

**Sustainable & Subsistence Providing Spaces Regulated by Public Characters:
An Anthropological Study of South Dallas Street Vendors**

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Bio:

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Abstract:

Using participant observation, qualitative interviews, and mapping techniques, I examined the ways in which “public characters” in South Dallas regulated the space in their regular gathering area, a carwash at the corner of a busy intersection. *Public characters* are defined as individuals who are highly visible parts of the community and *regulation* refers to the ways in which space is controlled socially. In this case, the public characters were street vendors who made their living in the informal economy and lived, but without a home, near the space that they regulate. Subsisting via the informal economy is common; however, the regulation of this type of subsistence-generating mechanism has been a topic of great debate in the circles of those with power, specifically area representatives and city leaders. The street vendors themselves are concerned about the ways that the powerful may choose to regulate their lives. This research is influenced greatly by the theoretical concepts of Mitchell Duneier. The contribution to the discourse of the public character that I add focuses on the need for life-sustaining informal spaces.

Introduction

I remember riding in the backseat of my parents' Javelin through South Dallas on our way to the State Fair of Texas. I was fascinated at the number of people in line to get a plate of ribs, greens, and potato salad at the hole-in-the-wall barbecue shop. The men in vibrant suits with wide legs that wore matching wide-brim hats and the women with their short multi-print dresses and platform heels intrigued me as they laughed and headed inside of what my Mother called a "juke joint." They seemed to be having so much fun. This was the South Dallas that I remembered; however, times have changed, the urban space has changed. The stores and shops have been replaced with men and women selling an assortment of items out of their cars. Huge grills and smokers resting in the back of someone's truck have replaced the hole-in-the-wall barbecue shops.

The purpose of this research is (1) to develop an understanding of how street vendors regulate public spaces in their effort to produce income and create life-sustaining places, and (2) to identify factors influencing the need for informal economy in a public space. This research identifies the political and economic factors that contribute to the informal economy of this area and examines the social hierarchies of the public spaces. I am interested in the ways in which knowledge and power impact the regulation of these public spaces and the role that economics and social structure outside the control of the denizens at the carwash play in this regulation.

In order to address these questions, I studied public characters at a self-service carwash in South Dallas. The carwash is located at a busy thoroughfare that leads to the State Fair of Texas fair grounds. It is significant to recognize, that when the terms "*regulation*," *subsistence*," and "*sustainable*" are used in this paper, they are referring to the ways in which street vendors critically depend on the carwash as a space in order to produce income that provides for their

basic daily needs. This research is not intended to sensationalize or exoticize a group of people marginalized as a result of their socio-economic status, race, or health and that are viewed as deviant. Rather, this research describes the means by which street vendors produce income to meet their daily needs. It also briefly examines the much larger authority structures and the practices used to control the street vendor. Why do street vendors engage in informal economy? How do they regulate the spaces, more specifically the carwash where they sell their goods and services? What social structures are in place at the open-air markets? How is the community impacted from the presence of the street vendor? What obstacles does the street vendor have in providing for daily basic needs? With these questions in mind, we must get to know the street vendor and the carwash intimately. In the same way, we must understand their relationship with the community, and as a result, we understand and know how the carwash is regulated. Resting on this knowledge it becomes conceivable to explain the role of the carwash and the significance of informal economy.

Background

An unsuspecting visitor to the fair would be surprised at the aesthetics of an area that is known for famous blues greats like Blind Lemon Jefferson, T-Bone Walker, Led Belly, and the late Ray Charles whose bungalow style house sits on an adjacent street. Instead of seeing a restored and aesthetically pleasing community that one might expect when visiting the area, heaps of trash, clothing, and empty 40 oz cans of beer encased in brown paper bags adorn the streets in this community. Homeless men and women sleep outside in the recesses and corners of buildings and landmarks like The Black Forest Theater formerly known as The Forest Theater. See Figure 1.

It first opened in the late 1940's. It was built for members of prominent and wealthy Jewish residents who lived in South Dallas. Many Jewish families began to move into South

Dallas after the Temple Emanu-El was relocated there from downtown Dallas in 1917. South Dallas was their crowning jewel. This was an area for the Jewish elite and the only Blacks that worked or lived in the area were “the help.”

