Chapter 8

Story-Making and Photography: The Visual Essay and Migration

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8.1 Introduction

It can be argued that migrants express their own agency, via spatial practices, to change the meanings of the spaces and places they occupy and use. Although they are not the most powerful agents in our glocalised world, they nevertheless sometimes consciously and more often unconsciously, compete with others to visually define their micro-worlds for themselves and, therefore, for more powerful others as well (Krase & Shortell, 2015). Of course, migrants move, but they also settle and can establish more or less permanent enclaves. As students of mid- to large-scale urban change, we focus on commercial neighborhood vernacular landscapes which we argue have the greatest visual impact on observers. As we argue here, special attention should be paid to the visible products of their settlement which are enacted in local vernacular landscapes. For example, markets, places of worship, and even the patterns of dress of people on the street can serve as powerful semiotics or “markers” of change due to migration. It must be noted at the outset that social scientist, like ordinary observers, must avoid the common tendency to essentialize these visible signs that contribute to the problem of stereotyping social groups.

Migration is visible because migrants change the meaning of spaces and places to both themselves and others by changing what those places and spaces look like. This simple proposition is based on many years of visual sociological research by the authors on various versions of what Appadurai (1996) might have called “ethnoscapes,” or otherwise visible results of globalization in places as distant from this writing as Sydney, Australia and Beijing, China, or as near as our workplace in Brooklyn, New York.

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A major point in this discussion of the story about migration and photography is that the most frequent way that ordinary people encounter migrants, or variously defined “others,” is visually. For example, seeing those recognizable as migrants on the streets of multicultural cities or when casually passing through migrant enclaves. It should be noted that this “seeing” can also take place virtually through one or another type of visual media. We have argued in many places that what people see and how they interpret what it is they see is extremely important (Krase & Shortell, 2015, 2017; Shortell & Krase, 2011, 2013). In addition to visually recognizable stores and businesses serving them, outward appearances (physical traits and styles of dress) and the visibility of cultural practices such as religious or cultural festivals are often interpreted as challenges to the hegemony of local territory. As noted by Sassen (2001), both the powerful and disadvantaged are often concentrated in cities. As she notes however, marginalized people often make claims on the city as “contested terrain.” Immigrant communities and their informal economies are common examples of this process and there are many ways by which one can study these social, political, and economic phenomena.

Mass media often frame migration as a social problem. Social scientists, in contrast, have written of the positive values provided to society at large of the appearance of migrants such as for tourism, economic development, and the aura of cosmopolitanism. After noting some of the dangers of objectifying immigrant enclaves, Rath (2007) called for innovative approaches to better understand the process by which “expressions of immigrant culture can be transformed into vehicles for socio-economic development to the advantage of both immigrants and the city at large” (2007, p. I; also, Rath et al., 2017). In a similar vein, Hum (2004) has written on the role of immigrant business in New York City, where while its global stature relies on nostalgia about historic immigrant enclaves, today immigrants are transforming historic landscapes not only by forming new enclaves but by creating and re-creating, many multi-ethnic, multi-racial neighborhoods.

In the twenty-first century, the creation of visibly diverse vernacular urban landscapes has accelerated, and similar scenes have become typical in Europe. Consequently, street protests by minority groups, or against minority groups, once thought to be an exclusively America phenomenon (Boyer, 2018) attract equal attention in the mass as well as academic media from Athens, Greece (Alderman, 2013) to Stockholm, Sweden (Higgins, 2013). The establishment of segregated ethnic communities in European cities has also been followed by the influx of documented and undocumented workers from the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, Africa, and Asia, producing multi-ethnic environments, marked by “problematic” cultural heterogeneity. In short, everyday ordinary people, whether majority or minority group members, who live and work, or simply pass through urban spaces are changing the meanings of those spaces. In this process they become both products and producers of that contested space.

