

3/28/05

The Global City

Voices of the Street Essay

Traversing Public Space and Consciousness on the Streets of 1940's Chicago

My grandmother _____ was a young, single, lower middle-class woman living in ^{redundant}urban Chicago in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In my interviews with her conducted on March 19, 2005 and March 27, 2005, she discussed her day-to-day life in Chicago. She described moving effortlessly between public and private space in the city, never conceptualizing herself as either part of, nor apart from the urban landscape. In her rich accounts of traversing the streets of Chicago to attend school, go to work or out to dance clubs and ballrooms, she never alludes to herself as a participant or observer of democratic action but as an ordinary woman going about her business. With a perspective shaped by contemporary writers on urban space and democratic action, however, one can argue that my grandmother was part of a new consciousness developing in the United States during that era which sought, albeit cautiously, to incorporate women, different classes and races into the social and political discourse of the nation. Chicago was a stage upon which these changes played out.

My grandmother described the streets of Chicago first and foremost as dirty. Indeed, she showed me pictures of her as a child riding a friend's tricycle in her neighborhood covered head to toe in mud. She lived in a community that was constructed prior to the enactment of zoning laws. The result was a mixed residential and industrial area where fumes from the Sherwin Williams's paint plant and the Steel Mill

would mix with the aromas of the Croatian food being prepared by her mother. Interestingly, she was anxious to draw a distinction between the natural, unavoidable dirtiness of her own community and the utter “filthiness” of the men she passed on her way to school who “begged and slept on the streets and in brothel doorways (March 19, 2005)”. Conversely, she described the brothel women as “beautiful in their morning makeup (March 19, 2005)”. In describing the contrast between the dirty men and the beautiful women my grandmother appeared to be bridging two eras. On the one hand, she maintained the perception prevalent in Brown-May’s discussion of late 19th century Melbourne; people intimate with the street such as bootblacks and night time vendors, or in the case of my grandmother, “beggars”, were “disreputable” and “a general nuisance” (Brown-May, 61). On the other hand, she admiringly described the brothel women as beautiful, foreshadowing the new consciousness that would emerge with the rise of the feminist movement in coming decades.

Due to the fact that she lived several miles from Chicago’s Loop, my grandmother spent much of her time in or near the street. She would take buses, trains and streetcars almost daily as she traveled to school, work and on social outings. She recalled frequently being stalled in her travels due to accidents between streetcars and motorists or pedestrians. In fact, according to a report in the October 5, 1940 Chicago Tribune, 485 people were killed in Chicago in accidents involving streetcars and 17,751 had been injured since January first of that year (Chicago Tribune).

The streets of Chicago were neither clearly public nor private space. My grandmother showed me candid pictures of her and her friends walking down the street arm-in-arm. The pictures were taken by entrepreneur photographers who would then sell

the photographs to the pedestrian subjects of the photographs or anyone else that wanted to purchase them. “My friend and I were walking down the street and ran across some young men who wanted to know [redacted] name, well wouldn't you know it but a photographer had taken our picture and wanted us to buy it but before we could that young man and his friends paid a quarter for it (March 27, 2005).” In this way the distinction between public and private is blurred. My grandmother walking down a public street, involved in a private conversation while her photo is being taken for public consumption demonstrates the individual's precarious location somewhere in a “third space” of the city that is neither completely public nor wholly private.

When I asked her to describe the streets of Chicago during that time she spoke nostalgically of a bustling urban center where one “rubbed shoulders with people of all ethnic persuasions (March 19, 2005)”. She said that one quarter bought her a ride on the streetcar from her home to school, lunch and a pencil (March 19,2005). In this way, as she participated in the seemingly mundane day-to-day commute amongst the myriad “ethnic persuasions” of the city, my grandmother was interacting with the public spaces that “serve as primary intersections between the individual and the city (Crawford, 26)”. She easily passed through the “microcities” Crawford illuminates in her analysis of public space in L.A. that were defined not by strict borders but by “boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, and religion (Crawford, 26)”. Indeed my grandmother admitted to the presence of strong racism (in this case among the various sub-categories of European immigrants as well as other minorities) and an unspoken understanding of the right to pass through the invisible boundaries so long as she did not linger. “I'd imagine there was an ethnic community for every persuasion in the city: Polish, Croatian, German,

Black, Irish... Sometimes I would come home and say something [in German] to my mother that I had learned from one of my German friends and she would yell at me and tell me that we were Croatian (March 19, 2005).”

