguish when determining the outcome of wrongful death suits. "As it's written now, the law only considers his economic worth," he said.

I thought about all these working people, and the sacrifices they made to secure what Extell's marketers called a "Life at the top" for those who were already atop the hierarchy of global fortune and power. How could this building they created be so highly valued, yet their personhood so devalued as to not even be assigned legal worth beyond the rate at which they were compelled to sell their labor? How could a city built by workers consider the life of a working-class man less valuable than the hunk of glass that killed him? Why are we even building more of these skinny, supertall fortresses for the rich when almost half of the apartments on Billionaires' Row remain unsold, even years after their initial listing, and while many more sit

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[291] Michael Gartland, "Family of NYC Security Guard Crushed by Glass in Horrific Billionaires' Row Construction Accident Locked in Ugly Legal War Over Death," *New York Daily News*, October 21, 2019, nydailynews.com/new-york/ny-harry-ramnauth-billionaires-row-extel-lend-lease-20191021-dvazobl3nba3vbwpu3zzjrk3lq-story.html.

purchased yet vacant because their owners have decided they'd rather live elsewhere and simply use their new home as a *pied-à-terre* through which they can land bank their assets?[292] What is the point of a condo that nobody lives in? All of this, it must be said, is occurring in an era when there are more homeless New Yorkers than at any other time since the Great Depression. There were 62,590 unhoused people in New York in December 2019 (approximately one month after our tower ascent), according to the Coalition for the Homeless, of whom 22,013 were children.[293] A substantial percentage of those 40,577 unhoused adults were working homeless, meaning that they had a regular source of income yet still could not afford a place to live in NYC. "In every borough, skyrocketing rents and stagnant incomes have left more and more New Yorkers on the brink of homelessness," the Coalition reports. "Having a job no longer sufficiently guarantees housing stability, and it is increasingly common for New Yorkers to leave their workplaces at night for a heartbreaking trek back to a shelter."[294]

Where is the sense in a system of urban development and resource distribution that feeds the fat and satisfied, but starves the hungry—especially when it is the hungry who put in all the effort to grow the food? I am reminded, as I often am, of the lyrics to the cherished old union anthem "Solidarity Forever," from which I have borrowed for this dissertation's chapter titles. "It is we who plowed the prairies, built the cities where they trade," Ralph Chaplin wrote for the

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[292] Zoe Rosenberg, "Nearly Half of Billionaires' Row's Pricey Condos Remain Unsold: Report," *Curbed New York*, April 30, 2019, ny.curbed.com/2019/4/30/18524040/billionaires-row-new-york-condo-glut. An excellent video about this situation produced by architecture and engineering YouTube channel The B1M can be viewed at Fred Mills, "Why New York's Billionaires' Row is Half Empty," The B1M, December 15, 2021, youtube.com/watch?v=Wehsz38P74g.

[293] Coalition for the Homeless, "New York City Homelessness: The Basic Facts," February 2020, dev-cfh.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NYCHomelessnessFact-Sheet_12-2019_citations.pdf.

[294] Jacquelyn Simone, "Today's Read: Thousands of Working New Yorkers Are Living in Homeless Shelters," Coalition for the Homeless, April 13, 2017, coalitionforthehomeless.org/todays-read-thousands-working-new-yorkers-living-homeless-shelters.

Industrial Workers of the World in 1915. "Now we stand outcast and starving midst the wonders we have made."[295] The miserable truth of that observation has not changed in over one-hundred years, and it may never be truer than it is of New York today. The island of Manhattan has become one of the great marvels of human history, but the fullest extent of those marvels belongs only to the ownership class. They alone get to enjoy a "Life at the top." To Harry Ramnauth and the other workers who built this city of wonders, twenty-first-century New York appears to offer little more than injury and degradation.

And yet still more ultra-luxury buildings like CPT go up every year. These new structures have so clogged the city's skyline that the cover illustration of an October 2019 issue of the *New Yorker*, entitled "Towering Wealth," depicts Manhattan as nothing but a dark, imposing mishmash of featureless skyscrapers, scaffolds, and cranes (Fig. 9).[296] The old silhouette, in which the Empire State Building stands alone as the tallest and most familiar sight in the Midtown skyline, is now a memory. That image of New York is gone for good, replaced with so many nameless glass boxes—432 Park Avenue, One Vanderbilt Place, 157 W. 57th St.—all of which are closed to the public. This is not the rejuvenation of a great American city. It is the assassination of that city and its character. "Together, these buildings perch over Central Park like a row of gigantic predatory birds," writes Kevin Baker for *Harper's Magazine*. "Perhaps because they have done so much to annihilate the New York around them, every luxury of the new buildings is designed to pull its residents inward, away from the rest of us—the very antithesis of urban life."[297]

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[295] Ralph Chaplin, "Solidarity Forever," *The Little Red Song Book* (Ypsilanti, MI: Industrial Workers of the World, 1995), 1.

[296] Mark Ulriksen, "Towering Wealth," *The New Yorker*, October 21, 2019, newyorker.com/magazine/2019/10/21.

[297] Kevin Baker, "The Death of a Once Great City: The Fall of New York and the Urban Crisis of Affluence," *Harper's Magazine* 337 (July 2018), harpers.org/archive/2018/07/the-death-of-new-york-city-gentrification.

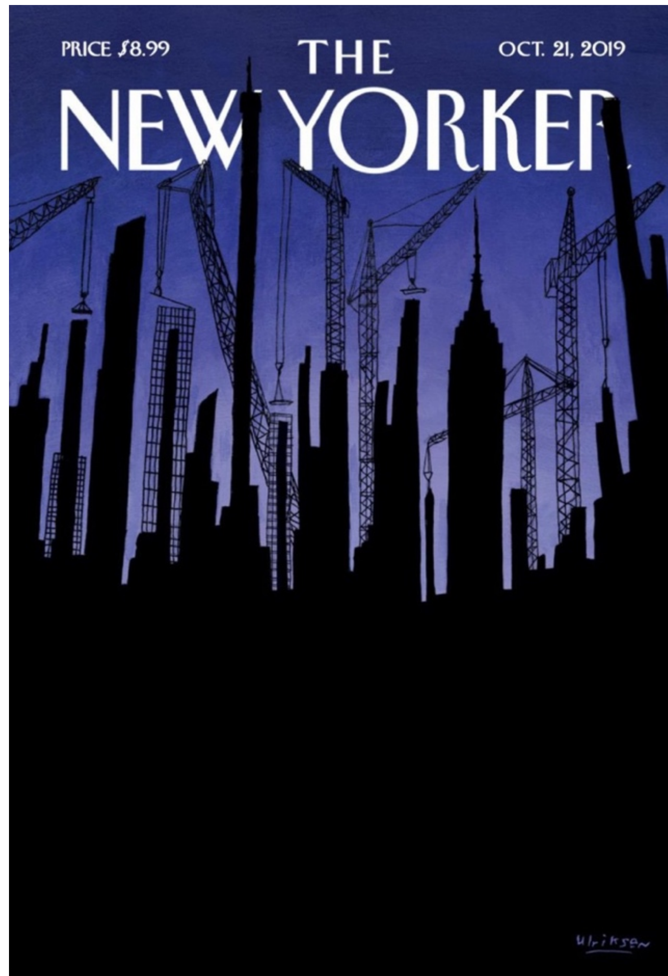

Fig. 9: “Towering Wealth.” Illustration by Mark Ulriksen, *New Yorker,* 2019

In this way, buildings like Central Park Tower are the architectural embodiment of Santiago Castro-Gómez’s “sovereign gaze,” as described in Chapter 1: the zero-point from which the powerful see all things yet believe that they cannot themselves be seen. It is the palace, the throne of kings. Whereas the urban oeuvre represents a multiplicity of encounters, the sovereign gaze sits above and beyond the unexpected, allowing for only one possible view on the world. This is the “mastery of places through sight,” writes theoretician Michel de Certeau, a contemporary of and intellectual ally to Henri Lefebvre. For de Certeau, such mastery through sight constitutes “a panoptic practice” made possible through the “division of space” into discrete political and economic units which can then be “observed and measured, and thus

[controlled]" from on high.[298] It is an essential component of modernity, and the source of the voyeuristic, almost erotic pleasure of seeing which de Certeau discovered upon his visit to the original World Trade Center in the 1980s:

> To be lifted to the summit...is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. ...When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. ...His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.[299]

Walking at street level demands that we witness the consequences of capitalist inequity. There is no place a housed person can go in New York to escape the sight of homelessness, or the shame that bubbles up in us as we speed past a hungry woman with our hands stuffed tight in both pockets. Even if the passerby gifts them a dollar, five dollars, ten dollars, it only matters so much. She will remain unhoused, and the systemic crisis of homelessness will never be solved by crinkled dollar bills and loose change. And so many grow cold to the homeless person's struggles and look away to spare themselves this pain. They refuse to see these fellow human beings at all, except perhaps through the furthest peripheries of their vision—an unconscious reenactment of the process through which the homeless have been pushed to furthest reaches of our social peripheries. The act of seeing becomes the nidus of our guilt, the small but dehumanizing pain that each person traveling by street or subway must reconcile with again and again, to say nothing of the daily pains the unhoused experience themselves. Every time a New Yorker leaves their apartment, they are compelled by sight to ask how much, or how little, they value the lives of others, knowing that whatever the answer may be, it is still not enough. It will

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[298] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 36.

[299] Ibid., 92.

never be enough. Only those looking down from the tower—the few who do possess the power to change things—are spared this pain. From their vantage point, unhoused people disappear as the oeuvre gives way to the sovereign gaze. The city transforms from a mass of people into a serene and depopulated architecture. Only from this perspective does sight appear to lose its power to harm the observer, and instead become a source of unlimited pleasure.

To put the distinction between the oeuvre and the sovereign gaze in other terms: the oeuvre is rhizomatic in the fashion of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizome theory of knowledge from their influential book *A Thousand Plateaus*. Like the nodes of a subterranean plant, the oeuvre "has no beginning or end," but is instead "always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*."[300] The sovereign gaze represented by Central Park Tower is arborescent, like a tree: hierarchical, totalizing, shut down to new possibilities. It shoots upward rather than outward, counteracting the effects of the city's streets and subway system, the horizontal structures most welcoming to the largest number of people, and therefore most conducive to an anti-hierarchical urban design. Instead, it is private, restrictive, off-limits in all ways except one. The great tower, like capital itself, invites the common person to stare up at it with alienated wonder, witnessing its power yet never able to grasp that power themselves. While there is of course nothing wrong with actual trees (which carry positive cultural connotations, and for good reason), the tree in Deleuze and Guattari's complex metaphorical language is the opposite of the rhizome. It embodies binary thinking and the Western institutionalization of knowledge. It is the high castle above the city from which the sovereign exercises dominion over those encounters they wish to experience and those which they do not. The city at street level is the rhizome. It reflects not just the bottom of the spatial hierarchy but the wild, underground roots of the urban

[300] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. By Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1987), 27.

oeuvre as well—a place and system of social organization where anything can happen. “We’re tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much,” Deleuze and Guattari write. “All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes.”[301]

In consequence, the arborescent tower in fact damages those who live there as well. It draws them inward as Baker states, closing them off from the city and their neighbors and making them numb to the humanity of others. It enhances their wealth but cheapens their lives, for to be sovereign is to enjoy luxury and loneliness in equal measure. This may be the true “hubris” of Castro-Gómez’s zero-point—not just the fallacy that they who occupy it cannot be seen, but the idea that being invisible is any less painful or dehumanizing than being surveilled. There is no benefit to any city-dweller in withdrawing from the urban, and so the sovereign gaze is by design a hollow and longing gaze as well, mirroring the working-class onlooker’s detached upward view from the streets. de Certeau compares a tourist visiting the top of a skyscraper to the flight of Icarus, and the inevitable return to street level, “the dark space where crowds move back and forth,” to an “Icarian fall.”[302] By this he means to suggest a perceived lesser-than quality to walking at street level, where the “ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below.’” Yet I think this comparison with Icarus is especially appropriate for those who take up the sovereign gaze, because we must remember that it was not the sun or the sea that killed Icarus. Rather, he was done in by the arrogance that led him to believe he could fly so high in the first place. By transforming the poor into commodities and the rich into a “viewpoint and nothing

[301] Ibid, 17.

[302] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92.

more," the sovereign gaze manages to strip both classes of their personhood. As Deleuze and Guattari write, "It is always from the depths of its impotence that each power center draws its power."[303] It takes many people to build a city and forge community within it, but only one lonely man can occupy a throne. Or, in the case of the CPT penthouse, a grand salon.

Outside on the platform, Thelma began climbing a tall mast into the clouds. There was a group of college-aged explorers who had joined our party on a whim, and they were busy shooting video for some documentary project of theirs. Our two groups had met at the base of the tower and traveled up to the crane together, yet I never did get their names. This is a common feature in urbexing, and within the oeuvre itself. One must always be prepared to encounter and maybe even befriend strangers in the most unexpected places. Moses and Steve Duncan, the two great public ambassadors of urban exploration among us, chatted about city infrastructure and shared photographs of their favorite historic manhole covers. Two others, including Adam (natch), made their way up to the tip of the crane's jib. There they would dangle out over the side of the building—a dangerous maneuver which I was neither talented enough nor courageous enough to perform. So where was I? I was freezing cold, because the black cloak I wore for Halloween had torn in the wind. We were making a difficult transfer between two ladders when a button snapped, and it was only with incredible luck that I was able to snatch it before it went sailing off into the sky. Now I was left shivering in a thin t-shirt at the top of the city, my face smeared with dirt and fake blood. My now-ruined outfit had been a cosplay imitation of my *Dungeons & Dragons* character, an anarchist halfling rogue who loved nothing more than a quick sleight of hand and to separate lords from their money. It was a more appropriate costume than I realized.

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[303] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 249.

Fig. 10: Halloween on the rooftops. Photo of the author in her costume at the Paramount Building in Times Square, taken by an explorer, October 26, 2019.

Eventually we would make our way back down the stairs, pausing at the fifth floor in hopes that the security guard would return to his rounds and step away from the door leading out to 57th St. When he did not, we had no choice but to blaze past him, leaving the guard shouting in frustration yet unable to chase us down. I felt bad about this, and I imagine the other members of our group did as well. The security guard was not a police officer but instead an ordinary worker, and an elderly one at that. His livelihood might be in jeopardy if he allowed property damage or theft to occur on his watch, or if one of us were injured somewhere on the construction site. While I am inclined to think he chose not to file a report since we hadn't stolen anything nor harmed the property, I must acknowledge that I do not know this for a fact. It is unfortunate that urbex, as presently constituted, places explorers in an adversarial relationship with people who are just going about their jobs. Security guards, utility and construction crews, transit

employees—all these workers and others are expected to turn explorers into the police when possible, or at least to expel them from the exploration site. Most of the urbexers I collaborated with seemed uncomfortable with this aspect of their craft, and none expressed ill will toward construction workers and night watchmen. Any such animosity was reserved for the police, an organization explorers despise more than any other. I have been assured that the police feel the same way about them, especially in cities like New York where the two groups regularly collide. When it comes to private security, it seems, the best policy for explorers is non-engagement.

We dashed out onto the street and down into the subway, leaping the turnstiles with nary the swipe of a single MetroCard. Thelma and Steve headed for the uptown Q train and vanished from my sight, melding back into the innocent crowd. I took the N line east to Queens, washed the red corn syrup from my face, and went to bed. It was a night of small crimes, so fitting for late October and that venerated North Jersey holiday they call Mischief Night.[304] I do not regret any of it. It was a beautiful evening, and one spent with good people—friends, really—in the *terrain vague* between rich and poor, up and down, fear and fun. My view of the city changed forever that night, reframed along with all our perceptions of time, space, law, money, and ownership. That is something that never goes away, Thelma warns me. It is an unavoidable byproduct of the urbex lifestyle. "A lot of people can't turn it off once the veil's pealed back fully. A normal person looks at a locked door on the street and in their head, they have built up [this idea]: 'This is ironclad, top-to-bottom, there's no way to open it.' But then you walk up to it and jiggle the handle and it's just fucking open," he says. "As soon as you realize how built-up in your head most of these barriers are—once you realize how astoundingly easy it is—it's hard to

[304] Or 'Goosey Night' if you are from Passaic County as I am. This informal and often maligned celebration is held on October 30th each year and permits adolescents to engage in pranks and minor acts of vandalism.

turn off. It's a whole different way of looking at the world. ...There's no barrier between you and the other side."[305] It is true, I think. Once you climb that fence or pick that lock, once you pass freely between the spheres of public and private, legal and illegal, the entire system begins to crack. And if you do it often enough, well, maybe the whole damn thing can shatter.

To access the oeuvre, one must "vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers," de Certeau writes, thinking in conversation with Lefebvre.[306] The rebel city-dweller "poaches in them...creates surprises in them. [They] can be where [they are] least expected." It is not every day that urbexers gain access this space. Squatters may build their homes within the urban void, but all except the most dedicated explorers visit only occasionally and then return to their regular lives. That transition itself carries weight, however, as it straddles the line between the sterile, anodyne world of the ordinary and the dark pockets of the city where anything can happen. I think I enjoy that shift most of all—from the streets to the cold, windy tower and back down to the streets again. I feel a bit like Lucy Pevensie, sneaking back through the wardrobe and out into Narnia again.

For a brief, spectacular moment that night (with an emphasis on the *seeing* aspect at the etymological root of 'spectacular'), I stood atop Central Park Tower, high above everything and everyone else (Fig. 10). I breathed deep and took it all in for the second and final time. "It's amazing, isn't it?" Steve asked as we looked out over the long expanse of Manhattan Island. "It is," I said. "But the funny thing is once the building's done we'll never be able to come back here again. Too much security, and nothing left to see." We laughed, and we both knew it was true. The only legal way to experience the view from the top of CPT is to buy it, either with $100

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[305] Thelma LaMay, interview with the author, February 17, 2019.

[306] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

million or with months of your labor. We were being crooks that night, not just by stealing a case of beer or a ride on the subway, but by stealing the whole entire city too. Instead of purchasing this sight, this sovereign gaze on New York, we had absconded with it just before the chance to do so disappeared forever. I suppose in a city founded on private ownership and the exploitation of working people, the only ethical relationship we can have with luxury is a criminal one.

Together at the Edge

It takes a lot to reach the top of Central Park Tower, and I am not just referring to the challenges of entering the building or walking up almost 200 flights of stairs. I mean to say that it is difficult to get members of the urban exploration community to feel safe with an outsider in such a dangerous place, and doubly so when that outsider is an academic researcher documenting their journey for a writing project. I have heard stories about academics who ingratiated themselves with various exploring groups, and essentially became explorers in their own right. They were accepted as part of the team and entrusted with protecting their comrades' safety, in the same way that all explorers are expected to protect one another and the locations they care for. These academics then left urbexing following the publication of their book or article, as though they had never been part of the community at all. Some of these scholars, I was told, continue to speak as authorities on urban exploration despite no longer maintaining contact with those who had most informed their writing—a significant betrayal in the eyes of those more press-averse urbexers. Worse, in some extreme cases these academics had left their collaborators holding the bag, forced to deal with police scrutiny stemming from the researcher's own carelessness. I cannot verify that all of this is true, and I do not want to cast aspersions on other ethnographers without full knowledge of what transpired, but this is the perspective that was

expressed to me by multiple contacts. I can still recall the look that came over one urbexer's face when I told him that I am an academic. We were at a cave party in St. Paul, Minnesota, making small talk as strangers at parties do. I said one word about my dissertation and his smile dropped like a lead weight. "We've been screwed over before," he said. "Be careful." I told him that I would be, but the conversation never recovered and I walked away feeling unnerved.

This is not to suggest that urbexers resent anyone who seeks to apply a theoretical perspective to exploring. On the contrary, no one is more interested in deconstructing urban exploration than the explorers themselves, who often talk about their work in terms of landscape studies and a fascination with urban design. Almost every urbexer I met recommended an essay I should read or offered up their own perspective on the relationship between gentrification and public transport or historic preservation. Most were thrilled to geek out about old subway tokens and drainage systems. Steve is the guiltiest party here. He holds an MA in public history and pursued a PhD in urban geography at the City University of New York. He has also served as an NYC tour guide and hosted a television series on urban exploration for the Discovery Channel back in 2005. Both he and Moses speak about New York's history, architectural minutia, and even hydrological processes in reverent, almost devotional terms, and Steve especially does so with entertaining fervor. "I've been trying to take my underground explorations into the public realm," Steve says. "I try to communicate what I find so interesting about these unseen places and systems to the public, because I think greater understanding and appreciation of infrastructural systems has the potential to change cities, and the world, for the better."[307] He is a hard guy to dislike, which is maybe why his appearance in the 2011 documentary *Undercity* became so popular. Yet I found that Moses and Steve are far from the only explorers with a

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[307] Steve Duncan, "Undercity: The Infrastructural Explorations of Steve Duncan," *Urban Omnibus*, August 22, 2012, urbanomnibus.net/2012/08/undercity-the-infrastructural-explorations-of-steve-duncan.

passion for urbex theory and manhole covers (many, including Thelma, have manhole cover tattoos and my friend DC has a cat named Neenah, in honor of the Wisconsin foundry that produces most of the country's manholes and gratings). All of them are happy to engage with these topics in scholarly terms, and they are well-versed in the latest academic literature on the subject. They have had a lot to say about how researchers should and should not approach urban exploration, and I have incorporated many of their suggestions into this dissertation.

Explorers, I find, are more than happy to work with graduate students, provided there is an element of trust between them. That, more than anything else, is the key. Anyone seeking to work with and learn from urbexers must first earn their confidence and demonstrate that they can serve as responsible members of the community for the long-term. There is no expectation that you will remain an explorer forever, *per se*, but nobody wants to engage with someone who will disappear after a year only to pop up on TV months later promoting their book on modern ruins. That leaves explorers feeling—rather justifiably—that they have been exploited. Trust issues also extend beyond contributing to the community and the regular ethnographic concerns that come with representing collaborators in writing. What makes trust such an important concept among explorers is that it is necessary to maintain their way of life. If those outside the group discover where a band of urbexers plan on congregating this weekend, it does not just threaten their plans for Saturday night. It threatens future access to that site in perpetuity, for them and all explorers to come. Factor in the prospect of arrest and it becomes easy to see why urbexers place so much emphasis on trust, both in their dealings with academics and with other explorers.