Martiniello (2014) added another visual dimension to the discussion of multicultural mixing in European cities by discussing the ongoing debate on the impact of globalization on cultural diversity and identities. He observed that most mid-size and large cities display a wide variety of ethnic, racial, cultural, national and

religious affiliations and identities. In contrast to homogenization of culture, or assimilation, various forms of cultural, ethnic, national, religious and post-national identities have emerged in the public sphere, especially at the local level. He noted that, according to Hollinger (1995), the expression “diversification of diversity” is an apt term for describing the dynamics of cultures and identities in the American context and by analogy the evolving cities in Europe as well (Martiniello, 2006, 2011; see also Vertovec, 2007). In the final section of this chapter, the authors demonstrate the value of visual surveys to record and analyze vernacular urban landscapes in the study of migration. The first visual essay, also using repeat photography, focuses on Brooklyn, New York, where a predominately Norwegian, Scandinavian immigrant ethnic enclave became a predominately Chinese, Asian one. The second example discusses the employment of a walking method and multiple continuities and changes evidenced over the years in the Whitechapel neighborhood of East London.

8.2 The Visual Essay

The key idea in the visual essay is to transfer some of the scholarly production from the text to the visuals – that visual researchers use visual communication in addition to visual data and visual methods (Shortell & Lizama, 2017). In a recent paper, Grady asked why, despite living in a more visual age, the social sciences aren’t more engaged with visual data, which, he argues, are necessary (Grady, 2019; see also Krase, 2012). Although images have long-been used in popular media, such as film and video, to tell stories about migration¹ their empirical use as visual data in the social sciences has been much less common. Except in the tradition of visual ethnography (de Brigard, 1995), for the presentation of standard social science research, visual essays were once relative rare and limited to illustrating points made by the analysis of data collected by other means such as demography or interviews.

More recently, the visual essay has become far more common, even those not specifically oriented toward visual methods and theories. In short, visual essays are composed of images and supporting text which provide critical commentary on a defined topic, serving as a kind of argument, explanation, discussion.

Specifically, for the field of sociology, there are a number of other published discussions about the “proper way” to compose a visual essay. All provide some standard suggestions. The most comprehensive and recent discussion of how the visual essay can present sociological insight has been provided by Pauwels (2012; see also Grady, 1991). Recognizing that some consider it to be an “unorthodox scholarly product”, he carefully provides guidelines that enable visual essays to be

¹ See for example: “The Best Movies about Immigration and immigrants” available at: <https://www.cinemadailies.com/the-best-movies-about-immigration-and-immigrants/>

placed within broader scholarly discourse by firmly grounding them in social science (2012, p. 2). His many observations, propositions and arguments, as well as excerpts from both scholarly and non-scholarly visual essays, help clarify how to fashion a visual sociological essay.

All relevant discussions of the visual essay, which focus on social science practice, emphasize that the visual data must be firmly placed in the discipline itself as well as the subject under scrutiny. For example, a visual essay in the area of the sociology of crime must be drawn from, and be placed within, its disciplinary and subject parameters, as well as referencing pertinent literature. Photographs collected during a visual survey for example, ought not be employed simply as “window dressing” for the study (Zuev & Krase, 2018).

8.3 Spatial Semiotics As a Method for Studying Urban Places

According to Lofland (2003), symbolic interactionists have contributed to knowledge about urban worlds by demonstrating how people communicate through the built environment, for example, by the common practice of seeing settlements as symbols (2003, pp. 938–39). Individuals and groups also interact with each other through images, the meanings of which they learned through socialization. Lofland (1985, 1998) also argued that cities are places of strangers and that we learn the norms of interaction that result from not knowing others with whom we share our daily routines. She added that, “city life was made possible by an “ordering” of the urban populace in terms of appearance and spatial location such that those within the city could know a great deal about one another by simply looking” (1985, p. 22).

Urban space is always in the process of being interpreted, particularly as people move around in it. Goffman (1959) contrasts two kinds of sign activity, intentional and unintentional, or as he put it, the signs a person *gives* or *gives off*. The former is intentional communication, often with verbal behavior, and the latter involves the interpretations observers make of a wide range of visible attributes and behaviors performed in public. We can interpret the intentional and unintentional signs of identity because of our lived experience understanding (and misunderstanding) denotative and connotative signs in public spaces.