One place that my grandmother was able to spend a relatively extended amount of time with members of different ethnic and racial communities was in the dance halls and ballrooms. In her early twenties, my grandmother worked by day in a factory and would spend several nights a week as a hired singer in venues from jazz clubs to big band ballrooms. She had a strong preference for the big band music typified by Dick Jurgens and Glenn Miller. According to my grandmother, “I didn’t like the jazz clubs so well, you can’t sing that kind of music, really (March 19, 2005)”. Although most likely based on her personal musical preference, my grandmother alluded to another reason for preferring the ballrooms to the jazz halls. “Those jazz clubs had all kinds of people coming through the door (March 19, 2007)”. As evident in photographs of jazz bands and clubs in the late 30s and early 40s, both the musicians and the clientele were interracial and perceived as “low-class” by those that frequented the “high-class” venues such as the Aragon Ballroom in downtown Chicago. The racially mixed composition of the clubs was viewed as socially taboo by the larger public in Chicago (Merrill, 2005). As a location where a diverse population would convene, the jazz clubs in Chicago served the same purpose as garage sales in L.A. as argued by Crawford. “[G]arage sales might not in themselves generate a new urban politics, but the juxtapositions, combinations, and collisions of people, places, and activities...create a new condition of social fluidity that begins to break down the separate, specialized, and hierarchical structures of everyday life (Crawford, 34).” The process of racial integration utilized the

jazz clubs as a venue for the expression of the emerging democratic participation of previously marginalized sectors of the population. Jazz would become an icon of Chicago not unlike the Tango became an icon of Argentina (Foster, 53). This iconic status was due specifically to its ability to create a new use for public space that incorporated the voices of the working class expressing tensions they experienced in their daily lives. It is not unusual that my grandmother would have felt uncomfortable in the jazz clubs. As a young white woman of that era she did intuitively, though not concretely, recognize the tumultuous expressions of democracy that were taking place inside the clubs. The uncertainty of the crowd challenged the strict class, ethnic and racial divisions with which she was raised.

The 1940s in Chicago was a time of negotiating a new consciousness. My grandmother was a part of this negotiation, struggling to understand the seeds of feminism that she unknowingly nurtured while admiring the beauty of the independent women that worked in a morally questionable place such as the brothel. She confidently passed through the new "third space" of the city street, cognizant yet unconcerned for the loss of privacy of the space. She confronted contradictory feelings and understandings in the jazz clubs, spaces that encouraged the exercising of a new democratic practice that would grow in an attempt to incorporate a greater diversity of voices within the city and beyond.

Analyzing the emergence of this new consciousness in Chicago through the personal stories of my grandmother was a particularly powerful experience. An understanding of history based on an individual's personal experience with that history creates that human connection that Wineberg argues makes the study of history so

powerful (Wineberg, 5). Imagining the "strangeness" of having my photograph purchased by a stranger or witnessing a strong step in the beginning stages of what would become the Civil Rights Movement certainly cannot be completely separated from my own experiences but, ultimately, allows me to develop a new understanding of my grandmother and her generation which, in turn, requires me to analyze my own place in history and how I conceptualize myself as a human being, another goal that Wineberg argues should be attained by the study of history (Wineberg, 6).

A very original approach - you've created an historical account, not just synthesized ones that already existed. Then you did a fine job of analyzing this personal account within Crawford's framework. The civil rights movement is alluded to, but this part of the discussion might have been strengthened with a fuller description of how that was apparent in Chicago, perhaps using published photos (of Branzville) or even secondary accounts. Overall, it is very impressive and creative.

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