A 2012 guide on "Foundation Concepts of Good Exploring Habits," written by Minnesota explorer Shotgun Mario, lays this problem out in clear terms. Here Shotgun Mario identifies location preservation as the most important function of ethical exploring, and in-group

harmony as a key to achieving that state of preservation. “I will talk about ‘exploring club,’” he writes in a riff on the movie *Fight Club*, “but I will talk about the *right thing* with the *right people* at the *right time*.” Mario sets up a hypothetical scenario for new explorers, one in which they discover “an old brewery cave from the 1800’s,” but receive warning from an urbexer named Steve (not Steve Duncan) to protect it by not sharing details with those they cannot 100% trust to preserve the location’s integrity. The hypothetical explorer agrees, but fails to understand the gravity of Steve’s instructions and the high standard for trust in the urbex community:

> So the next weekend you bring Johnny and Bobby and Joey down...and you four have a great time down there. ...Unfortunately, you forgot to tell your friends what Steve told you about keeping the place nice, and while you had your back turned Bobby decided to write his name on a wall over a piece of graffiti from the 1950’s, and Joey smashed up some old plates and tools in a corner that look like they were there since Abraham Lincoln was in office. They were your friends though, and you didn’t want to say anything to them afterward, so you kept quiet...
>
> Next week you and Johnny go back down, and the place looks even worse than it did when you left. There’s trash everywhere, lots of spray paint on the walls, and the whole place smells like someone puked. When you sigh and tell Johnny what a shame it is that someplace so nice went to hell, Johnny says he came down during the week with a bunch of other friends and they threw a party. He admits that it’s a mess, but it’ll be alright because his friend Timmy told him there are caves all over Minneapolis, and you guys can just find a new one and party there. He also invites you to the party next week that Bobby is throwing down there, and the one the next day that his friend Mike is gonna have. ...Suddenly you realize maybe you can’t trust people quite as well as you first thought, and maybe you should have just stuck with Steve’s invite.[308]

So how does one gain the confidence of urban explorers? The best method is to be an explorer yourself. Photos and video evidence of your exploits help build credibility, while an urbex-focused Instagram account functions as your own specialized urban exploration résumé. This is where I had a slight advantage over other academics looking to work with this community. I am an urban explorer, and I have been for many years. Or perhaps it is more

[308] Shotgun Mario, “Foundation Concepts of Good Exploring Habits for MSP,” unpublished document, 2012, emailed to author by Thelma LaMay, April 2019.

accurate to say that I was, as a teenager from 2001 to 2007, a *suburban* explorer. All my adventures during that time were confined to my home state of New Jersey, along with a few favorite exploration sites in close-by Rockland County, New York. The Garden State does not boast the same level or quality of urbex infrastructure as one might find in a place like NYC, but I did not allow this to dampen my enthusiasm. I devoted years of my youth to exploring abandoned houses (known in urbex nomenclature as 'bandos'), prisons, stormwater drains, and asylums. I was so committed to this hobby that for my 13th and 14th birthday parties I asked my parents and grandmother to drive a caravan of my closest middle school friends across the state, exploring various decaying structures with adult supervision. One can imagine how surprised the Hunterdon County sheriff's officers were when they responded to a trespassing call an abandoned high school only to receive peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from a kind old *bubbe*! Though I was aware of urbex at the time, I did not yet think of myself in those terms. My great influence was not the website Urban Exploration Resource, but a long-running local folklore magazine called *Weird NJ*. If prompted to give myself a title in those days, I probably would have said that I was a 'Weird New Jersey Tripper,' or something to that effect. Still, I knew that I had a lot in common with the explorers I followed on sites like Flickr and LiveJournal. This past life as a Weird New Jersey Tripper prepared me well for my fieldwork, and it gave me a small but valuable amount of credibility when establishing contacts for my research.

What I was missing was a presence in the broader culture. Everything I did as a teenager had taken place in the company of a small, independent clique of school friends. We were a kiddie pool compared to the great ocean that is the global urbex community. Other explorers would find my stories about blowing out birthday candles in the Asbury Park Casino amusing, but I was nevertheless an unknown commodity. There was nobody to vouch for me, and no

photographic portfolio documenting my exploits, for whatever low-quality pictures I had taken at the time were long since lost or deleted. Bradley Garrett recommended that I create an Instagram account and begin populating it with new photos, then hit the follow button on high-profile explorers with whom I might want to collaborate. This was good advice, and in retrospect I wish I had taken it. My reluctance to do so stemmed first from a general dislike for social media, and a self-conscious fear that my photography skills would look amateurish when compared to the likes of New York urbex photography legends Humza Deas and Raheim Simon. But more than that, I feared that making an account solely for the purpose of gaining trust was deceptive. It felt too much like catfishing, like I would be presenting a false image of myself to the world. I decided to reach out to potential collaborators without the artifice of a dummy account, and while for the most part this strategy worked, there were instances in which Garrett's approach proved the wiser course of action. Consider this direct message I received through Instagram after reaching out to an explorer using my blank, contentless profile:

> This is a very poor attempt. Make a new account, follow a few older explorers and then myself to try to give yourself some credibility, then you give me this story and a number to text to tell you when anyone with any real good intentions would ask to meet in person. Also, on top of that you said you were an urban Explorer and a grad student with literally no evidence to prove either claim, nor did you mention a school or a degree field. All in all this was really poorly done and you should've tried harder or better yet not tried at all. So, I'm going to go back to drinking my beer and picking locks to really good music and ask you to politely fuck off and leave me alone. Oh and nobody tries Central Park tower on a Wednesday you dumbass. Whoever you are I sincerely hope you reevaluate yourself, your motives and really everything before you decide to send a message this outrightly moronic again. At least other people have had the audacity to beg without hiding their identity.[309]

This was an embarrassing blunder. I had tried to strike a casual tone and not intimidate the contact (or make myself look cocky) with my academic *bona fides*. I suppose I worried about them seeing me as an outsider instead of a fellow explorer, but the plan backfired and the lack of

[309] Instagram direct message to the author, received August 16, 2019.

identifying details instead read as suspicious. I apologized as best I could, offering up all the information they had requested and more, and made it clear that any failures on my part could be attributed not to malice, but to my rookie status in the big leagues of New York urban exploring. "Yeah doing Central Park Tower on a Wednesday was stupid. I got antsy and wanted to do it so bad I got ahead of myself. Like I said, you're better at this than me," I texted in reply, feeling a little ashamed to have been called out on a mistake that led to an unnecessary confrontation with security. It was my first of three attempts up the tower, and the only one that proved unsuccessful. I hadn't known that there are more guards in position during the workweek, and that Saturday nights from 1-3am were the best time for getting inside. That was something only a New York explorer would know, and deep down I knew I was neither a New Yorker nor an established explorer. Not at this level of the game, anyway. Not yet. "I hope I didn't piss you off too much to consider talking some time," I wrote. "I sincerely did not mean to come off like a fraud. But if you don't want to talk I certainly understand. It's up to you. Either way I respect your work and I'm sorry for bothering you."[310]

That explorer and I wound up hashing things out, and they conceded that they were feeling anxious because they had recently taken an arrest for climbing one of the East River bridges. "People can be very shady and due to the sensitive nature of some of my work, I have to be careful," they wrote in a follow-up text. I said that I understood, and we had a good time after that discussing my dissertation plans. Still, this episode was a reminder that trust is rarely assumed in these settings. It is the researcher's responsibility to prove their trustworthiness and earn it over time through ethical exploring and good ethnographic practice. Trust is a conversation, a reciprocal relationship that flourishes or deteriorates with time. If I managed to

[310] Instagram direct message from the author, delivered August 16, 2019.

earn friendship with the people I met through this project, let alone their confidence out in the field, it did not happen with an introductory text or email. It happened over weeks, and sometimes months of working together, often in circumstances where our safety was dependent on a sense of camaraderie. That is, I think, one of the most beautiful things about urban exploration, and squatting as well. Participation in both necessitates a level of social involvement and care for others. The success of these communities is contingent on their ability to function as *communities*, with all the intimacy, compassion, and commitment to self-defense that entails. "You rely on each other when you're exploring a building. I've been in a lot of crazy situations...a lot of bad situations where everyone comes together," Tina says. "One time at Greystone [an abandoned asylum in New Jersey] this cop came and wouldn't let up. This one friend came to Greystone with her drone and started flying it around...to distract the cop...and we escaped out the back. When you're living in that kind of world you rely on each other instead of outside sources like government officials."

This section is about that sense of community and the relationships that form between explorers as they risk injury and arrest together within the urban void. It is also about placemaking, and how explorers cultivate new and unexpected landscapes at the edge of the modern city. These pages contain the bulk of my ethnographic findings, though due to space limitations they will not be comprehensive. I collected almost absurd amounts of data while traveling with urbexers in New York and beyond, and so I am forced to be selective about what makes it into this paper. I nevertheless feel that these accounts demonstrate the power of urbexer solidarity. Critics sometimes call urban explorers selfish or entitled, because their achievements appear to non-explorers as individuated acts of braggadocio. Yet the reality is that these explorers have developed a tight network of mutual care and support. They are highly organized

and highly concerned for the well-being of their comrades. Not only do I find this laudable, but it is particularly impressive when one recognizes the many gradations in explorer interest that could otherwise divide them. There is no one explorer archetype. Urbexers differ in their preferred exploring genre (bandos vs. caves vs. climbs, and even the odd train hopper here and there), as well as their disparate motivations (historical appreciation vs. photography vs. data mapping and geocaching, etc.). Thelma has compiled a tongue-in-cheek taxonomy of urban exploration, which includes categories as diverse as what he calls "Hobo Types," "Bunker Bois," and "Instagram Fucks" (Fig. 11). Thelma, master of tunnels and a student of Thomas Wallace Knox's 1873 tome *Underground, Or Life Below the Surface*, no doubt falls into the category of "Underground Wanker."[311] I suppose that I qualify as an "Academic/Book Writer," a sub-category of "History Wanker." I will lovingly withhold comment on Thelma's decision to list academics/book writers as separate from "Legit Historians." Besides, outside the context of this dissertation I think I am much more a Landscape Admirer or World Re-Enchanter than anything else. Perhaps those should be added to the list.

[311] "The greatest cave on the Globe is the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky...Numerous capitalists have tried in vain to buy the cave property...They refuse themselves to do anything for the benefit of the public...and they refuse to allow anybody else the desirable privilege," Knox wrote at the time. "This cannot very long continue, however. Time cures hunkses as well as difficulties, and cures meanness by putting it under ground." Today, fortunately, Mammoth Cave is part of the US National Parks Service, but other tourist caves like Missouri's Meramec Caverns and Colorado's Cave of the Winds cost approximately $26 to enter and feature robust gift shops. They generate $1-10 million in private revenue each year. "You may grumble—that it is the privilege of every free-born citizen—but you can't help yourself," Knox writes on. "There is only one Mammoth Cave, and only one way of getting into it, if you are really determined to see it...you must conform to the rules that have been laid down for the private benefit of the little ring, and for your own disadvantage." Much has changed since the 1870s, as one can plainly see; Thomas Wallace Knox, *Underground, or Life Below the Surface* (Hartford: JR Burr Publishing, 1874), 461-462.

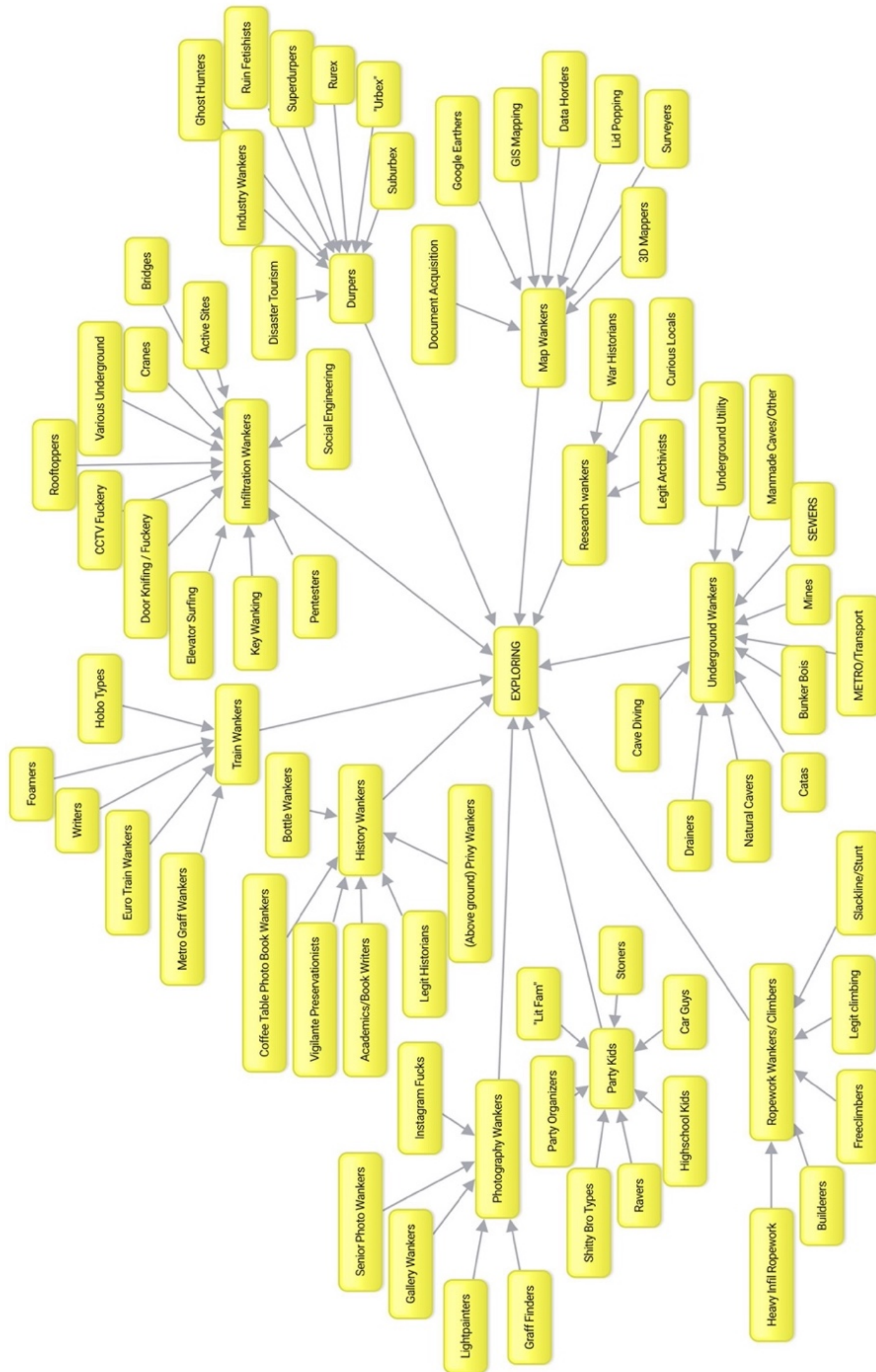

Fig. 11: Mapping the urbex community. Chart by Thelma LaMay, texted to the author in May 2019.

All these classifications feel distinct and could easily have nothing to do with one another, yet each point to the single umbrella term "EXPLORING," and this is precisely how their relations play out in real life. Anyone willing to step across that threshold between legal/illegal, public/private, and permissible/possible is an explorer and will be cared for by others accordingly. They are also invited to participate in the urbexing world, a global shadow community whose members travel great distances to visit each other and who host major functions that draw explorers from across continents to visit their cities in kind. These long-running events, like Mouser Week in Minnesota and an annual drain-delving festival in London, operate much the same as conferences might for university professors. It is not that explorers spend most of their time in cities where they are not residents, but rather that each urbex scene has a home base and then hosts guests from other exploring scenes as one would host a neighbor for a dinner. The result is a community built like a series of interlocking hubs. These explorers communicate with one another across great distances and come to know the nooks and crannies of each other's undercities better than they may know parts of their own downtowns. This sometimes leaves me with the impression that explorers are residents of their own exclusive urban landscape: one vast city of urbexers. And yet this is not true. Indeed, explorers inhabit the same urban spaces as everyone else, but they hide in the off-limit *terrains vagues* just below the street grid or just above the rooftops. I have therefore come to think of explorers as instead being like the wizards from *Harry Potter*, inhabitants of a secondary, parallel urban infrastructure lurking behind everyday landmarks. Some urbexers have made this comparison too, humorously referring to non-explorers as 'muggles,' though they rarely put *that* much stock into the insider/outsider dynamic. Explorers do not proselytize, but neither do they close themselves off

to the world. Anyone is welcome to join an urbexing crew, provided they can earn their peers' trust and prove themselves responsible along the way.

While my original intention was to restrict myself to the New York exploring scene, the global character of urban exploration soon led me to establish close contact with urbexers from other cities. Chief among these are the Minneapolis/St. Paul (MSP) explorers, who may be the most successful exploring unit in the United States today. Thelma has grown over the years into that squad's *de facto* leader—a status earned through the incredible amount of effort and thoughtfulness he has invested into their development. I was pleased that he made time to visit New York while I was living there, and I have likewise had the pleasure of visiting Minnesota and touring with his crew as well. I first stayed with the MSP explorers in May 2019 on the advice of Lucinda Grange (previously and hereafter referred to as Lucy), a New York urbexer who is close friends with Thelma and others in that community. Though I came to them as an unknown, Lucy's seal of approval and a pre-trip phone call with Thelma went a long way toward building assurance between us. I was greeted upon arrival with five nights of exploration, from a remarkable view of the Mississippi River atop an old Pillsbury factory to the depths of the Tunnel of Terror, a former Halloween attraction in a St. Paul cave still filled with the collapsing remains of fake haunted houses, artificial graveyards, and a gallows with a swinging noose.[312] The Twin Cities are unusual in that they are built on sandstone, an especially malleable material well-suited for tunneling. Because of this, these cities lay claim to a substantial number of decommissioned mine shafts and caverns dug out by White settlers. Among these is the St. Paul Labyrinth, a crown jewel of Midwestern exploration sites and possibly the finest network of

[312] A good video tour of the Tunnel of Terror site can be found online at youtube.com/watch?v=wokzdWREiXM. I have not met the young men who created this video, and so I cannot verify that they are affiliated with the MSP exploring crew. There are many smaller crews or stray explorers who also visit these spaces.

navigable catacombs west of Paris. Max Action, leader of the original 1990s and 2000s-era Minnesota urbex crew known as Action Squad, describes the 'Lab' as follows on his website:

> The Labyrinth has been the most rewarding site Action Squad has ever explored. We've wiggled through holes too small to crawl in, and we've dangled from ropes in 60-foot voids. We've faced seething walls of cockroaches, been charged by sewer rats, and been dive-bombed by tunnel pigeons. We've constructed ladders up and dropped rope ladders down vertical shafts. We've spent hours digging tunnels through solid sandstone using butter knives and other primitive tools to bypass barriers that stood in the way of our exploration. We've rappelled down an abandoned 5-story freight elevator shaft. We've soaked our feet with sewage, choked our lungs with powdered bird shit and dust, and filled our clothing with fine sand. We've exited in the pre-dawn hours from a manhole in the middle of a downtown intersection. We've exclaimed dozens of variations on the theme of "holy fucking shit!", as we found still more amazing places to explore after thinking we'd already seen it all. God, we *love* that place.[313]

To date I have only toured the Labyrinth once, despite now having spent a dozen or more nights in other nearby caves. The Lab is not—*cannot*—be an everyday experience. Its fifty to seventy miles of winding, almost intestinal pathways are mostly owned by utility companies like Xcel Energy, who string colossal amounts of telephone wire and fiber optic cables along the walls of its upper floors. Entry into the Lab is closely surveilled, and the penalty for being caught down there can be severe. And yet even having passed through just once, I must agree with Action Squad. The Labyrinth is magnificent. It is a place on par with the most stunning mountaintop vista or the bluest sea. It is triumph of underground exploration, and a near-surreal landscape whose very existence makes life more worth living.

There were several explorers acting as my psychopomps that night, guiding me deep into the Minnesotan underworld. I will not name them all, but among them were my collaborators Themla, Tankie, and DC. We entered through a portal that seemed to me both conspicuous and nigh undetectable, the sort of infrastructural object that hundreds of people pass every day yet

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[313] Max Action, "The Labyrinth: An Overview of the Whole Crazy Maze," Action Squad, actionsquad.org/laboverview.htm.

rarely think to notice. Thelma flipped a switch and the darkened tunnels erupted with light. "Come on, let's get moving," he whispered. We started walking, creeping downward through long, sandy corridors that seemed to branch off in every direction—not just left or right, but up and down through various ladderways as well. I stepped cautiously through puddles wearing large rubber wading boots lent to me by the crew, who practically live in these things. "This is really going to blow your mind," Thelma said, leading me up a ladder and through a narrow *chatière* ('cat-flap,' a word borrowed from the French cataphiles to describe tight underground crawl spaces).[314] I could not believe what awaited on the other side. "We call this Cornice Cave," he said. "Each one of these is a cast made by architects in the 1800s." Indeed, there before us and half obscured by sand were a dozen plaster gargoyles. Some were mermaids or fairy creatures, others were grotesqueries or decorative objects, all several feet long and seemingly quite heavy. I admired each sculpture with a kind of bewildered reverence. I felt a little like Indiana Jones, yes, but even more like a pilgrim upon arrival to Canterbury or the Santiago de Compostela. I was in awe. "Nobody else knows these are down here, probably not even the utilities," Thelma said. Such is the maze-like nature of the Lab. The only way to know all its secrets is to hunt down each of its many little chambers, a job unlikely to interest busy CenturyLink workers but one the mapping-obsessed explorers are more than happy to complete.