As the landscape changed, many of the Jewish families began to leave the area and migrate to communities north of this southern sector of Dallas. Many Blacks viewed South Dallas as an area for economic opportunity and prosperity. It was not until the late 1950s that Blacks began to find their voice through a coalition of pastors. This group of men helped to forge relationships with the White elites of Dallas and Jewish families began to sell their homes to Blacks who were looking to escape the “ghettos.” It was an area where industry thrived. Many Blacks found jobs in the steel yards and factories. Economic development was on an upswing. Blacks were opening businesses, restaurants, and venues for musicians to entertain residents of and visitors to the community. Strong roots in music, art, and business were established. The who’s who of “Black High Society” could be found here. This became an area for the Black bourgeoisie and the middle class. Black doctors, lawyers, and successful business men and women lived, worked, and socialized in this community.

In an interview with the Dallas Examiner (September 16, 2004), South Dallas recording star, Erykah Badu recalls when this area of Dallas was “the place to be.” Many of the Motown greats would eat at the Green Parrot Café that was owned first by her grandfather and later, her uncle. She indicates that “it was a cultural thing.”

Though many members of the black community in South Dallas became prosperous, devastating problems surfaced. Drugs and alcohol found its way into the community and the overbearing presence of political control was felt by Black residents. Seemingly, there was a liquor store for every church in South Dallas. Marijuana and heroin were the drugs of choice and

construction of an interstate that would run directly through the community and displace thousands was underway.

During this time, industry began to decline. Many of the plants and mills began to close and Blacks found themselves without jobs. Many chose to move to areas that afforded them more opportunities. Black-owned businesses suffered economic losses and many closed. The economic impact coupled with issues of substance abuse and political control marked the beginning of decline of this once flourishing community. Those who were left in the community had to figure out new ways to sustain themselves.

The 1970s, '80s and '90s saw a slow decline in the area that was once known as the spot to be for "down-home" cooking and blues. Due to the low socio-economic status of residents in South Dallas, they have been stigmatized as a deviant. Goffman defines stigma as an attribute that is either physical or social that devalues an individual's social identity in a way that disqualifies them for full social acceptance (1963). Durkheim believed that deviance has a home situated in societal factors and is natural and inevitable (1964/1895). This is the street vendor.

Presently, remnants of a culturally rich past show the signs of slow and consistent erosion. A surfeit of drugs, alcohol, illness, and poverty now plague this community. This southern sector of Dallas is no longer viewed as a culturally rich and income-producing area. Factory and industry jobs are memories of the past. Informal economic enterprises have replaced a majority of the mom-and-pop shops. Prescription drug sales, fencing, prostitution, and other underground economic actions are examples of the informal economy that make living possible for street vendors in South Dallas.

Today, this area is overrun with trash, discarded furniture, and dilapidated buildings and homes. Businesses are boarded up and restaurants are few. Most of the residents in this

community fall well beneath the poverty line. Jobs in this area are limited. Those seeking jobs outside of the community are faced with issues of childcare, transportation, and limited education. These factors have pushed them into the informal economic market. The street vendor has emerged and the need to regulate their space is commonplace. Duneier indicates that the men who live and work on the streets share commonalities and that the street is a habitat that sustains their minimal existence (1999, p.153). This concept rings true at the carwash and the diner regulated by the South Dallas street vendor. They have structured these spaces so that they are a controllable sustaining habitat. Despite the less than desirable actions of commerce that take place in the community, a love and desire for the community to thrive again exists in the hearts of the vendors. These are the public characters at the carwash.

The carwash sits to the right on Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. It is a small representation of the larger South Dallas community. This street is lined with boarded up businesses within small shopping centers that have been closed for quite some time. Liquor stores, pawn shops, and street vending are the primary sources of commerce for this community. See Figure 2.

Men and women are always selling items that they have found, stolen, or been given. T-shirts, tennis shoes, and “knock-off” handbags are on the list of items that are peddled and prescription drugs are a hot commodity. On rare occasions sexual services can be bought. At the carwash a customer can find a “Black Book.” The “Black Book” is not the proverbial “black book” that one often thinks of as being filled with telephone numbers of dates, nor is it a “mystical magical” book that holds spells. It is a book that has been authored by an African-American. The top-selling books at the carwash are the “Audacity of Hope” (or, as the vendors like to call it, “our president’s book”), and books by Zane, an African-American author who writes novels with adult themes.