"Have you thought about donating these to a museum?" I asked. "We have," another explorer said, "but how would you get them out of here without damaging them? We think they're best left for others to find. They don't belong to us or a museum. They belong to the Lab." I chewed this over for a minute, uncertain whether the crew had settled on the right strategy for handling these artefacts. But it turns out even the MSP explorers themselves have

[314] Most of the quotations in this section are paraphrased from my notes and memory. This was in keeping with my collaborators' request not to record audio while exploring.

debated best practices for dealing with obscure historic sites like Cornice Cave. "There's this interesting thing that happens when you find one of these places, [because] suddenly the burden of its preservation is on you, which is something that we grapple with all the time," Thelma explains. He says wants to engage in transparency and share this history with others, but fears doing so would "destroy the sanctity of this space."[315] Besides, would these otherwise ordinary plaster casts mean as much stuffed in a climate-controlled box? Does not their power to inspire and link viewers with the past derive precisely from their presence in this almost mythical place? Having thought it over now, I think the explorers made the right decision leaving those cornices alone, allowing visitors like myself to see them as extraordinary objects, rather than bland museum pieces divorced from any real sense of time and place.

Another room they showed me was one the explorers had designed themselves. We entered through a locked wooden hatch installed above a ladder to deter curious workers. Inside was a room that resembled a shrunken-down Viking longhouse with a rounded sandstone ceiling, two cinderblock benches along the side walls, and a wooden table in the middle. The legs of this table consisted of four rubber wading boots filled with cement, thereby integrating the MSP crew's clothing and lifeways into the physical structure of the room. Hanging above the table were several lines of string lights, a small disco ball, and a golden chandelier. The explorers had positioned an array of seemingly random trinkets around the back wall, from photos of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Richard Simmons to empty beer cans and a stolen road sign. This was their clubhouse, one of several cached throughout the Lab. It felt homey, lived-in, yet also very much like an apocalypse bunker. We sat down at the table and cracked open some cans of La Croix. "We want to give you this to welcome you to MSP," Tankie said. She handed me a small silver

[315] LaMay, keynote address (November 12, 2021).

necklace, laden with a pendant in the shape of her home state. “You can’t share any pictures taken in here—for security reasons,” she said of the clubhouse room, “but hopefully this will always remind you of the Lab.” I felt accepted, inaugurated into a community of likeminded people. “Thank you,” I said, slipping the necklace on under my hoodie. “This means a lot.”

The clubhouse room was far from the only explorer-made site I visited. The MSP crew, more than most, are an industrious group fond of building new spaces rather than just inhabiting pre-existing ones. Much of this is owed to the pliability of sandstone, which enables them to carve out their own tunnels and link previously disconnected pathways. One can always spot an explorer-made tunnel from its telltale signs: fresh and clean walls, uniform height, and little signs of facture from their electric chisels and scoops. There are several such tunnels allowing passage between a certain cluster of previously detached caverns in St. Paul (not the Lab; details withheld for site preservation purposes). The explorers are also forced to deploy these tactics to unseal passages blocked up by the authorities, resulting in a back-and-forth struggle over access points that the explorers almost always win. Many of the chasms I explored contain elaborate wall carvings, including the etched face of the Virgin Mary and *calavera* sugar skull designs. There is also Apollo City, a monumental landscape in miniature consisting of tiny sandstone buildings, stairwells, and people (reminiscent of Décure’s famous *Quarrtier de Cazerne* miniature in the Paris catacombs). It is the skulls that fascinate me most. Little tealight candles fill their empty sockets like coins laid on the eyes of the dead. These subterranean artists decorate their creations with spray paint, casting each skull in violent neon shades of pink, orange, and green. I am left once more with the sensation that I have stumbled upon the Gates of Hell. Thank goodness that I have in my collaborators such wonderful variations on Virgil and Beatrice.

Yet the explorers are not limited to using sandstone as their medium. In one St. Paul drain I happened upon a memorial to Glow Worm, a veteran MSP explorer who died several years prior. The memorial can be found in a small rectangular room fifteen feet underground, filled with rushing rainwater. There is a graffiti mural in her honor, of course depicting a small green worm. A poem on the wall eulogizes the lost urbexer, issuing a mourning cry that few outside the community will ever hear. These tributes sanctify the drain, echoing the now generational lineage of explorers who have come and gone from this place, each leaving traces of themselves in the presumed nothingness of the urban underground. The poem gives a sad weight to these memories, and makes it clear that you walk through hallowed passages:

> I looked for you at Trout Brook
> Climbed down through a column of frost and wind
> leaving the sunlight for the daily commuters overhead.
> Against the flow along a slippery stone path,
> I hope for a light but I am always met with darkness.
>
> These limestone walls, cold and damp, once
> echoed with your voice...
> Now they bear your name in worn paint defiant
> to the flow of the stream like all my memories of you.[316]

Beside this poem is a dry slope that one must crawl up to reach the Pink Room, whose walls previous explorers have painted in light pastel shades. They have filled this room with rugs and minor furnishings, and a mantle upon which they placed several candles and a sculpture of Our Lady of Guadalupe, whose veiled head they have ringed with a halo of hand-drawn stars. The whole thing looks like a subterranean chapel or a living room, so close to the surface and yet insulated from the hard Minnesota winters by many inches of thick cement. During one 2021 trip, I asked Thelma if people experiencing homelessness ever sleep down there. He said they do from time to time, as it is close to a shelter and an outdoor encampment. I am uncertain how

[316] Memorial to Glow Worm, located in a St. Paul drain, photographed for my records on October 5, 2021.

many unhoused people are aware of the Pink Room, but I feel grateful that it exists as sanctuary for those who know where to find it. If anything, I feel this form of use should be advertised and promoted. As explorers work to construct literal subaltern spaces, I believe they have an obligation to share them with those suffering most under capital. To whatever extent they may already do this, I would argue that it is still not enough.

I turned to the small library of zines and pamphlets left atop the mantle. They had titles like "How it Might Should Be Done: On Strategic Potentialities Unleashed by the George Floyd Rebellion" and "Self-Help for Revolutionaries," which bills itself as a guide "for those who participated in the uprising last summer and...who are dealing with a slowing pace of struggle." The Pink Room, I realized, is an anarchist library, and one kept remarkably up to date in response to the 2020 Minneapolis uprising. I skimmed through to the end of "Self-Help" and came upon this moving final paragraph, subtitled "Keep Going:"

> Hopefully we will meet each other in the streets once again, renewed, strengthened, and with a greater capacity to fight our enemies. Many of us will never meet each other, but we should all know that there are more and more of us all over the country, dedicated and working to overthrow capitalist society and bring our catastrophic way of life to an end. Every barricade built, every police station burned, every store looted is a way of communicating with each other, of seeing each other, of knowing that we are not alone. In the meantime, let's be gentle with each other, so we can be dangerous with the enemy. When it's time, we'll see you at the barricades.[317]

Later that night, we paused for a spell beside an artificial waterfall. Thelma and a few others studied a patch of strangely swirling brickwork whose provenance they have long failed to uncover. I introduced myself to Ginger, a young trans woman explorer who came to the tunnels with her girlfriend. Drainrat, a great lover of stormwater drains, wandered about examining the features of this interstitial marvel. DC told me an almost unbelievable story about an

[317] Anonymous, "Self-Help for Revolutionaries, May 4, 2021. I found my copy in the Pink Room, but the text can also be read at illwill.com/self-help-for-revolutionaries.

Instagrammer who combined his interests in urbex and kink to create a photo series depicting sex toys in various underground and abandoned spaces. She showed me his pictures and we both burst out laughing (In a respectful way! I really do admire this kind of creativity). It was a bizarre night, like every night spent exploring, yet it felt good to be down there with my friends. It also felt good to share this space so clearly marked and reshaped by the exploring community's presence. I think many have this idea that urbexers simply enter a location, trash it, and then leave. In this reckoning, they are a purely destructive force, never a generative one.

Yet there we were, building meaningful relationships in a place already transformed by the Pink Room and Glow Worm memorial. Urbexers, I now understand, do not merely explore space but *make* space as well, just like OMI and the LES squatters. What power there is in the ability to *create* in a society that only allows for consumption—what power there is in appropriating urban space. "Instead of just looking at a room underground and seeing what it is, I'm seeing what it could be," Thelma says. "You're allowed the playful creativity of changing space, which you are not allowed anywhere—unless you own a house." It was a concept I was only just beginning to grasp. We were living underground like Marx's Old Mole, growing something within the landscape and within ourselves that might burst to the surface with revolutionary vigor at a moment's notice. We had found space to be "gentle with each other," as the pamphlet said, and searched out small chances to resist the "catastrophic way of life" that beat on above our heads. "This is what it's all about. It's the only thing keeping me sane," Thelma said. "We explore *together*, here in the tunnels and pipes beneath a ruined empire." The Pink Room zine was correct, I think. Every tunnel burrowed, every cavern mapped, every story passed along between friends in a hole deep underground is a radical means of communicating

with each other, of seeing each other, of knowing that we are not alone. It is Lefebvre's urban oeuvre brought to life. "Well burrowed," I thought. "Well burrowed, Old Mole!"[318]

I would like to speak for a moment on the necessity of fear in urban exploration and the collectivized response to that fear offered by the community. One of urbex's strangest contradictions is its power to make you feel either near-superhuman or like the greenest coward in the universe. There is a euphoric flow that comes with any successful climb, when your feet always touch down in the right position and the next handhold gifts itself to you with ease. You come to see yourself as unstoppable, as though you were the one special case to whom neither gravity nor death apply. The same is true of each intrepid march into a bando or tunnel. Then there are the moments of terror, when you remember just how small and mortal you really are. These are the brushes with danger that bring urbex in line with Lefebvre's theory of urban space as a series of surprise and sometimes risky encounters. They are also the situations when that sense of community, of "be[ing] gentle with each other," comes to matter most. Fear is not just an occupational hazard in urban exploration, it is an occupational certainty. How one contends with that fear is dependent on the presence (or absence) of those cooperative, mutually uplifting relationships that explorers seek to form with one another.

I've had my taste of both courage and dread while conducting urbex fieldwork, and the former is of course the better of the two. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I have tapped into this feeling of absolute bravery most in the presence of non-explorers. I took my brother Eric and our friends Ross and Scott to the New York City Farm Colony in March 2019. The Farm Colony is an abandoned Staten Island poorhouse from the early 1900s that is a breeze to access and even easier to explore. We had a terrific time together, toying around in the remnants of a past era's

[318] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 198.

cruelty (Farm Colony residents were either sick, destitute, elderly, or convicted of a crime—and all of them were put to work farming for the state). I suggested we take things up a notch and visit another abandoned site close by, the old tuberculosis sanitorium called Seaview Hospital. The property there is caged in by barbed wire, monitored by cameras, and we could even see our own image flickering through a television display in the security booth window. My friends backed out. They had jobs and marriages and ordinary lives to protect and were therefore hesitant to take their chances with the law. I—possessing no life, no marriage, and no real job to speak of—ventured on alone, squeezing my way into the building through a basement window. I wandered without fear through the dark hospital, past rusted gurneys and corroded medical equipment, and it was not long until I was high on the roof shouting down to my comrades who sat crouched together in the woods below. A lifetime of *Weird NJ* bando exploration had prepared for this, and I did not feel even a second of hesitation there among the shadows and decay. I felt unbelievably, indescribably cool.

Then there are nights that humble you. In late October of that year, the day before our trek up CPT, I went with Thelma and Tina to the Williamsburg Bridge. We encountered a stranger at the base of the climb spot, a fellow explorer and—by his account—a staff writer for *Saturday Night Live*. He and Thelma hit it off right away. Tina, our guide, highlighted the route up to the top of the bridge's east tower. We would climb a short fence, step across a two or three-foot gap onto a girder, then transfer onto some stairs. The stairs led up to a ladder, and that ladder led up to the top, where tantalizing views of downtown Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan awaited. It was an easy job, and yet not just anyone could do it. I remembered a scene in filmmaker Andrew Wonder's documentary *Undercity*, in which Steve Duncan and his friend Shane Perez stand in that exact same spot, surveying that exact same climb. "I don't know if I'm doing this

today," Shane says. "I know, it's scary. You don't want to do anything scary," Steve says with a grin.[319] He is not mocking Shane but instead self-deprecating and playing off his own foolishness. It is all in keeping with Steve's good-natured personality, equal parts hypercompetent urban historian and fun-loving *raconteur*, which I have come to admire from our time together. Shane stands down. "I want to show up for work tomorrow," he says. I remembered the scene well. Steve goes up, but Shane stays behind and misses everything. The film concludes with a jaw-dropping shot of Steve reclining atop the bridge, watching the city play out before him like a movie. "This is idiotic," he laughs. "Please, don't do this at home."

I wish I had either Steve's audacity or Shane's sense of self-preservation. Instead, I split the difference between the two with embarrassing results. The first part was easy, and I was able to climb up and straddle the short fence. Yet then I looked down and saw the gap between the fence and the girder, and all that lay beneath it. There below my feet was the bridge's lower deck, teeming with fast cars, and beside that the long drop down into the river. I do not know which one a falling explorer would hit first, only that either plummet would result in a certain and painful death. I froze up. My fear of heights kicked in. Thelma and Tina eased me back down from the fence, but I was still so determined to reach the top that I tried a secondary route. This one put me on an I-beam fifteen feet off the ground. All I had to do was shuffle over the gap and climb down from the beam on the other side. Once more I froze, this time unwilling to move and unable to dismount. My heart was racing, and I felt as though I could not breathe. A full panic attack took hold while my friends stood around, unsure what to do, exposed to onlookers and potentially even the police for well over an hour. Thelma tried slicing an entry for me through the fence with bolt cutters, but to no avail. Tina offered some of her own battle-tested

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[319] *Undercity*, directed by Andrew Wonder (2010; New York), youtube.com/watch?v=vWF3IDk9Gek.

strategies for dealing with anxiety. Even this stranger whose name I no longer recall showed great kindness, doing his best to coax me back down to safety. Eventually he had to lift Thelma on his shoulders while Thelma pack-strap carried me to the ground. I felt awful. I had humiliated myself in front of the urbexers, exposed my own weaknesses and fear, and—worst of all—proved that I was not an explorer, just some outside researcher who was in over her head. I remembered the shame of an earlier incident, when I became so drunk at a party in a Minneapolis drain that the MSP crew thought they would have to leave a caretaker behind to look after me while I sobered up during daylight hours. On that night, at least, I dug deep, found my second wind, and made it back to the surface with the rest of the team. Despite my best efforts, I could not dig deep enough to find such strength on the Williamsburg Bridge. Thelma and his new friend went up, but I stayed behind and missed everything.

In 1994, folklorist S. Elizabeth Bird wrote that the mostly male adolescent "legend trip" to haunted cemeteries represents a budding machismo and a means of "playing with fear." These young boys' sense of trepidation, either real or play-acted, serves as "as some sort of initiation rite into adulthood, during which time they test themselves and their fear of the unknown." The core rule of this ritual is that "no-one should show undue fear, at least until everybody else does, and those who show weakness are taunted and tormented."[320] Bird was not writing about urbex specifically, but there is substantial overlap between urban exploration and the type of legend tripping she describes (especially considering the misguided yet somehow evergreen insistence among academics that urbexers are almost all teenage boys). I have heard other observers speak of urban exploration in similar terms, proposing that it is about proving one's mettle and that showing fear is not only shameful but in fact the ultimate mark of failure. This could not be less

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[320] S. Elizabeth Bird, "Playing with Fear: Interpreting the Adolescent Legend Trip," *Western Folklore* 53, no. 3 (July 1994), 203.

true. Explorers are a community, and they treat each other as valued community members. They form rescue teams when someone is injured, they organize operational security features to keep event attendees safe from arrest, and they are compassionate toward those who feel afraid in what are, objectively, frightening situations. In both of my episodes, first drunk in the drain and then panicking on the bridge, Thelma assured me that I was on what he calls "a journey," and that everyone has been through it. He shared stories of his own slip-ups and moments of unease. There was no taunting. There was no tormenting. I felt better and more comfortable, ready to get back to urbexing and support others if needed. Moreover, I still plan to hit the Williamsburg Bridge for real sometime, whenever I am next in New York.

The best example of intragroup kindness that I witnessed came in an unusual space called Pits Cave. We were visiting Pits as part of a regular fall gathering held on one MSP explorer's family farm near the triple border between Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin (I will refer to this as the 'fall farm party,' though explorers know it by another name). Attendees set up tents in a large green field and chat around a campfire before venturing out into tunnels and abandoned military installations. This event is a small and joyful miracle, especially the night spent rafting across an underground river. Yet it is Pits Cave that always serves as the farm party's highlight, and one of the best exploration opportunities of the year. This cave, located on the banks of the Mississippi River in western Illinois, consists of numerous chasms filled with ice cold water. The explorers come here each autumn to test their climbing skills, sidling along steep walls and even freeclimbing like Alex Honnold. There is not typically much danger in this, as the water provides a chilly yet safe cushion for falling climbers. In 2021, however, the water level had receded to unprecedented lows, exposing craters filled with sharp rocks and uneven surfaces. A fall here, once merely unpleasant, could now be fatal.

Fig. 12: Scrambling at Pits Cave. The correct path through this chamber is along the rope affixed to the wall on the right. The man who got stuck climbing straight down was being a goofball. Photo by the author, October 2, 2021.

I came to Pits Cave with Chelsea, a relative newcomer to urbex whose mix of enthusiasm and trepidation mirrored my own. She was at first uncertain about even making the journey from our campsite to Pits but decided she would go and turn around if she felt out of her depth. We had spent time around the campfire together and got along quite well, so I was excited to watch her succeed. Chelsea and I both survived the first ordeals, a short jump over one pit and a plank-walk across another. We soon came to a very large chamber that required much more technical climbing (Fig. 12). I again began to panic once out on the side of a rock wall, and a talented veteran named Jane stuck around to coach me through it using the 'three points of contact'

method. She did the same for Chelsea, calmly explaining where to grip, what to hold, and how to step. Both of us made it across unscathed and high-fived in jubilation on the other side.

At the far end of the cave, closest to the final obstacle, is a sloped wall pointing straight down into the pits. Jane held my hand as I crept my way across to safety. Chelsea followed soon after but became locked in fear a quarter of the way across. I could see where her feet should have gone, and the little ruts in the stone that she could have used to maintain her grip. But those details are easy to miss when it is you up on the wall, and Chelsea could not find them. "Guys--guys--I'm slipping," she cried, and we all already knew it was too late. Chelsea dropped down into the hole, much further than anyone would have in the past when the water level was higher. I had no idea how shallow the water below might be, and so my first thought was that she may have fallen twenty feet onto an almost sheer rock surface. Thankfully, the water was high enough to catch her. The other, more veteran explorers began brainstorming ways to get her out. They lowered ropes and pinpointed potential avenues for climbing back up, but none of it proved effective. Jane noted that every pit was connected, and that the ground on which we stood was merely a series of bridges above an unbroken stream of water. "It might be easier," she said, "to climb out on the other side."

So it was that Chelsea broke new ground and did the bravest thing anyone saw all night. She swam down into the cold, polluted cave water, disappearing under the stone beneath our feet. We could hear her struggle and swim down below, pushing through old sheets of styrofoam and deflated rubber boats left behind from guests at previous farm parties. We walked over to the final pit in time to see her emerge, her clothing soaked through with icy water. "You're the first explorer who's ever done that!" someone exclaimed. "Chelsea's a fucking badass," another declared. It took a long time to pull her back up, and all the while Jane and Thelma expressed

quiet worry that Chelsea might run out of energy or dip into hypothermia. I could tell Jane saw this for what it was: a legitimate emergency and a rescue situation. I retreated from the scene to give the experts room to work. “Stay calm, we’re going to get you out of there!” Jane shouted, and the sound bounced back and forth across the cave walls, awakening the little bats who slept overhead. Jane and the others tried forming a human chain, then tied some knots into a rope and deployed that as well. They hoped that she could use some combination of the two to scale the wall. Chelsea made progress but slipped back down into the water, her feet now growing numb from the cold. In the end, it was Thelma who assembled a large hoop they could use to hoist her from the pit. An hour later and Chelsea was back in dry clothes at the campfire, as others extolled her bravery and accomplishments. “This is going down in [farm party] history,” they told her. Chelsea smiled, and what could have been a traumatic or even deadly event transformed into a legendary story about explorer teamwork and mutual aid.

The MSP crew’s finest communal achievement is an annual urbex festival known as Mouser Week, held in January or February of each year. Mouser Week summons explorers from around the world to gather in the Twin Cities for an eight-day cavalcade through sewers, drains, chasms, milling tailraces, and all nature of underground extravaganza. Organizers spend months scouting locations and securing them against police intrusion. At one Mouser event I attended, we were shuttled to the cave in the back of a windowless van like kidnapping victims while the driver radioed ahead on a walkie-talkie to ensure that the point of entry was clear. Thelma and company also get an early start on arranging planning committees and assembling their décor. As the week draws closer, locals begin opening their homes and living room futons to a parade of dirty, sometimes unfamiliar explorers. Planners dress the caverns in streamers and balloons, laser light shows, candelabras and mining lanterns, and all the accoutrement you might expect to find

in a hip local pub. They dig stages into the sand for masquerade balls and shadow puppet shows. They screen Hollywood films and urbex documentaries on hard rock walls. They learn the histories of these caves and throw themselves backward in time to connect with the past. In 2020, they set up an underground bowling alley in a cave that once served the same function during its time as a Prohibition-era speakeasy. They posted photographs of the original 1920s lanes to the walls to remind us of this continuity and our role in keeping forgotten history alive. At other Mouser events there are fire dancers and cocktail lounges, and late-night pancake breakfasts cooked up on griddles carted down into the dungeons along with syrup, butter, milk, and toast. There are so many impossible things that should not ever exist beneath the city's surface. I do not know how to communicate what I have seen at Mouser Week except by babbling on about it all in wonderment (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13: Mouser Awards and the farm party's underground river (upper-right). Photos by the author (lower-right), who is protected against Covid but otherwise has no idea what she is doing, October 1, 2021 and January 22, 2022.

Mouser Week has been hosted near-continuously since 2000, with only a one-year break during 2021 to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. I was present for portions of the 2020 and 2022 meetings, though in both cases teaching responsibilities limited my attendance. These nights spent in caves with old friends and new, dirty and cold, sober and not sober, expanded my understanding of what ordinary people can do. They still feel the way I imagine Burning Man used to—experimental, spontaneous, social, artistic, de-commodified, and anti-capitalist—before that desert experiment became a haven for the Silicon Valley *nouveau rich*.[321] I remember the feeling of wandering through one long drain, graffitied top to bottom in psychedelic patterns, leopard spots, and swirling geometric signs while strains of Daniel Johnston's "Some Things Last a Long Time" hummed from a speaker inside Thelma's backpack. I remember listening to that sad, wistful song and thinking about how much love and creativity there is down there in the places where nobody else goes, and how it endures only through this community and their stewardship. It is a spectacle, yes. But it is a spectacle built by proletarians for their own pleasure, rather than one marketed and sold by the bourgeoisie.

There are other events like Mouser Week out there. The largest is in Australia, and I will soon travel with Thelma and Lucy Grange to another in London (and its thrilling after-party in the Paris catacombs—too late to inform this dissertation, sadly). I am sure London and Paris will offer a good deal of fun, but few other events can boast as superb an evening as the Mouser Week Awards. This presentation, the week's culminating event, is the epitome of urbexer communitas. It is here that everyone gathers in a large underground hall for an evening that I can only describe as one-half Academy Awards and one-half club rave. Many attendees arrive in costume, and there are copious amounts of alcohol and other recreational drugs. Homemade

[321] John Law, original co-founder of Burning Man, is not coincidentally an urban explorer himself. I am told that he is well-acquainted with Moses, Thelma, Steve, and several other collaborators.

trophies are handed out for superlatives as simple as "Explorer of the Year" and as wild as "Lover of Poop" (for the most sewer-friendly explorer), "Sexiest in Waders," "Map Nerd," "Most Likely to be a Cop" (facetious, I think?), and "Klutzy Ninja" (for the explorer most experienced at hurting themselves while doing something cool).[322] I was unexpectedly nominated for "Best New Explorer" (an honor, though not one I felt I deserved) and received a runner-up prize in the "Kodak Moment" category for my footage of a couch being set ablaze at a party. There is an award for "Best Group Effort," which acknowledges large-scale collaborative undertakings. In 2022, this included nominations for freshly dug tunnels, the creation of a memorial to a deceased explorer, garbage cleanups, and a general-purpose nomination for "Our support for one another and TRYING to keep each other sane during covid."[323]

Thelma's co-host for this event is Drain Freak, one of the most gung-ho urbexers I have met. He draws elaborate digital maps of each cave, which not only diagram where and where not to go, but also provide elevation profiles, precise measurements documenting the scale of rubble heaps, blurbs about prior use and site history, black and white archival photographs, and even marginalia noting interesting graffiti or wall carvings. My favorite elements are the small notations about past urbex blunders, including "Kyle sank here" (in reference to the underground river) and "Someone pooped here." These mapping efforts remind me of something Thelma said during his November 2021 lecture at the University of Minnesota: "A lot of our research [has] started turning into our own archive. ...It adds a whole different dimension to exploring. Some people involved in urban exploring go out and do their thing in the physical world and that's that.

[322] "I've won the Lover of Poop award at Mouser Week for the past seven years in a row," Thelma told me less than ten minutes into our first-ever conversation, held on February 17, 2019. "At this point my reputation for filth is preceding me." Sure enough, he won the golden toilet trophy yet again while I was there in 2022. Much like Devine's character in *Pink Flamingos*, he may well be the filthiest person alive.

[323] Mouser Week Award Nominations, Signal chat group, December 31, 2021.

They're hanging out with their friends. But [archival work] led to a much deeper understanding of the places we were going into, and our relationship to their history. Every time you step foot in one of these historic places, you are in some way rewriting the history of it."[324] Sadly, Freak could not be in attendance for the 2022 awards due to a positive Covid test. Rather than leave him behind, the Mouser Week tech crew ran an ethernet cable from the surface far down into the awards room and managed to complete a Zoom call from a place that I am certain has never previously experienced internet service. All of this was done to ensure the safety of those in attendance, and to make sure that a core member of the community would not feel left out during this important evening. If that is not indicative of the strength of urbex communitas then I simply do not know what is. The mastermind behind this tech wizardry is Barnabas, one of the crew's finest audiovisual experts. When he's not busy with his underground IT work, Barnabas can be found wandering around the Mouser Awards, offering guests free samples of his homemade liquor. It tastes far too strong for my liking, but it is the thought that counts.

By far the most impressive sight I witnessed during Mouser Week was Sandland, an ongoing community project located in Pepin County, Wisconsin. Sandland sits on twelve acres of private ground, hiding out in a field someplace where nobody would ever expect to find it. Slim Jim, another old-school MSP explorer, purchased this acreage in 2011 for the purpose of building his own exploration site. Why should explorers limit themselves to pre-existing interstitial pockets within the modern city, he wondered. Why can't they put their collaborative tunneling skills to work building their own legal and completely non-commercial urbexer paradise? "I've come to be less excited by a visit to tunnels or a cave that has been seen before by many explorers or cavers, but still just as excited to discover something brand new that

[324] LaMay, keynote address (November 12, 2021).

probably has not been seen by explorers we know," Slim Jim says. "Then I can share it with the group, and everybody will get to enjoy it for the first time."[325]

Slim Jim has always been fascinated by the underground world, and by what he calls the "mystery and curiosity" of mapping subterranean spaces. He loves puzzling these things out and seeing how different tunnels manage to connect unseen below the ground, winding into and around each other like a rhizomatic network.[326] Jim (not his real name) holds a master's degree in engineering from the University of Wisconsin and was on his way to becoming a typical engineer until his father took him to Paris during his college years. "There, [Slim Jim] saw a manhole cover and said, 'I wonder what's down there,'" according to a feature on Jim in the *Hawk Eye*, an Iowa newspaper.[327] From that point forward, Slim Jim took up tunnel mapping and geocaching as a full-time hobby. He explored the Parisian catacombs, then the abandoned Maginot Line bunkers, and eventually similar tunnel systems around the world. He has since become the MSP crew's top cave finder. Today, small and previously unmapped—though not necessarily navigable—cavities are known in the community as 'Jimholes.'

All of this has led to Sandland, an underground maze that requires guests to crawl on their knees through near-total darkness in search of an exit. This may sound frightening, but the manmade nature of these passagewayss means that it is not possible to become truly lost. Some may find the exit in only a few minutes. Some may wander around for half an hour, disoriented and repeating the same wrong turns again and again, yet all will eventually escape. Sandland is not meant to be scary, but rather to inspire and bring happiness to those who explore it. I will

[325] Slim Jim, "The Origins of Sandland," Sandland Blog, November 9, 2015, sandlandblog.wordpress.com/2015/11/09/the-origins-of-sandland.

[326] *Labor of Love*, directed by Tony Saunders (2018; Durand, Wisconsin), tonysaundersphoto.com/documentary.

[327] Curt Swarm, "Ottumwa Native Creates Underground Cave Maze," January 4, 2022, thehawkeye.com/story/opinion/2022/01/04/underground-cave-maze-wisconsin-created-ottumwa-man/9089351002.

admit that the Sandland maze did scare me a bit the first time I attempted it. I was not accustomed to tunnels so tiny that even crouching is not an option, and a bit of instinctual claustrophobia kicked in as I slipped inside. I was also not used to taking the lead. In most other exploration sites, I needed only follow someone more experienced like Thelma or Freak, who knew every footstep like the backs of their hands. But Sandland was always intended to serve as a maze. There are no cheat codes—you must navigate it on your own terms. Fortunately for me, I had *some* help thanks to Grace, the Sandland tunnel dog (Fig. 14). She has spent many hours in these crevices and knows just where to go (and how to nudge a lost explorer in the right direction). I shimmied after her as best I could, comforted by her presence.

Fig. 14: Following Grace through Sandland. Photos by the author, January 20, 2020.

Upon exiting the maze, Sandland guests enter the project's work-zone: a long, high-ceilinged slope outfitted with mining carts and rails. Diggers shovel sand into these carts and then pull them up to the surface via a gas-powered winch. The mine carts are then raised onto a zipline and pulled through the air above a wooded holler so volunteers can empty them out on the other side. At the bottom of the work-zone is the Sandland project's current point of focus: a septagonal chamber Jim calls the Donut Room. This room is more than high enough for its guests to stand upright, and it consists of a circular hallway wrapped around a central pillar. There are smaller paths shooting off from this hallway like spokes from a hub, though many of these remain under construction. Slim Jim likes to brag that the Donut Room is tall enough and wide enough to ride through on a bicycle—something he has done himself, if only to prove the point. The Donut Room has become the designated chillout spot for Sandland visitors, and it has played host to musical performances, underground suppers, and wandering geochachers lured in by GPS coordinates and online directions. The MSP crew still has a lot of work left to finish off the Donut Room. Volunteers visit regularly, equipping themselves with safety masks to keep silica from entering their lungs. They use shovels, chisels, and electric hammers to chip away at the sandstone day after day. It is a difficult but fulfilling task.

In the decade since Slim Jim's original purchase, Sandland has now expanded into a veritable backwoods amusement park (Fig. 15). "[Jim] doesn't do a whole lot with the surface part of this property," says one community member who posts to the YouTube channel SaveItForParts. "He lets us put other things on there...all sorts of silly projects."[328] As of 2022, these "silly projects" include a treehouse, shooting range, community garden, children's playground, and a campsite. Perhaps most impressive of all is the decommissioned Unimobil

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[328] "Visiting Sandland for Crazy Homemade Tunnels, Trails, Treehouses, and Trains!," SaveItForParts, August 15, 2020, youtube.com/watch?v=F1AsKn48gYM.

Tourister monorail train, which sits idle yet well-maintained near the Sandland parking lot. MSP crew members purchased this train car-by-car from the Minnesota Zoo, where it operated daily from 1979 through 2013. Those who visit the Sandland Monorail today can find any number of urbex bric-a-brac inside, along with historical information about Sandland and the train itself. Drain Freak has also been involved in this undertaking, so much so that he has even created an independent role-playing video game called "Sandland 2120," which can be downloaded and played for free on his website. The game is set in a dystopic future without sand, one in which "entire generations have gone without knowing the chafe of sandy clothes, sandy sheets, or saddest of all: sandy beer."[329] It is a title loaded with in-group jokes about Jimholes, government bureaucratic obstacles to Sandland's construction, and every young explorer's dream of leveling up from newcomer to the status of "Adventure Team Member." In-game players, much like real-life visitors, are required to sign a very important safety waiver at the park's entrance.

Sandland is a "labor of love," Slim Jim says. "We've been spending a lot of money and a lot of time...digging and maintaining and improving our methodology to dig faster because we love it. ...Instead of [being] a for-profit thing where you invest and make money, this is never going to make money. It's always going to *take* money." I can only imagine how much an extensive operation like this must cost, yet Slim Jim says he does not mind. "It gives me a lot of satisfaction—it gives *us* a lot of satisfaction—to have created something that people enjoy and see as unique and get to experience, that is unlike anything else in the region."[330] During my visit in January 2020, I asked Slim Jim if he had plans to open the park to local school children for educational field trips. I figured it would present them with a great, interactive opportunity to

[329] Drain Freak, "Sandland 2120: Exploration Adventure Game," 2021, drainfreak.com/sandland.

[330] *Labor of Love*, 2018.

learn about geology. He said it is something that has been considered, though there would be some legal hoops to jump through first. For now, however, Sandland is a place built by explorers, for explorers. It is proof that the profit motive does not reign supreme above all expressions of human labor, and that use value can not only triumph over exchange value but in fact vanquish it altogether. "It blows my mind that...more Americans prefer to spend multiple times what I've spent on Sandland on [luxury] housing and...[luxury] transportation instead of pursuing their passions and/or leaving a legacy," Jim says. "It's not what you have that leads to long-term happiness. It's what you do."[331] What Sandland also demonstrates is that explorers need not always extract their experiences from someone else's city, taking photos and memories but giving back nothing in return (a common criticism addressed in the next section). Sandland is what happens when urbexers are allowed the freedom to alter the landscape in keeping with their interests and needs. It is, in so many ways, a literal sandbox—an open space for play, experimentation, transformation, and social healing, far from the miseries of the workplace and the capitalist-driven life. It may sit out in rural Wisconsin farmland, but Sandland embodies every element of the communal right to the city.

[331] Slim Jim, Signal message to the author, March 25, 2022.

Fig. 15: Disneyland-style map of Sandland. Illustration by Alex Printz, 2015.

Back home in New York, some explorers are building similarly expansive new urbexing projects. Michelle Young is an explorer with one foot in the criminal trespassing sphere and another planted in the worlds of academia and public policy. She holds Ivy League degrees in architectural art and (ironically, for this essay) urban planning. Michelle also teaches as an adjunct professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. She and her husband Augustin Pasquet operate a tour company called Untapped New York as a means of bringing the urbexer's view of city infrastructure to the public. Untapped runs legal yet heavily urbex-informed tours of vacant properties like Ellis Island's old Contagious Disease Hospital to help reposition visitors away from expressly touristic spaces like Times Square and into contact with the urban void. This is of course a profit-seeking venture, and one that trades subversiveness for a series of permits and permissions, but Michelle and Augustin have not lost the spirit of urban exploration. "[I]'ve done a combination of illegal trespassing and then very legal exploration," Michelle says. She recounts a story of visiting a derelict space then undergoing redevelopment with Moses Gates and the building manager. Moses, who has likewise spun his experiences as an explorer into a career with a regional planning think tank, spotted a ladder and began to climb it, much to the amusement of the other white-collar worker. "He was in his wingtipped shoes and I was in my Havaianas flip-flops...but we couldn't resist!"[332] Though Untapped New York is a business and therefore does not quite replicate the DIY nature of exploring proper, I feel they offer a valuable new take on New York tourism. Who else can make the urbexer's view of liminality accessible for the public? Michelle and Augustin were kind enough to hire me as a short-term guide during my time living in New York, where I led more conventional tours of Grand Central Terminal, the remnants of New

[332] Michelle Young, interview with the author, January 18, 2019.

Amsterdam, and the downtown subway system. It was a fabulous experience, and I am pleased that I can now say I was once a licensed New York tour guide.

N.D. Austin, a "transgressive placemaker" from Brooklyn, has done comparable but more offbeat work on the other side of the law. N.D. is the mastermind behind Sextantworks (formerly Wanderlust Projects), an organization that has hosted a series of pop-up parties and speakeasies across the city. Each of these unauthorized celebrations takes advantage of forgotten landscapes in some way, drawing in energy from New York's many *terrains vagues* to cultivate new experiences for his patrons. He has served cocktails at a mausoleum in a Queens cemetery, hosted a one-night lounge on top of the Williamsburg Bridge, and even traveled internationally to assemble treehouse parties at a condemned amusement park in São Paulo and a pigeon coop in Cairo. N.D. says that whereas many view urban exploration as a means of masking the interstitial realm in intragroup secrecy, he aims instead to publicize it and inject new life and possibilities into old places. For him, the difference between the traditional mode of exploration practiced by the MSP crew and his own public-facing, more extravagant approach is critical. "I've never thought of myself as part of the urbex world. For me, trespassing and going to neglected, overlooked, and unloved places has always been about placemaking...experiencing your city in a way that you wouldn't normally," he says. "You [must] break yourself out of the channel that you are normally stuck inside...the little blinders where you're just on your normal, regular old path. ...In New York, if you don't have a lot of money and connections your chances of making anything in the world is very [low]." By coloring outside the lines of law and property rights, N.D.'s special brand of "trespass theater" provides new avenues for creativity that the modern city otherwise denies.[333]

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[333] N.D. Austin, interview with the author, March 15, 2019.

N.D.'s motivations strike me as being more like those of traditional urbexers than he might realize, but I cannot deny that his methods are unique. His most famous creation was a limited-time, invitation-only nightclub hosted inside one of New York's iconic rooftop water towers. This club, a group effort between N.D. and his partners Myric Lehner, Dirby Luongo, Lindsay Arden Cooper, and others, was christened the Night Heron and operated for eight weekends from March through May 2013. To enter, patrons would first need to receive an invite by way of a custom pocket watch, which contained directions and a phone number, and could only be acquired *from* the Night Heron and gifted to others (tickets therefore spread virally from patron to patron, transferring power over the guest list from N.D. to his audience).[334] The guests then followed these directions to a disused office building in Chelsea, called the number, and made their way upstairs through what was essentially a darkened bando (Fig. 16).[335] They were escorted through this process by organizers dressed in snappy evening attire, expressing an artistic juxtaposition with the surrounding piles of rubble and dust. Once on the roof, guests would scale a ladder, enter the tower through a small, rectangular hatch, and find themselves in a tastefully constructed clandestine tavern. The walls were cedar paneled, wine bottles rested on two dozen wooden shelves hung carefully above the bar, and there was even a performance stage on which musicians like one of my collaborators, upright bassist Yoni Benshlomo, would play for the establishment's guests (Fig. 17). Brooklyn Laboratories' video documentation of the event is surreal. It begins like any generic urbexing video, with young men in backpacks sneaking quietly into a dirty abandoned building, before the scene suddenly erupts with light,

[334] Alex Vadukul, "Water Tower in Chelsea Manifests a Secret Life," *New York Times*, May 22, 2013, nytimes.com/2013/05/23/nyregion/illicit-nightclub-in-a-chelsea-water-tower.html.

[335] Though, notably, the property was not abandoned! Instead, it was tied up in an ownership dispute, something N.D. noticed while reviewing legal records as part of his location scouting process. Once more we see how New York's fixation on ownership rights steals livable housing away from the people.

color, and accordion music.[336] It both feels like a throwback to the Roaring Twenties and yet also like something never seen before.

Though the Night Heron had all the trappings of a high society gala, its decentralized guest list produced an atypically mixed clientele, one far more blended than what you might encounter in the regular bar and club scene. “While one person might send [someone wealthy], the person the next seat over would send their deadbeat little brother who has no job and still lives in his mother’s basement,” N.D. notes. “The crowd was not all ‘cool people’ or all fashionable people’ or whatever demographic—rather the crowd was always *your favorite person’s favorite person’s favorite person*.”[337] Included among these favorite people was the occasional, somewhat befuddled celebrity like Adam Driver or Edward Norton. “Doing something you’re not supposed to do definitely seems to make a lot of people want to make out,” Norton mused during his evening at the water tower.[338] While the guests inside caroused and canoodled, N.D.’s security team kept watch outside, communicating with each other through earpieces like the Secret Service. There is no such thing as being overly cautious in this line of work. N.D. has been spotted before, getting busted by “two Coast Guard boats, seven NYPD boats, and two helicopters” in response to a picnic on a private beach. The Night Heron, fortunately, went off without a hitch. No police arrived and the guests left happy. N.D. allowed press outlets like the *New York Times* to attend and craft write-ups on the event, but only if they pledged not to publish until after Sextantworks closed shop in Chelsea and dispersed.

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[336] Mike McSweeney, “The Night Heron: NYC Water Tower Speakeasy,” Brooklyn Laboratories, May 18, 2013, vimeo.com/66447748.

[337] N.D. Austin, email to the author, March 23, 2022.

[338] Nell Freudenberger, “Tower Heist,” *New Yorker*, May 20, 2013, newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/27/tower-heist.

Fig. 16: Entering the Night Heron. Photo by Benjamin Norman, *New York Times*, 2013.

Fig. 17: Inside the speakeasy (N.D. pictured in center with white shirt). Photo by Marina Galperina, 2013.

N.D. is not a New Yorker by birth. He grew up in the Alaskan bush country, on a remote archipelagic landmass called Chichagof Island. His parents lived there as members of a millenarian religious sect called the Move of God, and they raised him without formal schooling or adherence to most mainstream legal customs. “There [were] no boundaries of any kind” out there, he told me. “No fences, no lines. It’s just the wilderness. It’s just the bush.” As such, N.D. grew up without concern for “artificial boundaries” and the “imaginary lines” of class structure and property law. “There’s still some deeply rooted thing in me that doesn’t see those things,” he says. “I’m not a big respecter of fences.” What N.D. does see is a certain magic in anarchy, an emergent power that comes from tearing down those imaginary lines that build wealth but diminish people. It was easy to locate that power in Alaska, but what about in the property-driven city? N.D. thinks he has found it there too. “This city is kind of shitty, kind of gritty. Everything’s hard. Even people who have it good think it’s hard,” he says. “Everything is expensive. Either it’s too cold, or it’s too stinky, or it’s too loud. There’s a lot of shitty things about this place. But from the first moment I came here I recognized that there was something hidden. I want to find that magical, hidden thing. I *know* it’s here. I just had to find it.” And did you, I ask? “Oh yeah, totally,” he responds. “And now I’m going to *build* it.”

What N.D. describes is the Lefebvrian urban dwelling within the city’s many voids. “In the wasteland of this terrible city, there is something beautiful and magical hiding...there’s an oasis,” he says. This oasis is the great, sprawling oeuvre of connections between people that, as Lefebvre teaches us, can only be accessed through creative autogestion and playful appropriation. This, more than anything, is what N.D. has set out to do. “My job, professionally, is to make powerful memories for people,” he says. Capital has compelled N.D. into a life of crime to achieve this goal, something he acknowledges when outlining his location scouting

process. "Once you have trained yourself to think like a criminal...once you start looking for unlatched windows, you will not ever be able to stop noticing which windows are unlatched. ...It's been there all along, you just know how to see it [now.]"[339] Yet while all of this is indeed criminal behavior, there is nothing violent or destructive about N.D.'s work. Instead, he engages in what he calls "reverse crime" or "additive crime, instead of subtractive crime." Instead of "removing value from somebody else and claiming it for yourself, it's the opposite of that," he says. "You're giving—as a gift—something of your time, and attention, and love, and maybe even money, and making something better for the world."