“Black Art” can also be purchased from the trunk of a vendor’s car. It is not magic that can be bought or bartered for. This type of “Black Art” is art that is not necessarily produced by African-Americans but depicts African-Americans in daily life. The most popular pieces are prints of a very muscular man with skin the color of burnt sienna embracing a woman with a cinnamon complexion and long flowing dread locs. Animal print rugs and painted mirrors are also considered to be forms of “Black Art.” “Black” inspired t-shirts, colorful tennis shoes, or handbags that look like Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Prada, and Dooney & Burke are also sold here.

Literature Review

Jane Jacobs identified public characters as “anyone who is in frequent contact with a wide circle of people” (1961, p.68). They were the eyes and ears of the community. The Public Character that Jacobs speaks about it is not the same type of public character that works and resides at the car wash but their tenets are the same. They believe in sustainability and subsistence. They are more than what the eye sees. They are woven into the fabric of society. They have an investment in the community and more specifically in the spaces where they work and live. This investment is displayed in their attempts to maintain a decent and family-friendly environment at the carwash. On very rare occasions sexual services can be bought or bartered for; however, the street vendors discourage these types of exchanges. Regardless of the deviant label associated with the vendor, they are public characters that love and respect their spaces.

To paraphrase Elijah Anderson, “the black middle class has moved away from the inner city ghetto but decency, propriety, hard work, and perseverance remain” (1992, p.59). While the South Dallas street vendor may not fit into the social category of “middle class,” this statement by Anderson personifies their character. They are committed to keeping their spaces respectable so that they continue to be life-sustaining places.

The commitment that the street vendor has made to the carwash is in danger of being erased. In comparison with the *plaza space* in the article “Spatializing Culture,” the practices of informal economy in open-air spaces “lend to the perception” that these places are “unsafe” and “unpleasant” (Low, 1996, p. 874). This is the perception held by many officials in South Dallas. These perceptions fuel the controversy surrounding the *Trinity River Corridor Project*. The revitalization of the areas encompassing Fair Park likewise concern the denizens of this area. The vendors fear that the operations at the carwash will come to an end as a result of these projects. These proposed changes would only contribute to the creation of even more marginalized spaces within this community. History has shown that urban development moves geographic margins and boundaries and often leads to gentrification. This is not to say that all development is detrimental; however, it reinforces the concerns of the community.

Research Design

In July and August 2009, I spent five weeks observing street vendors in open-air spaces in Southern Dallas on varying days and at different times of the day and night. Participant observation involved taking part in chess games and being stationary in two open-air spaces known for informal economy and observing for 2-4 hours at a time. Each observation session usually began with a chess game. This was a rapport building method that I discovered on my third day at my field site. During observations group discussions and semi-structured interviews were conducted. These led to recorded individual interviews that encompassed spatial, cognitive, and social network mapping exercises. In addition to these data collection methods, I used literature reviews and personal communication with individuals from the Jewish historical society. All field notes and qualitative data were transcribed and open and focused coded to establish patterns, themes, and behaviors.

Findings

First, I will examine the urban space as a life-sustaining space. This space is a crucial element in the life of the street vendor. Next, I will look at the code at the carwash. A brief exploration of informal codes and unwritten rules transitions the focus of the findings to the street vendor. I will examine the role of the street vendor as a regulator of space. Finally, I will examine the ways that space is controlled at the carwash.

Urban space is important in the lives of both the street vendor and those interactions he has with others. Street vendors are the visible men and women who live and work in the public spaces of the community. They are the public characters offering goods and services. As one street vendor put it,

I have to sell to whatever I can get my hands on to survive. (Lennell, personal communication, 2009)

The spaces where they sell their merchandise provide tools that assist them in sustaining the basic daily needs of their lives. The city streets and the spaces that define them, such as the carwash, are not only areas for provision but are valuable components of the community. Residents who value space for its use value – sentiment, neighborliness, daily round – often develop self-conscious strategies to resist the growth machine and its exclusive priority on exchange value (Williams, 2008, p. 32). The marginalized population of my research site is viewed as the “other” through the privileged lens of those residing outside of this area. A report for the Mayor’s Southern Dallas Task Force shows that area representatives and council members believe that South Dallas can be revitalized and is a prime urban space for tourism if panhandling and all the other forms of informal economy are eradicated. They believe that this change is crucial in saving the community. The street vendors feel differently.