This is a familiar concept for those who study urban exploration, as N.D. knows well. In 2005, the French urbex group *Les UX* and their 'cultural guerilla' squad Untergunther regularly snuck into the famous Panthéon at night to restore an antique clock that the state had allowed to rust for forty years. They did so with all the same tools, knowledge, and craftsmanship that a government contractor would bring to the job, yet they did this unsupervised and without pay, solely to give back to a building that they had spent so much time exploring.[340] Untergunther was marked as criminal by the legal-minded French state—"irresponsible, paranoid subversives whose actions could serve as a model for terrorists," according to London's *The Times*—but in the end it took an urban explorer to even *notice* the faded beauty of this broken object, let alone fix it.[341] This is the power of additive crime, a direct parallel with squatting's concepts of

[339] I can attest to this. Ever since I began spending time with the manhole popping MSP crew I can no longer pass by a manhole without wondering what's hiding beneath its lid—or how easy that lid would be to remove with the right set of tools.

[340] Untergunther has produced a widely viewed filmed recreation of these events, which I have watched both at home and projected onto a cave wall during an exploring event: *Panthéon, mode d'emploi*, directed by Lazar Kunstmann (2009; Paris: Ruhe Production), vimeo.com/51365068.

[341] Adam Sage, "Underground 'Terrorists' with a Mission to Save City's Neglected Heritage," *The Times*, September 29, 2007, 42.

reclamation and sweat equity. It is also very much the model in which N.D. operates. "When I think of the number of shitty old spaces that I've fixed up, or the number of things we've cleaned up, or the number of times we've fixed the locks on something [where] otherwise people are stealing the copper pipes out of the walls... It's a weird grey space legally. In New York, the law is all about how to stop people from...steal[ing] something from somebody else. But the law doesn't really know what to do if you're *bringing* things and *adding* them to the space."

Like many who take to the urban void, N.D. can get quite philosophical about this business. He refers to the concept of the 'magic circle' or the 'zone trip'—transgressing across socially constructed lines to discover new spaces in which all preexisting rules are rendered null. "Burning Man comes from that," he says, "and French Situationists were doing versions of that even before then. If you go far enough back there were ancient Romans who were like, 'Let's go clamber around the old [Egyptian] shit. This has been going on for a really long time." Here N.D. makes a case not only for a historiography linking Debord and contemporary explorers, but for a genealogy of urban exploration that stretches back millennia and across cultures. Exploring, in these terms, is not simply a cure for modern alienation but a permanent feature in human life. It is a desire and a near-spiritual necessity that has been with us since long before the early ownership class built their rudimentary fences and posted their first 'No Trespassing' signs. "It's about bringing people together, face-to-face," N.D. says. "You, in your real body, present with other people in a moment...physically crossing a line."

There are, I should say, aspects of N.D.'s work that I find somewhat out of tune with this high-minded mission. The Night Heron was, at base, a semi-exclusive *soirée*. Tickets prices were sliding scale but could at times become somewhat expensive, access was restricted to those within a network of close confidants, and the presence of Hollywood actors threatened to

undermine the ostensibly democratic nature of the guests-inviting-guests format. The pocket watch gimmick is also one of several choices (along with the faux speakeasy affectations—right down to Jazz Age flappers belting song into vintage microphones) that make it feel at home with other vestiges of late 2000s/early 2010s Brooklyn-based hipster culture. That expression of hipsterdom was all about aestheticizing obsolescence, as evidenced by the then-popular fascination with typewriters, fixed-speed bicycles, and vinyl records. What could be more obsolete, and therefore more purely aesthetic, than a speakeasy constructed eighty years after the end of Prohibition? And, as with most things affiliated with New York hipsters, the Night Heron and similar events strike me as possessing a dangerous potential for inviting gentrification. That may not be much of an issue in a place like Chelsea any longer, but I could see how a well-publicized pop-up party in a less affluent neighborhood might help stoke the fires of eventual yuppification. I have attended a similar, though less exciting rooftop party at a bando in Queens. There were no pocket watches, no covert telephone calls, no band of trumpet players. It was just me, Lucy, and a handful of other explorers drinking bottom-tier wine on the side of the BQE. It was a lot less inventive than what N.D. does, but it felt a lot less hoity-toity as well. Maybe the MSP crew is correct—perhaps there is something to be said about keeping urban exploration parties as under wraps as possible?

All that having been said, I possess incredible respect for N.D. and his work on the Night Heron, along with his other projects. I consider him a placemaking virtuoso, and I am grateful that he has so far used his powers for good. The Night Heron was never a money-making venture, but instead an experiment in art and fun. Its unlawful and ephemeral nature is what made it so special. A permanent, legal, for-profit clone has since opened somewhere above a hotel in Williamsburg, possessing none of the magic but no doubt generating far more wealth for

its owners than the Night Heron did for N.D. Such a business has also no doubt left much more of a gentrifying footprint than Sextantworks' pop-up-and-go efforts. While I do worry about the risks posed by urbex-inspired businesses like Untapped New York and trendy, 'talk of the town' events like the Night Heron, I also see loads of good in what Michelle, Augustin, and N.D. are doing. They have all set out to 'untap' the city, as it were. Not to open it up for exploitation as one would untap a labor market, but to liberate it from the constraints of alienation and capitalist modernity. They show us that urbexing can take many forms, well beyond the popular imagining of three teenagers in hoodies stumbling around an old factory. They are novel. They are experimental. They are, in short, urban.

This is what city-dwellers are capable of building when liberated from the constraints of property law and economic caste. From Sandland, to Mouser Week, to the Night Heron, and even something as small yet vital as the Pink Room's anarchist library—all these creations speak to the resourceful, community-minded nature of urban exploration. For as much as urbex may resemble parkour or other extreme sports, with their emphasis on individual competition and physicality, exploring is in truth a slow, patient process of coming together in unexpected places. It draws its participants inward, even as it pushes them out to the city's furthest limits. Today, we are faced with fewer and fewer opportunities to work together and make something new. Neoliberalism and austerity have sapped our culture of its potential for growth, while America's unshakable decline casts everything in shades of nihilistic grey. If urbanites are to discover new potentialities, then they must seek them out together, away from the structures of capital and at the far reaches of law and space. That is the work of urban exploration, and I feel perhaps it has never been more essential for our collective well-being than it is right now.

The Urbex Critique

Before concluding this chapter, I feel it is necessary to consider some of the criticisms directed toward urban exploration, both by the news media and—more importantly for the purposes of my dissertation—by scholars in the fields of geography and American Studies. I will address urbex skepticism in the media primarily to dispel its accompanying positions, as I feel they are either unfounded or reflexively opposed to exploring due to the pro-capital, pro-law enforcement bias that prevails in that industry. Yet I cannot so easily dispatch with the criticisms offered by my colleagues in the humanities. Their concerns about urbex—chiefly that it is too much centered around young, White men, that it reproduces the colonizer mindset, and that it is a mode of cultural exploitation rather than one of cultural production—are indeed worries shared by some of my collaborators. I do not endorse every aspect of these perspectives, and I will provide some counterarguments in defense of urbex as an inclusive, constructive exercise (rather than a destructive or extractive one). Yet there is validity to their claims, and a degree of negative behavior practiced by many explorers that can undermine urbex's liberatory nature. To excuse these actions or ignore scholarly attention to the problems they represent is to do a disservice to the many explorers working to make urbex a positive and welcoming community.

As with squatting, mainstream news outlets frequently sensationalize urbex and misinterpret its practitioners' motivations. Most often, they assume that urban explorers are merely thrill-seekers in search of a cheap rush or, in recent years, attention-starved teenagers looking to garner social media fame. That first term, thrill-seeker, is especially characteristic of the way newspapers and television journalists report on explorers. They often cast urbexers as 'daredevils' and 'adrenaline junkies' who engage in faddish 'stunts,' as though exploration were something like a present-day revival of the flagpole sitting trend of the 1920s. "For a certain

fearless class among us, New York is a dense obstacle course waiting to be climbed, graffitied, [and] spelunked," reads one typical account. "What follows are the stories...of some of these adrenaline addicts...[and the] rush-seeking lunatics pushing the legal limits of this city," the author proclaims in this 2014 write-up for *New York* magazine.[342] Urbex can at times be thrilling, but its appeal stretches far past the short-lived pleasures of an adrenaline hit. At its best, urban exploration can also foster community (evinced in the previous section), inspire a sense of wonder or a deeper appreciation for the built environment, and provide purpose in a world defined by alienation. Every urbexer has played the daredevil from time to time, but they just as often cherish the quiet moments—admiring the city from the lip of a skyscraper or sharing a six-pack with their comrades in a tunnel deep underground. By overlooking these qualities, journalists produce an intriguing contradiction: urban exploration is equal parts brainless when they wish to discourage readers from participating, and an epic, almost aspirational lifestyle when they wish to render it as spectacle for some *Vice*-style profile piece. What it is not is meditative, life-affirming, cooperative, or serene, even though every "rush-seeking lunatic" explorer has experienced these dynamics as well.

These writers also discard the history of urban exploration to depict it as an emerging craze sweeping across youth culture. Less sympathetic reports tend to emphasize the dangerous and illegal dimensions of the practice, which fly in the face of respectable conduct both because of the risk to explorers' safety and because, crucially, urban exploration violates landowners' property rights. These accounts sometimes carry a paternalistic tone, presuming that most explorers are adolescents who do not understand the risks that come with their hobby. Little attention is given to the possibility that they do understand these risks, and that there might

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[342] Jason Feifer, "The Everything Guide to the Urban Daredevil," *New York*, September 26, 2014, nymag.com/guides/everything/urban-daredevils-2014-9-22.

indeed be qualities to urban exploration that make it worth the danger. Such articles turn to police statements for support, publishing them uncritically and only sometimes providing an alternative perspective through conversations with the explorers themselves. "Police warn against 'urban exploring' craze driven by YouTube after young boys dragged from city sewer," reads a headline in London's conservative broadsheet *The Telegraph*. "[Explorers] put themselves and others at risk to climb buildings, as well as causing damage to property," added Neil Goosey, a British police sergeant cited in the article. "We're asking parents and carers to talk to young people about the dangers of this kind of activity, so they understand how something they may see as exciting and fun is actually dangerous and possibly also criminal behaviour."[343] The advent of platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have made it even easier for the press to discredit young explorers. "How far would you go for an Instagram photo?" asks a 2016 headline by the Australian Broadcasting Company. "Many in the Urbex community are driven by curiosity, adrenaline and the fear of being caught. But above all, they're motivated by a desire to capture the perfect photo for their Instagram accounts," ABC reporter Alkira Reinfrank writes.[344] Another headline, this time for an NBC News affiliate in Texas, refers to urbexing as a "new internet fad" which leads "thrill seekers to trespass for [the] ultimate selfie," while the article itself admonishes explorers as "teens or young adults" willing to "risk safety for clicks."[345]

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[343] Helena Horton, "Police Warn Against 'Urban Exploring' Craze Driven by YouTube After Young Boys Dragged from City Sewer," *The Telegraph*, July 12, 2018, telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/07/12/police-warn-against-urban-exploring-craze-driven-youtube-two.

[344] Alkira Reinfrank, "Urban Exploration: How Far Would You Go for an Instagram Photo?" *ABC*, October 24, 2016, abc.net.au/news/2016-10-25/urban-explorers-putting-life-on-the-line-for-instagram/7645446.

[345] Jason Puckett, "New Internet Fad Leads Thrill Seekers to Trespass for Ultimate Selfie," *KAGS*, November 4, 2016, kagstv.com/article/news/local/texas/new-internet-fad-leads-thrill-seekers-to-trespass-for-ultimate-selfie/499-348159719.

By reducing exploring to simple online clout-chasing ("Doin' it for the 'Gram," as some on Instagram might call it), these press outlets reduce the scope and significance of exploring as well. No longer is urbex a means of expanding one's world, but a way to shrink the urban and its almost unlimited potentialities down to the size of .jpg thumbnail. Embedded in this portrayal are all the regular critiques of young people as members of a narcissistic "Me Me Me Generation," as *Time* declared in a 2013 cover story about selfie-obsessed Millennials.[346] When everything is performance for an online audience, this thinking suggests, then nothing is lived in the moment and therefore cannot possess any practical, embodied value. Were urban exploration meant only to generate clicks then it, like anything else done for the 'Gram, becomes empty calories. These media depictions therefore cast exploring as hollow and vain, nothing more than a particularly dangerous expression of self-indulgence. Such an approach produces the desired effect of making exploring that much simpler to rebuff. While there might be unconsidered depth to the actual experience of urban exploration, the pursuit of the "ultimate selfie" is pablum. It is yet more evidence of a generation led astray by technology and egomania.

It is true that many explorers double as photographers, and that some of them, like my collaborator Lucy, have built whole artistic careers around urbex photography. But exploring is about more than taking pictures (even very artful ones), and it is certainly about more than gathering likes on social media. As Moses writes in *Hidden Cities*, "Photography is great, but oftentimes it can be a distraction from the experience itself," and it is that experience of urban exploration—of *being* in place rather than just *capturing* place—that I find so interesting.[347] Perhaps images of urban exploration monopolize discourse on this subject because they are

[346] Andrew B. Meyers, "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation," *Time*, May 20, 2013, time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation.

[347] Gates, *Hidden Cities*, 122.

exploring's public face. They are the most striking and legible dimension of a subculture that otherwise remains a mystery to the general population. When those outside urbexing hear the phrase 'urban exploration,' their thoughts most likely turn to the dramatic, long-exposure HDR shots of abandoned buildings that populate search results for the term. Or they may think of pictures like Fig. 10: a faceless, silhouetted explorer posed with their back to the camera at the edge of a rooftop. From this distinguished vantage point, the anonymous urbexer stands tall against a shrunken cityscape, inverting the everyday relationship of scale in which the urban landscape overwhelms the body. It is these photos, rather than insider knowledge or ethnographic experience, that inform a large percentage of academic urbex opinion. The result of this, as we shall see, is an incomplete and non-representative assessment of the field.

Garrett calls such images the "hero shot," which he defines as a "highly stylised photo of an urban explorer looking smug about an accomplishment in a location."[348] Some explorers do employ this technique in their photography, as evidenced by the somewhat baffling fact that I now have my own "hero shot." It may well be the image they want to present to the world, and how they wish to think of themselves. But, like all idealized self-images, the hero shot is a trick. It is the product of a carefully refined photographic process that does not adhere to the broader realities of urban exploration. Most exploring photographs are snapshots captured with lower-quality devices like cell phones. When these photos depict other explorers, they are usually messing around for the camera rather than brooding dramatically on a rooftop like Batman (Fig. 18). If the hero shots that make the rounds online serve as exploring's public face, then these quick and dirty images are the face explorers share with each other: playful, unscripted, and embodied in space and time. Whereas the hero shot obscures one's identity and inflates the

[348] Garrett, *Explore Everything*, 269. Examples of the hero shot can be found throughout this text, including effective underground and above-ground examples on pages 73 and 77, respectively.

human form to an impossible stature, the urban exploration snapshot is grounded in the nitty-gritty of urbex life. They show the messy hair, the dirty fingernails, the bags under one's eyes that come with staying up until 6:00 am crawling through mud and sewage with your friends. They are not a spectacle but rather pictures of real people in real places in real moments. "Online representations in the community say almost nothing about the content and experience of the embodied activity," Garrett writes. "Urban exploration is not about aesthetics of decay," or about photographic heroism, but about "experiencing the world in the here and now."[349]

Fig. 18: The non-heroic shot, in contrast with Fig. 10.
The author (right) and explorer Tina Hammersmark (left) playing around
at an abandoned hospital in Connecticut. Photos by the author, October 28, 2019.

[349] Bradley L. Garrett, "Shallow Excavation: A Response to 'Bunkerology,'" June 10, 2011, societyandspace.com/2011/06/10/shallow-excavation-a-response-to-bunkerology-by-bradley-l-garrett.

Yet the hero shot cliché endures as an easy target for criticism, prompting writers like Robert Macfarlane to compare it with the *rückenfigur* motif ('back figure,' or more precisely, 'figure seen from behind') made famous by German painter Caspar David Friedrich in his 1818 Romanticist masterpiece *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. The *rückenfigur* as Friedrich imagines him is both anonymous, viewed only from behind and lacking any individualized features, and yet also a highly specific *type* of person. Not just anyone admiring Friedrich's work could project themselves onto the *rückenfigur* and adopt his outlook, as the painter intended. Instead, this well-dressed European gentleman with walking cane in hand offers a perspective meant only for the imperial ownership class. He is the White male explorer, master of the sovereign gaze. He is contemplative, yes, but also triumphant—so secure in his grip on the world that he has transmuted even the once dreaded Alpine landscape into a sublime receptacle for his vision. When Macfarlane and others write that the "dandified nature" of urban exploration photography "seems chiefly to refocus the problems" of this artwork, they mean to say that urbex acts as a present-day extension of the White male impulse to seize the sovereign gaze through adventure.[350] In this mode, urbexers do not 'explore' cities as one might 'explore' an idea, nor are they curious *flâneurs/flâneuses* in the style of Baudelaire or the Situationists. Instead, they are read as explorers of conquest in the Dr. Livingstone tradition: White outsiders who intrude on landscapes that do not belong to them to prove their masculinity and right to domination over the land. These "so-called urban explorers," as Steven High and David W. Lewis deem them, are "mainly white, middle class youth between the ages of fifteen and thirty" who seek to re-create the "colonial encounters of earlier times" by "cross[ing] into undiscovered lands."[351] The urban

[350] Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019) 154.

[351] Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007), 43.

"wilderness" in turn serves as a contemporary extension of the indigenous frontier which, once mapped and traversed, manages to reinforce "White people's sense of their own superiority."

This is the neo-colonialist interpretation of urbex that found favor with academics in the late 2000s and early 2010s. It began as an outgrowth of the then-popular fixation on 'ruin porn' photography in struggling postindustrial cities like Detroit. Ruin porn, as the name suggests, are photographs that fetishize infrastructural despair in the same way that pornography turns bodies into mass-produced objects of desire. It is a style that should be familiar to most internet users: high-contrast depictions of paint chipping off walls, forgotten artifacts of past habitation left strewn across a floor, and sunlight peeking into long and vacant hallways. "So much ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins [and] dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them," John Patrick Leary writes in his 2011 essay "Detroitism."[352] The emptiness of these photos speaks to more than a lost sense of hope—it suggests a lack of curiosity or analysis, an unwillingness to engage with a city's history in pursuit of only its most superficial titillations. "The city is a shell," Leary writes, "and so are the people who occasionally stumble into the photographer's viewfinder." This touristic view of poverty common among ruin porn photographers leads critics to presume the same of all urban explorers and fosters the false presumption that they are definitionally outsiders to the cities they explore. "Given the historical roots of colonization and conquest in the Western historical imagination of travel," American Studies scholar Rebecca J. Kinney writes, "the dichotomies of self/other, outsider/local, and explorer/native continue to permeate contemporary accounts of urban exploration."[353]

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[352] John Patrick Leary, "Detroitism," *Guernica*, January 15, 2011, guernicamag.com/leary_1_15_11.

[353] Rebecca J. Kinney, "'America's Great Comeback Story:' The White Possessive in Detroit Tourism," *American Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2018), 784.

I am fascinated by Kinney's analysis, as she and I have read many of the same sources (Garrett, Ninjalicious, et al.) and drew similar theoretical connections to thinkers like de Certeau without awareness (at first) of each other's scholarship. Yet we have nevertheless reached almost opposite conclusions. "The impulse to see the city from above, a vantage point that evokes Michel de Certeau's 'totalizing eye,' is a trope that appears throughout accounts of exploration and travel texts," she writes. Whereas the Black local resident is perpetually under surveillance, the urban explorer—always assumed White—is "privileged to move freely through place," including through landscapes of Black dispossession and poverty. "Therefore, the urban explorer is one who can simultaneously be authorized as in place and invisible," Kinney says, "which typically reconfirms white nondisabled men as the normative social subject."[354] This argument parallels Castro-Gómez's description of the panoptic observer at the zero-point of empire who, in classic *rückenfigur* style, can cast his gaze out upon the landscape without himself being seen. What Kinney therefore proposes is that the urban explorer, in their privileged travel through non-White and working-class spaces, does not challenge the sovereign gaze of the capitalist or de Certeau's man in the tower, but in fact possesses that gaze and becomes a vessel for its power. This urbexer, always envisioned as White and male, does not just trespass against property. He trespasses on the marginalized urbanite's right to life and self-determination as well. He is not counterposed to the commodification of American cities and neoliberalism's program of interior colonization. Rather, he *is* the colonizer.

Kinney and I met during an October 2021 meeting of the American Studies Association, where we sat on a panel entitled "Ruins and Insurrections: The Struggle for the City." I presented a condensed version of this chapter, whereas Kinney served as the session's chair. We spoke for

[354] Ibid., 785.

a bit following the panel, at which time she revealed her prior writing on urban exploration—something I had missed during my research given her essay's primary focus not on urbex but on what she calls the "white possessive in Detroit tourism." Kinney assumed that I had simply failed to consider the soft strain of White supremacy within urbex. I told her that while I agree that White explorers carry unjust privileges and that there is a troubling element of adventurism sometimes present in the field, I do not feel these issues are emblematic of the way all explorers practice their craft. We need not always equate urban exploration with dark tourism or ruin porn. Indeed, most of the explorers I have worked with are not outsiders at all. They are instead long-time residents of the cities they explore, who return again and again to the same locations to maintain good exploring infrastructure and document the histories of these places that official institutions have forgotten. I noted the potential for additive crime demonstrated by N.D. Austin and in Untergunther's restoration of the Panthéon clock, and that generative projects like Sandland prove there is more to urbex than turning someone else's neighborhood into a backdrop for hero shots. I also stated that my own teenage experiences as a suburban explorer in New Jersey had left me with a profound sense of local pride and a greater appreciation for my home state's landmarks, histories, and culture.

Kinney acknowledged that the concept of an explorer-in-residence had not occurred to her. She took it as a *fait accompli* that explorers are tourists, and that the "dichotomies of self/other, outsider/local, and explorer/native" are endemic to urbex in all its forms. Though she did not assign a class dimension to this binary during our discussion, one can presume that her hypothetical explorers are also middle-class Whites in the same way that squatters are regularly cast as middle-class White suburbanites in the press. I understand that the point of her *American Quarterly* essay was to examine the White tourist imaginary's harmful impact on Detroit, and so

undertaking an urban exploration ethnography would not have made sense for her, but I feel that Kinney's approach to urbex could have been strengthened had she taken the time to speak with even a handful of explorers. Instead, she kept to the wholly etic position where too many scholars reside, ironically marking herself as an outsider in relation to her topic. We left the conversation on good terms yet entrenched in our positions.

What frustrates me about the explorer as colonizer perspective is that it either ignores or inverts the power dynamics at play in many expressions of urban exploration. Kinney compares the act of seeing from above while exploring to de Certeau's "totalizing eye," but forgets that explorers do not own nor purchase that point of view. They *steal* it. This theft, moreover, does not represent the dispossession of the proletariat but instead a means of expropriating space from the corporate powers that produce conditions of poverty in the first place. It is finding purpose in the ruins left behind by capitalism's invisible war on our cities. I by and large agree with the popular criticism of ruin porn, which is not only at times damaging to places like Detroit but also ranks among the most trite and soulless ways to explore. Yet which is the greater threat to the well-being of Detroit's working-class: the photographer wandering through a derelict building or the General Motors executives cutting wages from the comfort of their $350 million Renaissance Center? It need not be an either/or proposition, but some perspective is necessary.

Even ruin porn becomes a little more defensible when we study the power relations between photographers and corporate economics. Is it an accident that interest in ruin porn peaked between 2008 and 2012, those frightening years following the first great financial disaster of the century? What if ruin photography is less about possessing urban space and more about processing very real anxieties concerning social decay and the neoliberal state's willingness to abandon all responsibility to its people? What if exploring is not a means of

reproducing bourgeois imperialism but instead, as Thelma says, a way to carve out a place for oneself in the "tunnels and pipes beneath a ruined empire," and thus reaffirm one's role as a member of the rebellious undercommons? Besides, the notion that urbexers go unsurveilled is easily falsified. While White explorers may not experience the same level of surveillance foisted upon people of color and those enduring poverty or homelessness (as we shall soon see), they nevertheless remain a popular target for police antagonism. They know they are being tracked by CCTV cameras and may well take an arrest for their actions. Some, like my collaborator Eric (straight, White, and male) have even been arrested at gunpoint and shuffled handcuffed into court for the *al-Qaeda*-esque crime of walking the New York subways.[355] Eric even wound up being investigated by the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force. As such, explorers do not think of themselves as living above the indignity of state subjecthood. They are not exempt from being "watched, inspected, spied upon, directed...prevented, forbidden, reformed, corrected, [and] punished," as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon says.[356] They, like everyone else in their own way, only seek out whatever sense of autonomy and self-fulfillment they can, despite the law's objections.

There is some truth to Kinney's claims, as I said at the beginning of this section. I met a troupe of White explorers at the fall farm party who had the night had before spent time urbexing in Gary, Indiana. Gary is an 85% Black city, and a former US Steel company town that has in its history been the site of massive labor conflict, strikebreaking, industrial collapse, White flight, and a long run of racist disinvestment policies. Almost a third of Gary houses are abandoned, along with many of its former civic institutions. Whereas New York can still hide the suffering

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[355] Larry Celona, "Two Tunnel Security Breaches Cause Scare in City," *New York Post*, May 9, 2011, nypost.com/2011/05/09/two-tunnel-security-breaches-cause-scare-in-city.

[356] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth-Century*, trans. by John Beverley Robinson (New York: Haskell House, 1969), 294.

of its poor beneath a shiny glass blanket of skyscrapers, in Gary all that pain is left out in the open. It feels at times less like a city and more like a wound, and yet Gary is not dead. There are 69,000 people living in Gary, and each one of them deserves better than to have their homes and neighborhoods gawked at by strangers. These White explorers, all young and about evenly divided along gender lines, had not thought about this. They seemed surprised when I proposed to them that Gary may not have been an appropriate place to treat like a playground.

This was a lesson I had to learn for myself in 2008, when I made the same mistake as an eager twenty-year-old explorer living in Indiana. I recall stepping out of the Gary bus station on my way to a concert in Merrillville and growing starry-eyed at the sight of so many empty structures. I took off running and within minutes I was on the roof of an old brick building. A friend of mine who was local to the region chewed me out for this behavior and I am thankful for her. I was ignorant of Gary's history at the time, and where I now see proof of White supremacy and the cruelties of capital, I then saw only bandos. Was this a privileged position stemming from my White, middle-class upbringing? Yes, without question. But it was also the product of youth and a lack of education on the subject. As I have grown and learned more about urban segregation and ongoing atrocities like redlining, I have not found any less joy in urbexing—I simply know better now where it is not appropriate to explore. A responsible explorer is always prepared to exit a location when given a good (human-centered, not property-based) reason to leave. As such, the urbexers I spoke with at the farm party were not hostile toward my suggestion, just surprised. I am inclined to attribute their actions to historical ignorance as well, though this does not excuse them. I feel the community has a responsibility to internalize these lessons and explicitly teach new members how to practice urbex in ways that do not bring further harm to Black and Brown city-dwellers.

The urbex community can, indeed, be quite thoughtful about these things, contrary to Kinney's presumptions. I have observed a discourse within urbex circles concerning positive and negative modes of exploration. When I told the Minneapolis/St. Paul explorers about my encounter at the ASA conference, it touched off a lengthy and somewhat introspective discussion about good exploring ethics and how their subculture is perceived by others. Most agreed that outsiders should either avoid urbexing in severely exploited cities like Gary and Detroit or, at the very least, that they should think critically about their actions and demonstrate respect toward these places and their residents. Yet there was widespread displeasure with the idea that all urban exploration matches the colonizer image presented by these scholars. "This person must literally only have been talking strictly about 'bando tourism, and they wouldn't at all be wrong in that context, but there is so much more to exploring," an urbexer named Victor wrote in our chat on the popular messaging app Signal.[357] "Poverty tourism is real and definitely has a vein in the larger exploring community," Thelma agreed, "but using this to write off exploring as a whole is a big mistake. There is clearly an important cultural message happening with exploring, and taking the worst part of it (commodification and tourism) as its whole is harmful and dismissive of many, many people—including explorers that *are* people of color and from the areas they explore." Thelma's comments were met with several rounds of thumbs up and heart reactions from other urbexers in the chat.

"What about explorers who aren't that interested in abandoned buildings? Most of the exploring I do is in fact quite the opposite to this," Victor said, noting that Kinney, High, Lewis, and others have concentrated on only one genre of exploration site (bandos) and one specific urban landscape (the majority-Black Rust Belt city under siege), to the detriment of other aspects

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[357] Signal chat group, October 15, 2021.

of exploring. “We talk about bridges and tunnels, infrastructure is generally not at all racialized space, rather space that should just be open to the public who are the very people who pay for it. Or what about exploring military locations? This could even be considered an act of protest imo [in my opinion],” he said. “I enjoy exploring power plants partly as a celebration of the inevitable collapse of the fossil fuel industry,” an explorer named Keith wrote in assent, punctuating his thoughts with a laughing emoji. “Nice, explorable sewers and tunnels are not associated with poverty at all, though. Buildings, sure. But tunnels are vestiges of luxury (when they’re old tunnels),” another chat member named Dennis commented, drawing a line of distinction between different types of ruins. While a trip to an abandoned home might encourage explorers to fetishize loss, delving into America’s rotting urban infrastructure instead compels us to think about the economic and political forces behind that ruination. It is thought-producing, rather than thought-terminating in the heavily aestheticized, uncritical style of ruin pornography Leary describes. It is *these* ruins—the vestiges of a faltering capitalist state rather than the underdeveloped/overexploited neighborhoods that state reserves for its surplus populations—that the tunnel-obsessed Minnesota crew lives to explore. “I mean to be fair,” Thelma chimed in with typical good humor, “I DO want to colonize the sewers.”

I was struck most by Victor’s comments on the purpose of urban exploration, which laid out this chapter’s thesis with terrific clarity. “I’m finding access to areas that are generally saved only for the elite of society. I love breaking into condos and high rises. I am literally stealing an experience I could never afford by crashing a hot tub or getting on the roof right above a multimillion-dollar penthouse,” he said. “I really view a lot of what we do as an outright attack on capitalism and consumer society. ...‘Everything for everybody’ is reflected in trespassing in spaces that the wealthy or the government doesn’t want you to be in. This, to me, is about

reclaiming agency in a world where we are systematically alienated from the spaces around us and the ability to move freely."[358] I almost leaped out of my seat upon receiving this message. "You basically just summarized my whole argument haha," I texted back. "I think you're absolutely right! Especially about the stealing experiences part."

I appreciated Victor's statement not just because it reaffirmed my position (what academic doesn't love it when that happens?) but because it was more proof that some explorers think about what they do in expressly anti-capitalist terms. They are not mindless thrill-seekers or uncaring neo-imperialists. They are not bored kids out for kicks on the weekend. There is a conscious, sometimes openly stated political project underpinning all of this—if not for every explorer, then at least for some diehards like Thelma and Victor. "The public perception of urban exploring is one of the things that frustrates me more than anything in my life," Thelma says, bemoaning the standard view of urbexers as reckless criminals. "There's this whole other side [of the field] who have been doing incredible research, incredible projects, and often doing their own clandestine historic preservation of these spaces. ...This isn't just some dumb hobby where I'm running around in tunnels and then looking up what they might be on the internet later. This is an actual serious endeavor, something that's potentially important. And something that has messages to come out of it, many of which I think we still haven't figured out."[359]

"Everything for Everybody" is exactly the right slogan for this culture built not around extraction and exploitation but transparency. Explorers unseal the black box of modernity to learn what works about our cities, what does not work, and how to tinker with the machinery to make it function better for everyone. That the illegality of this practice has forced explorers to

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[358] Ibid.

[359] LaMay, keynote address (November 12, 2021).

operate in secrecy themselves is an irony not lost on Thelma. “You can’t blame ppl [people] for taking exploring as just what they see, which is the worst part, cause we be lurkin in the shadows lol,” he texted. Were explorers allowed to act with greater visibility, or if more explorers chose to reject media sensationalism and publish their own urbex essays, documentaries, and memoirs, perhaps there would be less spectacle and instead a greater public embrace of the field. “This is a perfect example,” Thelma wrote of my encounter with Kinney and the colonialist critique. “The less we tell our own stories, the more others will tell their version for us, for better or worse.”

Victor did have one small addendum to add, however. “Now,” he wrote, “if we wanna talk about the intersection of privilege and risk and the fact that [it] is easier for us to totally disregard the law to do this kind of thing since our demographic is largely white male bodied people, that’s another thing...” This brings us to the final and most substantial critique raised against urbex, one which anyone who studies this topic must consider with full seriousness: that urban exploring is a boy’s club that operates in the service of cis/heteronormative able-bodied White men. In their essay “Not Everyone Has (the) Balls: Urban Exploration and the Persistence of Masculinist Geography,” feminist geographers Carrie Mott and Susan M. Roberts argue that the “political potential of urban exploration...founders on its failure to recognize difference,” as their perceived “explorer-subject [is] associated with ideals of rugged masculinity” and the performance of “able-bodied, heteronormative and typically white” expressions of male power.[360] Their study of online and written exploring materials highlights “widespread (though far from universal) discourses that emphasize masculinity, fearlessness and physical strength, reinforcing older ideas about what sorts of bodies belong to explorer-subjects, and ignoring the exclusions they enact.” While Mott and Roberts recognize the “progressive politics”

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[360] Carrie Mott and Susan M. Roberts, “Not Everyone Has (the) Balls: Urban Exploration and the Persistence of Masculinist Geography,” *Antipode* 46, no. 1 (2014), 234.

underpinning urban exploration, they propose that there is a "paradox" through which this potential is disrupted by urbexers' (and urbex researchers') supposed distaste for questions of identity and marginalization. "As long as this paradox remains unexamined," they write, "possibilities for a radical engagement with the city through urbex will inevitably fall short."[361]

Mott and Roberts provide several examples of this masculinist discourse, most of which are sourced from 2000s and early 2010s blog sites, including comments in which "some urban explorers routinely describe themselves as 'penetrating' places often characterized as 'virgin.'"[362] Such statements transmute the act of exploring into a form of sexual conquest, in which exploration sites double as feminine objects ripe for deflowering. They quote the authors of an urbexing website called Operation Penetration, which ran from 2000 to 2004. "BIOKILLER's main concern is penetration," the site says of one male explorer with an over-the-top pseudonym. "If there is a door, he will open it, if there is a hole, he will penetrate it." A banner above this vile bit of boasting "depicts a woman lying in a seductive pose, her body partially obscured by a sheet or blanket, next to the word 'penetration' in bold black lettering."[363] The authors then point to numerous examples of explorers demanding courage from their fellow urban penetrators, using the far too common gendered language of those possessing "balls" versus 'pussies' who back down from danger. "You'll hurt, you'll bleed, you may find yourself crouched in an [sic] tunnel alcove nose to the third rail as a subway train whistles past, leaving

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[361] Ibid., 234-235.

[362] Ibid., 238.

[363] Operation Penetration, nofuture.com/op/op.htm (Site no longer accessible); Mott and Roberts, "Not Everyone has (the) Balls," 238-239.

you wondering how you ended up here," reads a passage from the now defunct urbex site sleepycity.net. "For what? Knowing you had the balls to take life by the balls and live it."[364]

I was lucky enough not to encounter this language in my fieldwork, largely because happenstance placed me among one of the most inclusive and welcoming crews in the country. Therefore, I was at first inclined to dismiss such talk as a relic of an older, less enlightened time. This is not to say that I was comfortable with things like Operation Penetration, but rather that I naively hoped that urbexer sexism was a problem the community had already mostly resolved. Yet urbex lifers like Thelma have indicated to me that exclusionary, masculinist language persists among some seedier exploration crews, including one "notoriously sexist" outfit in Australia that recently abused and then excommunicated a popular trans woman explorer. It is therefore a continuing issue that other urbexers must identify, accept, and stamp out. "It is still gross. There's no way around it. ...You're climbing shafts, you're topping giant, phallic buildings, there's manholes. It's all dicks and penetration. It literally is. You crack a location wide open and fuck it," Thelma says. "It's in the words everyone uses to describe things. Girls are often not thought of as leaders in the exploring scene. It's so obviously there." Tina agrees. "I have a love/hate relationship with the exploring community," she says. "I've made some absolutely amazing friends. But I would say a lot of [explorers] are cisgender White males, and pieces of shit. ...I've heard a lot of racism from them. ...It can definitely be disheartening."

The crux of Mott and Roberts' argument then moves beyond this sophomoric language to suggest that urban exploration is exclusionary to its core, as it is impossible for people with specific disabilities to participate and difficult for others to join in due to their hyper-surveilled racial identities. "Wouldn't everyone like to venture wherever they pleased, without fear for

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[364] Sleepycity, "About Sleepycity," sleepycity.net/faqs (Site no longer accessible but archived at web.archive.org/web/20110724071905/sleepycity.net/faqs); Mott and Roberts, "Not Everyone Has (the) Balls," 238.

personal safety? Ultimately, however, participation in urbex is not simply a choice that everyone is equally enabled to make," they write. "Eluding security guards and police may prove an entertaining game for some, while for others the risks of such practices are far too great. A person already under surveillance and scrutiny and subject to racial or other forms of profiling by security agencies, for example, faces a much greater risk of harassment and detention than the typical white urban explorer."[365] In their conclusion, Mott and Roberts chastise Garrett and those who champion urban exploration as a "liberatory venture that everyone should participate in" (anticipating this dissertation as well) for their/our failure to acknowledge these deficiencies:

> We wonder how it is that most analysts of urbex have felt it is sufficient simply to note in passing the deeply gendered and exclusionary nature of the practice, and avoid any sustained or meaningful critique or engagement with extensive relevant feminist literature pertinent to the topic. It seems to us that this might be because the majority of geographers interested in urbex seem, for the most part, to accept the highly individualized, masculinist approach adopted by many urbexers themselves. This is a troubling situation, and one not without irony.[366]

I want to preface my slight rebuttal to this statement by first saying that I am grateful for Mott and Roberts' analysis and share their distaste toward the misogynist content featured on exploring websites like Operation Penetration. Those comments are emblematic of the rape culture that permeates every aspect of American society, and which is therefore present in urban exploration as well. I am also grateful to Thelma and Tina for highlighting for me just how terrible the situation remains. Yet still I do not feel that comments like those featured in "Not Everyone Has (the) Balls" are representative of all, or even most urbex practicioners. If I did feel that way, then there is not one chance that I would continue to participate in urban exploration, let alone center it in this essay about the construction of a more equitable world. Mott and

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[365] Mott and Roberts, "Not Everyone Has (the) Balls," 237.

[366] Ibid., 236-240.

Roberts' focus on "balls" as tokens of bravery has special resonance for me as a transgender woman, willfully castrated and thereby marked by a conspicuous absence of testicles in a manner matching or even in some regards exceeding that of cisgender women. I have no patience for male chauvinism, and little desire to let comments about "penetrating" infrastructural "holes" pass by unremarked upon. Being a socialist, I also do not accept a "highly individualized" approach to anything, but insist instead on collectivized group dynamics, collectivized problem-solving, and collectivized exploring habits.

Yet Mott and Roberts are considerate scholars and prove that they are more interested in constructive critique than in dismissing urban exploration wholesale. Their article includes several recommendations for ways in which urbex scholarship can move away from a focus on archetypical male bodies and toward a more inclusive reading of space. These include attention toward the ways in which urbex represents a queering of social boundaries and produces homosocial bonds between explorers, and how exploring might expose the class inequities encoded within cities and human mobility. These recommendations still take for granted that explorers are nearly always male, as inferred by the idea that the most meaningful bonds between explorers are homosocial ones, but they are a good start. For my part, I have tried to adopt some variations on these perspectives in this essay, most especially the interest in class inequality.

As Thelma's comments and Victor's acknowledgement of the "intersection of privilege and risk" demonstrates, today's urbexers are increasingly cognizant of the unequal racial and gendered aspects of exploring. Rather than ignore them or insist on White male normativity, the explorers I observed seek to diversify their ranks and make exploring more accessible to those who face greater identity-based risks. While I thankfully was not present for any run-ins with the police, I have seen explorers exit caves with a stated plan to use White urbexers and/or those

without arrest records as shields to protect explorers of color and/or anyone with a pre-existing criminal background should they find officers waiting for them on the other side. Women explorers are especially well suited to serve as the group's 'face' during an encounter with the law, owing to ostensibly positive yet nevertheless harmful social biases that make them appear less threatening and less criminal than men. Urban explorers understand all of this and manipulate the prejudicial nature of American policing when they can.

"What you look like has a big impact," Michelle says. "If I'm stopped, people are like, 'Oh, it's some small Asian girl.' ...If I was [Black or Brown], getting caught could be a totally different story." There are other identity-based factors too. "Nobody thinks I'm a criminal. ...It's the intersection of class and race. I'm not a high school kid. I'm a White professional male," says Moses, highlighting his class dimensions in addition to race and gender. "Me and Michelle have gone to a couple places together, and it's like, Jesus, we're really the poster of the privileged urbex team," he says.[367] Tina has also experienced the benefit of the doubt given to light-skinned female explorers, as she recounts this story of a busted trip she and three friends took to the roof of one Times Square hotel. The consequences of their arrest are minimal, especially compared to one story about a Black explorer featured toward the end of this chapter.

> We get down to the bottom and we're greeted by six or seven NYPD. They see us, and we're four girls, and they are all so confused. They're looking at us like 'What? These girls here?' And the security guard is like, 'Yes, them.' And they're like, 'Alright, I guess turn around?' So, they handcuff us and take us to a room in the hotel, and a couple of the cops were actually pretty apologetic about it. They thought they were there for a 'burglary-in-progress.' "We had to go to court for it, and we got a ticket for the equivalent of peeing in public or drinking in public. So, like $25. But we fought it because there we no 'No Trespassing' signs, so we got the charges dropped.

[367] Gates, interview with the author, March 14, 2019. Moses would later clarify in a March 5, 2022 email that "What I meant to convey from that quote about me and Michelle is that us being two different types of people gives us different privilege in urbexing, and that kind of combines to cover all the bases."

Urban explorers did not choose for their subculture to suffer this kind of racist and gendered policing. This is a problem whose origins are external to the field, though explorers absolutely have an obligation to counter the phenomenon with justice-minded education and intersectional solidarity. Tina, for her part, has taken the job of reprimanding her fellow explorers seriously. “I think that I’ve made an influence from calling people out with no remorse,” she says of those times when other urbexers expressed prejudiced sentiments around her. Such patterns of behavior are, I think, somewhat less common today than they were ten to twenty years ago, in the period when Mott and Roberts’ data was generated. The increasing visibility of social justice movements over the back half of the 2010s seems to have left an impact on urbex discourse, and I have encountered several explorers who consciously invest themselves in anti-racist theory and activism. Included among them are standouts like the late Kevin Ehrman-Solberg, better known to his fellow MSP explorers as Cowboy Dan. Ehrman-Solberg was a proud urbexer, socialist, and academic geographer. He was also a co-founder of the University of Minnesota’s “Mapping Prejudice” project, which seeks to visualize racial discrimination in the Twin Cities through a series of interactive maps. Cowboy Dan spent his days fighting for the rights of unhoused people and agitating against corporate landlords, and he spent his nights diving into the cracks within the urban landscape. He embodied the powerful and growing link between exploring and social justice work—two undertakings that he always read as being in conversation with one another. I cannot say that his life is characteristic of the culture at large, and I imagine he would have been the first to acknowledge that urbex has a long way to go to achieve equity. I can say, however, that Cowboy Dan and Thelma are not the only urbexers engaged in left-wing activism.