You know them folks don't care nothing 'bout no niggas like us and I ain't just talkin bout them White folks either. They'se got some niggas don't care none either. Just gone let them water things break like Katrina. I know you heard about that. They ain't about nobody but them – just some educated fools don't give a damn about me or anyone else but they pocketbook. Folk ain't never had to hustle a day to make it. Plenty of food ... plenty of money. (Joe B., personal communication, 2009)

The beliefs and attitudes of the privileged differ greatly from those living in this gray area of Dallas and do not often see the vendors as public characters but as deviant merchants of trade. The street vendor sees themselves as public characters looking out for the community they love and making a living the best way they know how.

It used to be a wonderful area. My great-grandfather built a house for my great-grandmother there. Stanley Marcus of the Neiman-Marcus Empire grew up there. Now it's just a place for prostitutes, zombies – you know, lifeless crackheads and pan-handlers. I wouldn't live there if I had to. Hopefully, the Trinity project breathes changes it to the way it used to be. (Ann, personal communication, 2009)

This area of Dallas is no longer a community of wealth and privilege. The residents that reside here fall well beneath the poverty line. Individuals that remember when this community was one of the wealthiest areas in Dallas are dismayed at its current condition.

Code and the Carwash

While there is no formal code of space regulation, unwritten rules exist. The regulation of these spatial arenas is enforced by the public character. I met Green on a morning of observation

at a known area of informal economy in Southern Dallas. He was engaged in a chess game. I heard what appeared to be arguing but realized quickly that an intense game of chess had just ended. I walked to the back and enthusiastically took interest in the game that had just ended. I was cordially invited to sit down and take part in a game with Green. He is the prominent chess champion of the carwash. He became a key informant for this research.

Green is an African-American male who is 45 years old. He has a self-admitted alcohol abuse problem and has often had to sleep in the very carwash for which he is the care-taker. He is the “go-to guy” for anyone interested in occupying a space at the carwash to sell their goods or services. He is the gate-keeper but not the power-holder.

This carwash is a prominent economic producing space. Green explained how space is defined, occupied, and regulated to make them sustainable and subsistence-providing. The statement made by Green provides insight into the importance of regulation and informal economy in the lives of a marginalized population.

You can't just come down here and start selling stuff. You know? I mean you have to ask around. You may be trying to set-up shop in somebody's spot...you know their home. Look at it like this. If somebody came to your home trying to set-up, you'd be pissed. You got to ask around. Each place usually has a caretaker like me. You know. I'm the eyes and ears of the wash. I can tell you where you can sell and where you can't but this place is a place for regulars. You know, people who been here a while. They the ones usually get to sell here. Now, there are other places down the street and in different lots and stuff that anybody can grab. This is all most of us got. There ain't no real jobs down here so we have to

sell what we can sell. That's the only way most of us can survive. (Green, personal communication, 2009)

Vendors have established a market-like atmosphere at various public spaces. This commerce-producing arena is overflowing with a mix of sights, sounds, and smells that tell the story of the community. This is their means to an end. This is how they provide for their basic daily needs. The scene is drenched in enterprising exchanges and many of the empty unoccupied spaces have undergone a metamorphosis changing them into sustainable and subsistence providing places for the street vendor.

Nicknames and Regulation

Vendors often assume nicknames according to their appearance, stature, or the types of merchandise or services they offer at the carwash. The nickname becomes their identity. Their identity constitutes the ways in which space is regulated. Earlier in this paper we met Green. He is known as “care-taker” on the streets and at the carwash. His duties are to make sure that everything runs smoothly and is kept clean. He also arrives early each morning to make sure that those that live at the carwash survived the night. See Figure 3.

Care-taker looks after this place. He make sure everything be just right. (Al, personal communication, 2009).