It is true that most American and European explorers are White, though the demographics of a given exploring scene differ from city to city. I encountered many more Black explorers in New York than in Minnesota, for example, though even there the numbers skew toward Whites. Yet my fieldwork observations do not back up the claim that explorers are near-exclusively young, male, and cisgender/heterosexual. Nor have I found that urban exploration is closed off to all people with disabilities. Concerning the latter group, I met a couple of urbexers who are on the Autism spectrum and who enjoy urbexing as their version of what is called a 'special interest.' These special interests—a devotion to some hobby, concept, or beloved pop cultural item—are common in people with Autism. One such person I explored with, a man called Drainrat, had a pronounced special interest in stormwater drains. Drainrat was new to the Minneapolis/St. Paul exploring team when I met him, and though his status as an Autistic person made him stand out within the group, he has quickly become a fixture in the community. He now leads monthly drain-centered meetups while also hosting a popular all-night drain marathon during Mouser Week. Drainrat received a prize during Mouser Week 2022 honoring him as one of the best new explorers of the year. Another explorer with Autism, meanwhile, expressed to me that digging days at Sandland have provided him with an outlet for his own interest in tunnels and excavation. The athletic demands of urban exploration may have the unfortunate effect of rendering it inaccessible for those with some (but not all) physical disabilities, but I have seen no indication that neurotypical explorers seek to exclude neurodivergent explorers from their community (at least not among the progressive Minnesota urbexers). On the contrary, those who identify urban exploration as a special interest may well rank among the most talented and dedicated members of any urbexing crew.

Urban exploration events also frequently boast a pronounced LGBT element, befitting of this avocation which so queers the everyday relationship between bodies and space. Trans women such as myself are a common sight at urbex events, and I have encountered numerous cisgender lesbian women and gay men as well. Explorer parties sometimes feature carnivalesque costumery that blurs the lines between masculine and feminine gender presentation, and while this is typical of the festival genre in general and not necessarily indicative of an everyday acceptance of LGBT people, here I find it does comes packaged with a larger queer-positive outlook. Not every explorer is queer, of course, but the exploring scenes I have most involved myself with are colored by the perspectives of their LGBT members in a manner that I have found welcoming, refreshing, and indeed somewhat radical. Garrett has noted similar experiences, especially in his interactions with the Minneapolis/St. Paul explorers. "The Minneapolis crew is probably the most diverse and interesting of all the urban exploration crews," Garrett told me. "That has a lot to do with them absolutely refusing to allow it to be a heteronormative activity in that city."[368] For example, he recounts a time when he and Thelma, who is married to a male explorer, were wandering together through a sewer tunnel. They soon came to a junction, prompting Garrett to ask, "Do we go left, or do we go straight?" At this, Thelma turned around and replied, "We don't ever go straight, we go *forward*," thereby marking the sewer as an explicitly queered and counter-normative space, and their journey within it as a progressive venture. Rather than a simple "hole" to conquer in the patriarchal language of Mott and Roberts' subjects, Thelma's sewer is instead a crooked, even kinky path toward liberation. "It was such a great moment, and everyone started busting up," Garrett laughs. "But, of course, everyone started saying 'forward' after that, and I still say it."

[368] Bradley L. Garrett, interview with the author, December 3, 2018.

Thelma is even more explicit about the connection between subaltern identities and ‘going underground,’ into the unsafe, unsanitized, un-straight world hiding beneath the surface. Whereas living ‘in the closet’ connotes shame, repression, and an involuntary expulsion from society, the queer explorer going underground develops their own space for self-love and actualization in the urban void. For Thelma, the sewers have always been queer, and he was quick to invite other gay men there with him to share in that atmosphere. “The people we brought with us were queens. We wore high heels in the sewers,” he says. “You bring a [straight male] explorer...into a sewer and they’ll tiptoe around the sides. You bring a queen into a sewer in heels and they will splash down the middle!” He theorizes that “people with queer identities end up in these spaces more often than others” both because they have been pushed out of more privileged spaces, and because the underground represents a more welcoming place to build a life for themselves. He compares LGBT urbex to gay cruising in “disused and forgotten space.” Gay men out cruising “had to go to the fringes of physical space to find privacy,” Thelma says, calling our attention once more to the heterotopic social peripheries that so fascinated Foucault. He goes on to draw lines of commonality between himself and LGBT explorers of the past, and relates how exploring has become a refuge for him at a time of rising queerphobia and precarity:

> People who did the exact same thing [as us] in the '20s or the '30s...weren't called [urban explorers]. They were all just 'weirdos,' or 'sewer rats.' And a huge amount of those people were queerdos! If you don't see a place for yourself in society that you can take, you fucking find it. And it's probably not going to be at the mall, it's going to be around that dark corner that you wander about when you go to the park.
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> A lot of people take to exploring because they find the community and [discover that urbexers] have less preconceived notions about people and are passionate and interesting. And it saved them. It's a place for people, which is massively important in a terrible world like today. Whenever something shitty happens, there's something on the news about Trump, I'm like--'He's never taking my fucking sewers. He can't stop me from going underground.' The day after Trump got elected, I went down into the sewer and rolled in sewage, screaming. To me, that's the response. I reject your sterile cleanliness.
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> It's no surprise that exploring has become more popular. ...People have gone underground during bad times historically all over the world. In Vietnam, they dug tunnels and hid whole cities in them. In Poland, the Jews escaped through the sewers when things got bad. You retreat. I couldn't find what I was looking for above ground, so I can just build this world underground.

I must concede that I began my fieldwork anticipating a substantial gender imbalance of the sort Mott and Roberts describe. This is not because I saw urbex as a toxically masculine culture that shuts women out from involvement, but because its blend of physical and psychological derring-do seems more likely to attract those socialized as male than those socialized as female (a problem in its own right). I was surprised then to find myself among so many fantastic women explorers, with whom I felt an immediate sense of sisterhood. These women have become my closest confidants in urbex, and my time living in the city would have been far lonelier and less satisfying without their friendship. They are also some of the boldest urbexers operating today, and while I have not observed any women taking extreme risks like hanging off the side of a giant clock like Adam, I have seen them scale bridges, mountain goat their way across rock walls, and squeeze through *chatières* so cramped that they would induce instantaneous claustrophobia in any reasonable person. Many of these women are among the longest-tenured and most acclaimed urbexers in their cities.

Newer women are also welcomed into the fold. One female explorer I met in Minneapolis, a forty-two-year-old woman named Jessica, became involved through her relationship with Dennis. We spoke one evening during a subterranean movie screening, where she kept busy knitting a scarf while the film *V for Vendetta* played projected onto a sandstone wall. She professed that she sometimes doesn't 'feel' like an explorer because she is so new to the culture, especially compared to her very experienced boyfriend. Both I and others present pushed back against this idea, reminding her that anyone foolish enough to break the law so they can watch bad movies in a hole in the ground has well earned the title 'urban explorer.' Jessica agreed, and said that she has never felt unwelcomed, only struck with self-doubt. The community has in turn done its best to assure her that she belongs and is just as much an explorer as Dennis or anyone else. She may have entered the community through her relationship with a male explorer, but she is not seen as subordinate to his position, only newer to the scene. This interaction stands in opposition to Mott and Roberts' claim that "while many women do engage in urbex, they figure often in photographic representations of the practice as minority figures who appear to be going along with an activity that is largely led and defined by the male explorers"—an assertion that is again based on hero shots and not engagement with explorers.[369]

One need only look to Lucy's photography as evidence that even the traditionally masculine hero shot, a basis for much of Mott and Roberts' research, can be claimed by women and remade into an attestation of feminine power. Lucy is a New York and Zurich based artist originally from Hartlepool in the United Kingdom. She works as a fashion photographer and has a keen eye for urbexer style, as evidenced by having once "finished fourth in her local beauty

[369] Mott and Roberts, "Not Everyone Has (the) Balls," 240.

pageant...while wearing a pair of hip waders with her bikini during the swimsuit section."[370] Lucy has combined her interests in fashion and exploration into a series of photographs she calls the "Backwards and in High Heels Collection." This title is of course in reference to cartoonist Bob Thaves' comment that Hollywood dancer Ginger Rogers did everything her more celebrated male co-lead Fred Astaire did, except under even more challenging conditions. The photos in this collection depict numerous women—including models, dancers, other female urbexers, and Lucy herself—high atop bridges and skyscrapers. They stand posed in fashionable attire that both compliment and contrast with the infrastructure around them. This does suggest a juxtaposition between the female body and the masculine qualities we associate with steel beams and feats of (historically) male engineering, but it also supposes that there is a grace in urban architecture as well. It compels the viewer to see beauty in these imposing structures, while likewise seeing strength in women whom male photographers might depict only as flat objects. This synthesis of elegance and grit, form and function, and the masculine vs. feminine eye on the world is reinforced by the title Lucy has given to one of her works in particular, "Structure and Strength."

This image features a woman in a long red skirt standing near the top of the Newport Transporter Bridge in Wales (Fig. 19). She faces toward the camera (rather than facing away in the style of many macho hero shots) yet dictates the course of her own gaze, glancing down at the danger she has mastered. "I started this project to challenge gender stereotypes, to make the viewer reconsider the mental and physical capabilities of women," Lucy says. "Risk and heights are two things that are often viewed as being things men work with, not women. These are two

[370] Gates, *Hidden Cities*, 250.

things present in all the images in this collection."[371] The same photographic mission repeats in similar work with Ingrid Silva, an Afro-Brazilian ballet artist from the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and in Lucy's widely reproduced 2012 self-portrait taken atop one of the Chrysler Building's chrome eagles. In each instance, women explorers are rendered as individuals, separate from men and possessing their own identity in the way that the *rückenfigur* does not. This is not the gaze of a colonial conqueror. These are women who have achieved a state of symbiosis with urban space. the city is an extension of their body, and their body is an extension of the city.

Fig. 19: "Structure and Strength." Photo by Lucinda Grange, 2015.

[371] Jen Carlson, "The Story Behind Lucinda Grange's Insane Photo Sitting Atop the Chrysler Building Eagle," *Gothamist*, July 6, 2016, gothamist.com/arts-entertainment/the-story-behind-lucinda-granges-insane-photo-sitting-atop-the-chrysler-building-eagle.

This is what I mean when I say that urban exploration can be used for constructive ends. By empowering participants to see the city from a different angle, by granting them the freedom to utilize space in unauthorized ways, and by nurturing collaboration between explorers, urbex offers innumerable chances for personal and collective growth. Academic critics like Kinney, Mott, and Roberts are wise to pinpoint urban exploration's more problematic tendencies, because of course no human endeavor is without defects. I am not so much an evangelist of this practice to think that it is beyond the need for improvement, even *serious* improvement, and I know that my anecdotal examples do not wipe the slate clean. "There are aspects of urban exploration that leave me deeply uneasy, and cannot be fended off by indemnifying gestures of self-awareness on the part of its practitioners," Macfarlane writes. Among these aspects he lists "its air of hipster entitlement, its inattention towards those people whose working lives involve the construction, operation and maintenance...of these hidden structures...[and] the opportunities urban exploration holds for insensitivity to those people who have no choice but to exist in contexts of dereliction and ruin."[372] Each of these is a good concern, and some of these problems, such as a lack of care for those living in squalor, are so woven into the texture of exploration (and American society in general) that they may be impossible to excise. I am pleased that there are writers like Macfarlane calling our attention to these issues, and to Mott and Roberts for their final assessment of exploration, which is worth reprinting here:

[372] Macfarlane, *Underland*, 154.

> To be blunt about it, we...think it matters that some people are much more likely to be arrested or harassed when engaging in urban exploration than others. The ways in which our bodies are interpellated, variously hailed as gendered, raced, and abled, is of real material consequence for everyone, as we each carry with us the weight of these processes. ...If those liberatory experiences are often only possible for particularly embodied subjects, and if the practice often reinforces the privilege of a certain type of subject, then how does the practice actually challenge or re-work, say, the ways urban socio-spatial processes simultaneously marginalize some while privileging others?[373]

This is a critique that all explorers should grapple with for the good of their practice. They should not be sidestepped or glossed over but confronted head-on as in all aspects of human social relations. Yet we must remember that these problems do not originate in urban exploration but in capitalism and its accompanying racial and gender hierarchies, systems of power whose dictates urbex—despite its flaws and despite its relative smallness in the face of capital—is more often poised to confront rather than promote. There is still so much potential for good in this practice, despite its many festering inequities. As Macfarlane writes, "Other aspects of the subculture have come to compel me. I was especially struck by the manic systematicity of much explorer practice...I liked urban exploration's awareness of the porosity of the city's fabric, the proliferation of portals, rifts, and drifts it perceived, and also its sense of sub-cities...as spaces existing in long-term, slow-motion flux."[374] He regards urbex as an old custom, perhaps one as old as cities themselves, and notes the way this generational legacy "intersected with histories of poverty and hope within cities."

This, to me, is what urban exploration is about. While I do find it a "liberatory venture," as Mott and Roberts write, I do not think it is one that "everyone should participate in." Perhaps urbex *should* be for everyone, in a better world than ours. But here, in this White and male

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[373] Mott and Roberts, "Difference Really Does Matter: A Reply to Garrett and Hawkins," *Antipode* (2013), antipodeonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/mott-and-roberts-reply.pdf.

[374] Ibid., 154-155.

supremacist social reality, it is a sad fact that urbex may not be an option for everybody. These authors are correct when they write that the ability to explore demonstrates privilege and presents a high barrier to entry for people of color and those with disabilities. It is also quite dangerous. Urban exploration can, and has, gotten people in deep legal trouble. It has gotten people killed. It does us no good to pretend otherwise. "If you're a person of color and you get caught trespassing, your likelihood of going to jail or getting shot is *so* much higher than a White dude with a DSLR fancy $3,000 camera," Thelma says. "It's already disincentivizing people of color, and that's before there are any person-to-person interactions [with White explorers]. It doesn't matter how nice you are, or how accepting you are. They still have a disadvantage." There are Black explorers to be sure, but many other potential explorers of color remain turned away by this risk, and that is a tragedy that some White people in the urbex community have not been willing to confront. I hope the following story will help open their eyes and spur them to action.

One explorer I reached out to for this project was Drifter Shoots, an Army veteran and urbex photographer popular on Instagram. Drift, who is Black, declined to meet with me because he suspected—rightfully so, as it happens—that he was being tracked by police. Drift was arrested in December 2020 after Cincinnati police made him the target of a nationwide manhunt in retaliation for his climb up that city's tallest skyscraper. The *New York Times* reports that "state troopers in Arizona shut down an interstate highway to catch him," and brought with them a helicopter, assault rifles, and attack dogs.[375] Police charged Drift with multiple burglary-related felonies, rather than the standard misdemeanors most explorers face, and held him "without bond in 23-hour lockdown for more than two months." Prosecutors insisted that he be kept locked up

[375] Dave Philipps, "A Rogue Climber Running from the Law Was Fleeing His Own Trauma," *New York Times*, June 4, 2021, nytimes.com/2021/06/04/us/isaac-wright-driftershoots-ptsd.html

specifically because of his military background and exploring skills. “Stealth and deception are his trademarks,” assistant prosecutor Anne Flanagan told reporters. “We don’t know what other motive he may have [in addition to photography]...but we do know what training he has.”[376] Drift was sentenced to probation and received no additional jail time beyond those two months in captivity, yet this horrific experience exacerbated the trauma he had already endured because of military PTSD and the earlier police murder of two family members. The judge in this case expressed hope that Drift would receive the treatment needed to improve his mental health, yet never acknowledged the state’s role in worsening his health, nor the fact that urbex photography *was* his treatment. “You could put me through years of therapy, give me all the meds in the world, and it would not help me the way that my art helps me,” he says.

This case is a perfect example of the hyper-surveillance that Black explorers face, which makes urbex a daunting proposition for many people of color, as Mott and Roberts argue. Drift, for his part, concurs. “I’m one of the very few African-American explorers out there in the community, it’s a 99% White male dominated space,” he says. “I’ve seen my friends get caught on structures...and walk away with like, ‘Oh, they’ll go down to the precinct.’ And then when they get to court, it gets dismissed or they get community service. But when it’s me and I don’t even get caught on a structure, I get hunted down based off my background and demographics.”[377] All of this is true and indisputable. Yet his story also demonstrates the grand, sometimes life-saving benefits of exploration that can at times justify the danger. Drift is now back at work as an explorer and photographer, creating new art in cities around the country.

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[376] Cameron Knight, “Treatment and No Jail Time for Isaac Wright,” *Cincinnati Enquirer,* November 4, 2021, cincinnati.com/story/news/crime/2021/11/04/treatment-and-no-jail-time-isaac-wright-photographer-veteran-great-american-ball-park/6252759001.

[377] Nick Tomaino, “The Rise of Drifter Shoots,” *The Control*, January 22, 2022, thecontrol.co/the-rise-of-drifter-shoots-6b470ed18bd7.

Cases like his (though I should say his case is by far the most extreme I've encountered) show why Mott and Robert's analysis is necessary. Difference must be recognized, as difference shapes our relationship with law, state institutions, and each other. Any explorer or researcher who denies the unequal privileges at play in exploring, or who is unwilling to put in the work necessary to correct them, is a detriment to the community. Yet studying urbex as an exclusively White phenomenon, as though PoC participants do not or should not exist at all, is also disrespectful toward explorers like Drifter Shoots, who so clearly loves what he does and finds both satisfaction and healing within it. If Drift can return to exploring even after enduring all that he has, then there must be *something* about this practice that makes it valuable and worth defending—or, better yet, *improving*—despite its privileged character and flaws.

I do not believe that urban exploration is a salve that alone can rescue the city from its fallen state. The explorers understand that their practice is a living design, in continuous need of repair for the benefit of their cities, their compatriots, and themselves. As Shotgun Mario writes in his guide, "Foundation Concepts of Good Exploring Habits:"

> Although we don't all agree on everything in the exploring community (including what exploring actually is), as a group we tend to work through our issues and see through our own personal problems for the greater good. We debate, argue and fight. We make amends, have fun, and explore together. We've moved mountains together, and we've been able to keep one of the largest underground societies in the world quiet for a long time. We're not always right with what we decide, and we're not always moving in the correct direction...but what matters is we always try to correct what is wrong in the name of good exploring ethics, from the community level down to the individual level.[378]

What I have sought to argue in this dissertation is that urban exploration (and squatting, for that matter) is part of a constellation of behaviors that can, through time and when paired with other radical actions, help free the urban from its imprisonment under the modern, capitalist episteme. Urbex is a tool, not a prescription. It is like all things bound up in those "histories of poverty and

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[378] Shotgun Mario, "Foundation Concepts of Good Exploring Habits," 2012.

hope," part of the infinite struggle between the proletarian city-dweller and the bourgeois planning class. To what end shall it be used? Will it be a weapon of White patriarchy and neo-colonialist exploitation, or will it be an asset for intersectional community-building and solidarity? That is something that the explorers must decide for themselves. From what my fieldwork has shown me, at least, I am left with optimism that urbex can continue changing for the better and live up to its own emancipatory potential.

CONCLUSION: COMMODITY OR SOVEREIGNTY?

Squatting and urban exploration offer something fundamental yet missing in ordinary life. They provide a stage upon which we might defend our material needs, craft a sense of belonging, and reclaim a small hint of the autonomy denied elsewhere under capitalism. They are one of many mundane yet unlawful activities that work to rehumanize our social lives and reestablish our right to the city—not the attenuated, state-directed, liberal conception of that right, but the true, revolutionary formulation championed by Lefebvre. While not everyone wants or needs to organize shared housing, let alone scale the Brooklyn Bridge, many city-dwellers are still attracted to these activities because they recognize an element of freedom within them that is otherwise absent from their lives. Most people *want* to admire the explorer's bravery or the squatter's resilience, despite the many smear campaigns run against them. Most people *want* cities to help them connect with others instead of furthering their isolation. These near-universally appealing qualities make autogestive lifeways difficult to stamp out. The government can penalize them as it likes, but there will always be newcomers drawn to Lefebvrian modes of resistance, whether by necessity, desire, or a potent mixture of the two. As with all attempts to regulate human behavior, criminalization alone is not enough. Fortunately for the capitalists, law is not the only tool at their disposal.

Scholars like Debord have long demonstrated modernity's power to gobble up and subvert any practice that resists the logic of capitalist realism and recuperate them into spectacle. Often capital's corporate and state directors are slow to begin this process, choosing at first to police the challenge rather than seize upon it, as they did with their billy clubs and armored tank

on the streets of Alphabet City, and in their crackdowns against explorers. Yet any aspect of counterculture persistent enough to endure this assault will eventually find itself swallowed up and marketized instead, transformed from an object of scorn into an effective business venture for those bold enough to identify opportunities for profit in previously criminal activity. This new commodity lacks the transgressive spirit of its original yet will almost always prove the more popular of the two, given its accessibility and the continued stigmatization of the genuine article. This process has already played out with leftist subcultural movements like the 1970s punk scene, and there is evidence that capitalists are now attempting to absorb urban exploration and squatting in the same fashion. Yet this is a mission doomed to failure. Therefore, I feel it is appropriate to close this dissertation with two examples of how ill-equipped capitalism is to suitably cultivate legal, for-profit business models capable of supplanting these everyday acts of rebellion. I want to show how these activities lose their meaning once stripped of their subversiveness and reinterpreted as corporate pursuits, because I feel this mirrors the way capitalism hollows out the urban to create the modern city.

Related Companies and Oxford Properties Group are the primary developers of Hudson Yards, a massive gentrification project that transformed an old rail yard near Madison Square Garden into a complex of six gleaming glass skyscrapers. In 2021, these developers opened City Climb, a ticketed attraction in which participants are allowed access to the 1,270-foot-high roofline of their 30 Hudson Yards property. The City Climb package consists of a short walk up an outdoor flight of stairs, a photo opportunity at the summit (all photos taken by staff, no personal cameras allowed), and the chance to dangle over a ledge while affixed to a safety harness. Visitors are guided throughout this process by trained employees and are continually on belay, even while walking up the stairs. They are also required to dress in blue jumpsuits

reminiscent of skydiving apparel. These safety measures appear quaint compared to the freewheeling nature of urban exploration, and they certainly temper that element of danger so necessary in revitalizing the urban oeuvre. Yet they also serve the function of keeping inexperienced rooftoppers calm and alive. The harnesses, while less than thrilling, are not objectionable on their own.

More problematic is the $185 per-person price tag Related and Oxford have affixed to what is essentially a walk around two narrow observation platforms. This is almost five times the already hefty $38 admission fee levied on visitors to the tower's regular observation platform, known as the Edge. Those who purchase these tickets receive nothing of material value for their money, aside from a complimentary photograph and—optionally for an additional $16 fee—a glass of champagne. They are buying something Related and Oxford do not and cannot control, yet something the developers are happy to market to their customers regardless. These guests are purchasing the city itself. They cannot afford to buy a privileged view from the top, and they dare not steal it as urbexers might. A 45-minute rental is thereby the only possibility remaining, even if marked up to an exorbitant cost. The developers are quite aware of what they are selling. They understand that the product is the view and not their building, as evidenced by the $10 premium they charge to visit the Edge at sunset. This repackaging of the NYC skyline as commodity and spectacle has likely resulted in millions of dollars in annual revenue for Related and Oxford, the former of which is already valued at $50 billion in assets. All of this for a brief view of a city whose landscape and vistas, ostensibly, belong to the public. "I don't think there's nothing to the fact that it used to cost $2 to go on the Empire State Building and now it costs $50

to go on the Empire State Building," Moses Gates says. "I think [urban exploration] blew up because more and more people got frustrated with the curat[ion] of public space."[379]

Related and Oxford's decision to brand their observation deck as the "Edge" evokes more than just their building's sharpened, angular architecture. It suggests transgression and disobedience, a feeling that one is slicing away at the outside margins of acceptability. Yet what City Climb offers is the most edgeless, sanitized version of urban exploration possible. Here one finds a take on urbex completely divorced from anything exploratory. The journey is literally on rails, owing to the mechanical rope system that guides visitors up the 370-step staircase to the top. There is no chance for spontaneity or surprise. There is no autonomy when customers must follow the guidelines laid out for them by employees. While the low risk of harm is a positive, it also denies the kind of improvised friendship through struggle that I experienced with Chelsea at the Pits Cave. There is indeed little opportunity to form a bond with other guests, besides accompanying family and friends. This take on urban exploration is exactly the "pre-packaged adventure" that Ninjalicious lambasts in *Access All Areas*. It is a product rather than a process; something one buys rather than something one builds. It is, in brief, a recuperation of urbex into a consumable market form, bearing all the same aesthetic trappings of a climb to the top of Central Park Tower but none of the creativity or passion. "What happened to free observation decks?" an urbexer named Jamie wrote in our Signal chat. "I might have to go rooftop that one on principle. $185? You fucks sold a $55 million penthouse."[380]

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[379] To be precise, tickets to the Empire State Building's 86th floor observatory cost $44 per adult, while tickets to the 102nd floor start at $77 per adult. There is a small discount for children and seniors. These are the current prices in 2022 and are subject to change again in the future.

[380] Signal chat group, October 28, 2021.

Out on the West Coast, meanwhile, the *Los Angeles Times* did a write-up in December 2020 about a Hollywood "capitalist commune" called Treehouse. This building, the newest venture from a pair of tech entrepreneurs named Prophet Walker and Joe Green, seeks to create "the togetherness of intentional communities like co-ops, communes, or Burning Man without the anticapitalist politics or freegan cuisine," the paper writes.[381] On its website, Treehouse pitches itself not as a business but as a "family of neo-homesteaders who, in a vast city, are drawn to connection."[382] Living quarters at Treehouse are nevertheless "pitched at the upper middle of the rental market" (by already affluent Hollywood standards), with a single bedroom and bathroom priced for no less than $1,715 per month, plus an additional $210 monthly fee for utilities and events like group yoga classes. "Only 10% of the units are set aside as affordable for low-income tenants," the *LA Times* states, "but all are currently occupied by poets."[383]

Treehouse embodies one of the classic capitalist dilemmas, in that its founders can diagnose the miseries their system engenders yet are incapable of resolving those problems while still working within that system. Green thought to create Treehouse after realizing he had been happiest as a child surrounded by friends, and then later as a Harvard student living in a dormitory. For Walker, the link between capital and isolation is even more apparent. "I never experienced a lack of community until I made money," he says. Walker soon began thinking about "how L.A. [breeds] loneliness—the skyrocketing rents, the neighbors who never [meet], the way that markets and neighborhoods in the city segregate people by race, class, age and

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[381] Sam Dean, "This Capitalist Commune is Trying to Cure L.A.'s Loneliness. Plus There's Free Coffee," *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 2020, latimes.com/business/technology/story/2020-12-17/this-venture-capital-funded-commune-is-trying-to-cure-las-loneliness.

[382] Prophet Walker and Joe Green, treehouse.community.

[383] Dean, "This Capitalist Commune is Trying to Cure L.A.'s Loneliness," latimes.com/business/technology/story/2020-12-17/this-venture-capital-funded-commune-is-trying-to-cure-las-loneliness

interest."[384] Treehouse appears at first to serve as a well-intentioned solution to all of this, or even as a way to borrow what works about squatting and render it compatible with the law and money. Day-to-day life at Treehouse does look much the same as in a socialist communal living setting, with housemates working together to manage their space and sometimes squabbling over petty conflicts. They host house-wide meetings called Tree Talks to address these disagreements, and it is at these meetings that they also screen potential new members and vote on their admission. There are no showdowns with police, nor any need to pirate electricity or form a Piss Bucket Brigade, but in general Treehouse seems to merge the co-living arrangements of life in a squat with the bougie luxuries of a downtown loft apartment.

The fatal flaw in this plan is that "capitalist communes" are an oxymoron. The narrative that Walker and Green founded Treehouse to combat loneliness is nothing more than a fairy tale. Their real plan is to treat the alienation wrought by capital as a market inefficiency and exploit it for profit, as even the *Times* acknowledges. "In an era when luxury is synonymous with isolation," they write, Walker and Green are "betting that real community can be packaged as a premium, an amenity that keeps atomization at bay as surely as heated floors banish cold feet." By reducing community to a "premium," a purchasable feature instead of a universally accessible component of any healthy city, the Treehouse founders corrupt the spirit of co-living embodied by Operation Move-In and the LES squats. Though their website talks a big game, playing on their arboreal (and decidedly *not* rhizomatic) theming to boast that "at Treehouse the root is community...the blossoms are the connections between friends and family, and it all grows wild when pollinated by kindred spirits," their business model implicitly argues that the

[384] Ibid.

oeuvre should belong only to those who can pay for it.[385] It is not community, but the commodity fetishization of community. It is capitalism's attempt to extract wealth from the crises it itself has created. Walker and Green are aware of this too, as demonstrated by their plans to expand Treehouse to other locations throughout LA in the pursuit of fortune. "It just so happens that through density arbitrage, through a host of laws, through real estate financials, [Treehouse] is an incredible investment," Walker says. He then takes a step back, perhaps realizing that he has given away the game. "But truly, we're trying to build a community," he tells the paper.[386]

These are but two of many instances in which capital has worked to recuperate squatting and urban exploration, and perhaps not even the most glaring examples available. Their exorbitant cost and failure to reproduce more than the most superficial qualities of each, however, illustrate just how resistant these practices are to co-optation. "Urban exploration is thoroughly underground (literally as well as figuratively) and always will be. It cannot be commodified because by nature it is transgressive," says John Law, Burning Man co-founder and a member of the legendary 1970s urbex crew Suicide Club. "Pioneering capitalists have tried to make businesses out of urban exploring for some years now, but the lawyers and the legal concept of financial liability and the limitations of indemnification from illegal actions make it impossible to make a business out of exploring places illegally. That fact is spectacular, and very cheery for me." The same is of course true for squatting, which by its nature *must* exist outside law and legality.[387] These facts account for City Climb and Treehouse, two attempts to squeeze

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[385] Walker and Green, treehouse.community.

[386] Dean, "This Capitalist Commune is Trying to Cure L.A.'s Loneliness," latimes.com/business/technology/story/2020-12-17/this-venture-capital-funded-commune-is-trying-to-cure-las-loneliness.

[387] Lydia Laurenson, "New Modality Catalyst: John Law," *The New Modality,* October 22, 2019, thenewmodality.com/catalyst-john-law.

profit from vague facsimiles of these endeavors, rather than from urbex and squatting themselves. Yet there are other ways in which the profit motive has seeped into these activities. Urbex has been hit especially hard by second-hand commodification of late, a framework in which exploring itself is not monetized, but the *explorers* are. One sees signs of this in the rash of clothing companies and camera manufacturers establishing sponsorship deals with popular urbexers on Instagram. This effort has led to an influx of rather samey online hero shots, many of them hawking specialty backpacks and hoodies. The brands involved are happy to invest in these explorers' criminal mischief, yet so far have shown a reticence to post bail or cover legal costs should their brand ambassadors end up in the back of a police cruiser. These companies therefore purchase the clout and exposure that comes with being a famous urban explorer yet divest themselves from all the risk. What better analogy can one find to explain the vacuous, zombie-like nature of capitalist urbexing?

At least one explorer has also started selling his urbex photography as NFTs (non-fungible tokens), a type of cryptocurrency that converts infinitely reproducible digital assets into private speculative holdings. I want very badly to bemoan this development, especially given my overall distaste for crypto, but I must acknowledge that it has some benefits. Drifter Shoots' "Where My Vans Go" collection, a series of NFTs depicting his conspicuously branded sneakers hanging over the precipice of various city structures, has moved more than $5,000,000 in trades as of January 2022, with no one single piece valued for less than $100,000.[388] Drift has used this money to pay off the legal fees from his arrest, and is now profiting from his artwork and the risks he takes as a climber. I suppose he is not terribly different in this regard from non-NFT photographers like Lucy, whose website offers prints of "Structure and Strength" and other

[388] Tomaino, "The Rise of Drifter Shoots."

images for up to $1,400. Artists deserve to receive an income for their creations, and I am glad Drift found a way to break free of the financial penalties levied on him by the Cincinnati courts system and their perversion of justice. I have seen a lot of negative comments surrounding his NFT business on urbexing forums, and I admit that my initial response was similarly negative. Explorers are right to feel repulsed by the financialization of their pastime, but Drift's personal history and his need to recuperate the losses suffered due to racist policing make this, at least for me, an acceptable and maybe even laudable case.

All these monetization developments have been driven by Instagram, and so there has been much consternation in the exploring community concerning that platform and the so-called 'Insta Kids' who populate it. These Instagram explorers, along with their brethren on TikTok and YouTube, document their urbex trips in part as entertainment for a digital audience. This new crop of Generation Z explorers differs in several ways from Millennial urbexers and those who came before them, and this is something that both groups are beginning to recognize. "They'll go to the top of the bridge and touch it and be like, '*Wow, this architecture!*,'" laughs Humza Deas, gently mocking infrastructure-obsessed veterans of the craft like Moses Gates and Steve Duncan.[389] Deas is one of the big stars of Instagram urbexing, along with other New York-based photographers like Drift and Raheim Simon. For this bunch, the journey to the top is all about capturing high-quality art and producing content for their followers—and sometimes for their sponsors as well. They aren't *just* in it for the clicks the way the news media might frame things, but they understand themselves as digital artists and performers in a way that someone like Thelma might not. Moreover, the consternation between Gen Z and Millennial urbexers appears to flow in both directions, at least for some. "The Instagram Kids have no compunction at all

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[389] Adrian Chen, "Meet the Outlaw Instagrammers of New York City," *New York*, August 17, 2014, nymag.com/intelligencer/2014/08/outlaw-instragrammers-of-new-york-city.html.

about getting co-opted by brands," Brad Garrett says. "Humza Deas was one of the first and worst. I remember him doing a sock ad where he took photos out of a helicopter of his socks flying over the city. We almost cried in London. We were like, 'This is it. It's over.'"

Yet I am not all doom and gloom about these things. Back in early 2019, I had a pleasant dinner with a sponsored Gen Z urbexer at the Court Square Diner in Long Island City. This young man, then less than a year out of high school, was a member of an Instagram exploring crew called Scout Legion. Though this was the name of the team at large, I will call him Scout for simplicity's sake and to protect his anonymity. The members of Scout Legion explore dressed in elaborate masks, with some patterned on horned devil faces and others on World War I respirators. They photograph themselves teetering on the ledges of high buildings and peacocking for the camera like rock stars in some forgotten bando. They are the Instagram Kids some old heads have told me to fear. And yet Scout is clear about who was most responsible for nurturing his interest in urbexing. "Steve Duncan," he says, without hesitation. "I've never met him, but he showed me what urban exploring is all about. Especially the history—he knew so much!" Scout is indeed every bit as passionate about the hidden narratives tucked away in interstitial spaces as any Gen X or Millennial explorer. The pursuit of these stories has given new shape and meaning to his life, much as it did for me at his age. As he explains:

> I didn't really do anything before this. I was kind of into sports, but then I fell off from that after a few years. Then high school started, and I didn't really know anyone, didn't have any friends. But once I started exploring it taught me a lot of things about life. Just enjoy things, be yourself, and all that. I can't imagine what I would be without exploring. ...I like the small things. ...It's like stepping into the past, finding [historical artefacts], figuring out the story of a place.[390]

[390] Scout, interview with the author, January 18, 2019.

Scout reminds me so much of my teenaged self, and it was a thrill to witness his urbexing talents at work on the beams of a Dutch Kills railroad bridge later that night. I am therefore a bit skeptical of this supposed generation gap, even if Instagram has provided younger explorers with new paths toward urbexing revenue. I cannot pretend that these developments corrupt urban exploration, because I know how ga-ga many older explorers would have been for Instagram if it was available during their youths. I certainly had a fascination with filming my exploits, and I am sure those videos would have made their way to YouTube had I been born a decade later. I also cannot help but notice that many, many urbex Instagrammers are men of color, including Scout, Deas, Drift, and Simon. If anything, Instagram seems to be diversifying urban exploration and imbuing it with new life, rather than causing harm. It would be further hypocritical for me to assail these social media creators given how much time I have spent enjoying their photography and giddily watching new episodes of vlogger Ally Law's monetized urbex YouTube series, including such classics as "HELD AT GUNPOINT! Climbing tallest building in Paris *ARRESTED*."[391] These videos are purposefully over the top yet demonstrate a real commitment to exploring and a kind of auteur style, both in Law's camerawork and infiltration skills. Scout, Humza, and even Ally Law—they too are explorers, and now is their time to pick up the torch and carry it however they like.

I do still have reservations about introducing so much money into the field, not only through Instagram sponsorship but through businesses like Untapped New York (despite my own brief involvement in that enterprise). But I prefer to see real, actual urbexers profiting from their success rather than companies like Oxford and Related swooping in to pad their revenue with weak imitations. All in all, I am conflicted. Does the monetization of urbex undermine my thesis,

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[391] Ally Law, "HELD AT GUNPOINT! Climbing tallest building in Paris *ARRESTED*," November 6, 2017, youtube.com/watch?v=D8fowuwJzN4.

or does it represent a reasonable negotiation with the marketplace that benefits explorers and their work? Has the germ of personal profit always been there, or is it a new feature brought into being by the internet? These are questions that I may seek to address more fully in a future expansion of this project, should the community find such a pursuit worthwhile.

This has been a complicated dissertation, to be sure. My decision to focus on two separate groups—squatters and explorers (with additional historic differentiations among the former, no less)—has presented me with the challenge of balancing these many narratives, and at times I worry that I have written two halves of a paper instead of one whole. More anxiety-producing for me is the fact that most squatters squat as a means of survival, whereas no explorer's life depends on exploration in quite the same way. Perhaps, I think, I have even committed the most egregious of all Marxist sins: mistaking the idealist for the materialist. Have I fallen for that old trap, believing that people can simply wish capitalism away through hobby pursuits and lifestylism or the power of positive thinking? Have I overemphasized the value of everyday acts of rebellion, despite knowing that, even at their best, squatting and urban exploration cannot possibly approach the power of a full-scale revolt against capital? Maybe.

It does not help that the squatters and explorers do not always view themselves as being cut from the same cloth. With almost every group I interviewed, I heard comments about how some other population of interest to this essay represented an anti-radical departure from their mission. Some affiliated with Operation Move-In accused the Lower East Side squatters of being white, middle-class phonies. Some LES squatters warned of fake anarchists who are only in it for the good times but never the hard work. Some explorers complained about those darn Instagram Kids, who climb all the same construction cranes they do but apparently never for the right reasons. Everywhere I turn, there is distrust between squatters and explorers, squatters and

squatters, explorers and explorers. Who am I to mash together all these people who do not always see themselves as kin? Who am I to assume they stand united in some revolutionary cause, when many do not even think of themselves as revolutionaries at all?

So, yes. This dissertation has been complicated. It has meandered through many different time periods and crisscrossed every corner of the five boroughs and beyond. It has been a tangle of contradictions from the start, defined less by resolution and more by a proliferation of uncertainties. Each time I think I have a handle on some line of inquiry, another uncertainty reveals itself or grows in scale, making it difficult to zero in on the truth. I admit that I remain uncomfortable with my very partial conclusions on race, gender, and urban exploration, which suffered from a lack of PoC exploring contacts. I do not believe this ambiguity arises from a disinterest in considering difference, which Mott and Roberts identified in previous urbex scholarship. In fact, I would say that a desire to recognize and respond to marginalization is the very thing that brought me to this topic. Rather, I may have struggled with race specifically because of my own Whiteness and the blind spots that come with it. The same could be said for my enthusiasm for exploring—built into this paper's thesis and argumentation from day one—which created additional blind spots that made it easy to miss some of these problems until I was already late into the writing process. I am thankful that the dissertation, in many ways, is only a rough draft. There will be chances in the future to build on the work conducted here, and I intend to make a race-conscious study of urban exploration central to any potential monograph. Until then, as in most humanities projects, uncertainty reigns.

Perhaps I should not blame myself too harshly for that uncertainty, however, since the squatters and explorers too have yet to resolve these questions. Are their practices truly radical or will they bow down to capital in the end? Do they belong to the disenfranchised or the

privileged? Is there room within them for interracial solidarity and, if so, what does that look like? Is it even possible for us to produce radical uses of urban space from inside the modern episteme, when our minds and deeds are so infected with capitalist realism that we may well be incapable of ever really acting against the system? I think that the *potential* for transformation is there, but it will take a lot more than *potential* to revive the right to the city. We may be on our way now, or we may only be killing time, wandering about in circles while the revolutionary moment recedes behind us. There is no resolution available, only more uncertainties. It is as Lefebvre himself wrote in his "Notes on the New Town." Here in New York, what do I see? "Will people be compliant and do what the plan expects them to do, shopping in the shopping centre, asking for advice at the advice bureau, doing everything the civic centre offices demand of them like good, reliable citizens?" he asks. "Can spontaneity be revitalized here, can a community be created? ...As yet I cannot give a firm answer. The hypothesis is plausible, and it produces a whole new string of questions. ...What are we on the threshold of? Socialism or supercapitalism? Are we entering the city of joy or the world of unredeemable boredom?"[392]

For what it is worth, I still believe these practices matter and that there is value in assessing them together. Though OMI has long been disbanded, and the LES squatters are today homeowners, squatting itself remains a critical form of urban rebellion and survival. Though exploring may be too White, too male, and increasingly too profitable, I will always admire its scofflaw nature and the real sense of agency it offers to those who participate. "I think exploring and living in those conditions at C-Squat went hand in hand," says Tina, who learned how to pick locks from Jerry the Peddler and how to resolve conflict between explorers from house meetings on Avenue C. "The idea of lawlessness, of living above the law, comes with the

[392] Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, 118-119.

territory of squatting and even urban exploration. ...I'm not going to do what everyone else is doing, what everyone else is telling me to do." As the almost comic feebleness of City Climb and Treehouse show, capitalism will never fully succeed in recuperating these practices because they exist definitionally outside the boundaries of the capitalist system. They belong to the urban void, to that geographical negative space in the shadow of planning where urbanites are free to live, think, do, and create to the best of their abilities. They can never become fully commodified because they are, at base, an expression of communal self-reliance and the interconnectedness of all city-dwellers. They are not commodities but expressions of life. They speak to the sovereignty of the people, not the sovereignty of profit. I am reminded of the words of Buenaventura Durruti, an anarcho-syndicalist CNT-FAI soldier who fought and died during the Spanish Civil War. "We have always lived in slums and holes in the wall. ...You must not forget that we can also build. It is we who built these palaces and cities... We, the workers," he declared. "We can build others to take their place. And better ones. We are not in the least afraid of ruins. ...The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history, [but] we carry a new world here, in our hearts. That world is growing in this minute."[393]

This project took almost four years to complete. That is approximately 12% of my entire life to this point. I have aged well into my thirties since it began, and I have moved from North Carolina to New York and back, and then on to Minnesota to take up a professorship and join the local exploring scene. My life has changed. So too have the people and places I've encountered changed with me. When I left New York at the tail end of 2019, it was still the same old dynamic city I have known all my life. Not three months later it was in lockdown as the Covid-19 pandemic swept across the globe, shuttering important Alphabet City hotspots like the Pyramid

[393] Abel Paz, *Durruti in the Spanish Revolution*, trans. Chuck Morse (Oakland: AK Press, 2007), 478.

Club and forcing Maggie and others into a state of self-imposed house arrest. The pandemic led to the cancellation of all organized urbex events, including Mouser Week 2021, and pushed far too many explorers apart from one another. But the squatters have bonds so strong that not even the NYPD can break them, and explorers always find a way through life's little *chatières*. These communities endure and will continue to inspire.

New York also endures. As a city, it has survived hurricanes and stock market crashes, terrorist attacks and despotic governance. New York will go on forever, not because of the dictates of planning but because of the quality of its people and the endless, unshakable desire that every New Yorker feels to do more, create more, and live in solidarity with their neighbors. With time, I trust that the people of New York will come to direct their own affairs, freed from the grip of real estate and property law (Fig. 20). I believe that the urban oeuvre will emerge from the shell of modernity, and that the right to the city as Lefebvre defined it will flourish once more. In smallish acts that deny poverty, that deny policing, that deny racism, that deny gentrification, that deny the supremacy of the few and the subordination of the many, they are building something new. They, the working-class urbanites of New York, are launching their own attack on the modern city. They are making homes out of dilapidated buildings and raising their children in them. They are scaling corporate office towers and straddling the third rail. They are changing the fabric of the city as they change the shape of their lives. In quiet, unexpected ways, they are making a revolution.

Fig. 20: “The city belongs to those who live in it.” Photo by Amy Starecheski,
captured during the eviction of the Dos Blockos squat, 1999.

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