Carwash: A “Fictive” Corporation

The vendors have organized themselves into a mock business structure. Though space is not formally assigned, those with longevity usually have the best spaces in front of the carwash. People driving down the street are often intrigued about the “party-like” atmosphere of the carwash or the brightly colored assortment of t-shirts that drape from the hood of a car and usually circle around to see “what’s going on.” They soon come to find out this is a market that

operates under the guise of “car washing.” While they shop from each open-trunk, they are able to purchase a plate lunch, cable TV, and get their car detailed. This is the means of sustainability for the street vendor and for the shopper looking for a bargain. The carwash space has taken on the identity of a fictive corporation.

The corporation is led by the CEO. The CEO’s of the carwash are the power and authority holders. This is the nickname that they are known by at the carwash. They have the final decision in interactions at the carwash. Their involvement in informal economy is unknown but their presence is always felt and understood. They drive the best cars and have the most money. They make the rules and provide the discipline. None of the research participants offered any additional insight into the role of the CEO nor did they explain their presence at the carwash.

The caretaker is next in the organizational structure. There are usually two to three caretakers of the carwash. The caretaker that has had the longest relationship with the CEO is the only one that has the nickname of “caretaker.” He is the one out of all the caretakers that have the most authority. While it is uncommon, these would be the people to see if there were any disputes over space.

I have compared the organizational structure at the carwash with the concept of “fictive kin” best described by Carol Stack. She explores kinship and organization in the Black community. Her research uncovers the concept of help between “kinfolks who are not necessarily related. Moreover, kin terms are frequently extended to non-kin, and social relations among non-kin may be conducted within the idiom of kinship” (Stack, 1974, p. 45). These relations exist among vendors at the carwash. The carwash serves as a front. Without it, the street vendor would not have the subsistence needed for daily living.

Discussion

This research has produced astonishing revelations. I discovered that many street vendors suffer from a series of illnesses that prevent them from obtaining formal employment. Many have not worked in years and this makes it difficult for them to re-enter the work force. Street vendors are relying strongly on the carwash as a means to make money to provide for their daily needs.

The carwash serves as a “cover” for the many services and goods that are being sold. To the untrained observer, it would appear that people are washing and detailing cars while visiting with friends; however, in all actuality, economic exchange is taking place. This type of activity is against the law in the city of Dallas. Police surveillance notifications are posted on the telephone poles surrounding the carwash. This is the new type of implied panopticon designed by city government. A panopticon is a prison design that allows an observer to observe all prisoners without the prisoner knowing if he or she is actually being observed. It is constructed to force those that are being observed to adhere to rules. Regulation of the public character is often through force made by agents of government. Power in these spaces is both implicit and explicit. The type of power constructed by both the street vendor and the city official, as Foucault suggests:

[I]t must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in on another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general

design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies” (1990, p. 92-93).

In other words, power is created and shaped by the whole of society. The street vendor is constantly faced with struggles and confrontations both in and outside of their social network. Projects designed to force vendors to comply with city rules and regulations in which they lack knowledge endanger their livelihood; however, they continue to use their skill-sets to produce mechanisms needed to sustain their lives. These mechanisms are often disregarded and frowned upon by the much larger hegemonic stakeholders.

The city believes that through appropriate methods of enforcement, street vendors and residents can be shaped and molded into ideal merchants and citizens. One of the first proposed methods of enforcement was to place cameras in the areas surrounding Fair Park. This is to reassure tourist that measures have been taken to protect their safety. This new form of the panopticon also serves as a deterrent for street vending.

The proposed city regulations will undoubtedly affect the street vendor. What will be done to prepare residents for these changes in the evolving climate of urban planning and development in South Dallas?

Reflection

It is a well known fact that applied anthropologists use their skill-sets to not only contribute to academic discourse but also to solve problems and issues. Additional and complete explorations of the role of open-air spaces as a means of subsistence in the life of the street vendor will provide tools to create a dialog between city leaders, developers, and residents of the community. It is my intent to conduct further research based on the concepts presented in this paper. My interest in the street vendors of South Dallas is situated in my interest in urban

anthropology and economic development discourse. It was this interest that prompted me to conduct a research study of street vendors and the ways in which they regulate their space at the carwash to maximize sustainability and subsistence. Through this research my interest expanded to include health disparity issues of the African-American homeless population.

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Figure 1. The Forest Theater now known as The Black Forest Theater
Note: Photo by E. Oliver



Figure 2. The Carwash
Note: Photo by E. Oliver



Figure 3. Slim J. lives and works at the carwash
Note: Photo by E. Oliver