Place, as opposed to mere location, is meaningful. The meaningfulness of place is manifest in an agglomeration of beliefs, impressions, and affective responses of people using the space, in both enduring and ephemeral ways. Vernacular landscapes, where ordinary urban dwellers (that is, non-elites) enact their quotidian routines, contain a variety of places in the lives of the people who live, work, and pass through these neighborhoods. The practices of self and group are encoded in material and symbolic forms, in the built environment and social space. The meaningfulness of place depends on the assumption, which we generally hold unreflexively, that because these places and practices (work, home, shopping, commute, etc.) are

meaningful to me they probably are to you also, even if I don't know exactly how for you (Schütz, 1967). That is why we can recognize places that do not belong to us, that are unfamiliar, belong to someone else (Blommaert, 2010).

Urban dwellers constantly engage in meaning-making in urban public space, constrained by normative structures that transcend any individual's beliefs or experiences (Bourdieu, 1990). These structures shape social space and our interpretations of it, so that we feel that we are seeing the way things are, rather than a constructed order, because we do not generally recognize structure in the patterns and rhythms of daily life as such, only choices, inclinations, and behaviors. Bourdieu (1990) claims that those with similar positions in social space tend also to be proximate in geographic space, a pattern urban researchers often call "micro-segregation." Because people in different social positions have distinct perspectives, their interpretation of the signs of self and group in geographic space are structured, in part, by the differences that define social space.

The meanings encoded by ascribed characteristics and cultural practices manifest in spatial and visual signs in public spaces. Urban dwellers are generally literate at interpreting these signs, even if they are not always aware of how they are able to do it. Many of the signs we see in urban spaces are the result of messages intended to communicate with someone else, not us specifically, particularly those that result from social performance of self and group identities. Sometimes we are co-present during the production of signs and sometimes we are not. Because these signs occur in public, we are able to interpret them whether or not we are the intended audience or have knowledge of their production.

Quotidian mobility is both a significant social activity and an element of a powerful method for studying urban communities. The importance of walking in urban space is being rediscovered. Much of this recent work uses or appropriates the concept of *flânerie*. Short (2012, p. 121) calls the concept "a lens for understanding and representing cities undergoing globalization". Benjamin is widely regarded as the principal theorist of the *flâneur* (Benjamin, 1999; Blanchard, 1985; Buck-Morss, 1989; Burton, 2009; Gillock, 1996; White, 2001). The *flâneur* was a student of the modern city. For Baudelaire, *flânerie* was a way of encountering the vitality of the city; it was a way of reading and understanding urban space. By Benjamin's time, bureaucratic rationalism had substantially altered the city, emptying it of mystery in favor of commercial efficiency and municipal control.

The other side of urban walking is its everyday quality, not as a way of knowing the city aesthetically, but as a way of engaging in day-to-day life. Urban dwellers walk in the city in a variety of ways: commuting, working, shopping, exercising, socializing, and even sight-seeing. These forms of quotidian mobility structure our experience of the city and of group dynamics within it (Brown & Shortell, 2015; Shortell & Brown, 2014).

Short (2012) observed the arrival of an important new kind of urban walker: the global nomad. He explains, "globalization's inherent interurban quality facilitates a new kind of *flânerie*, that of the global nomad, as another process to serve the experiencing, charting, and the conferring of "globalizing" to a city" (Short, 2012, p. 133). The kind of quotidian mobility the global nomad engages in is situated in a

different class location than the *flânerie* of the nineteenth-century aesthete. It comes from an altered cosmopolitanism, where the meaning of national identity is loosened from the connection to a particular nation-state. The global nomad is transnational and transurban. This mobility is, above all, practical and aspirational. It reveals the phenomenological nature of contemporary globalization. “In the twenty-first century, cities are new and strange again as reterritorialized modernity in globalizing cities, particularly beyond the West, combine with global and local characteristics to provide cityscapes with quotidian yet phantasmagoric experience for the *flâneur* to shape” (Short, 2012, p. 134).

Our semiotic approach to the walking method, following the genealogy of the *flâneur*, draws on the work of Iain Sinclair (1997, 2002, 2006, 2011, 2013), the greatest of the psychogeographers of London. Like the Situationists, Sinclair used walking as a way to know urban spaces that are usually overlooked, inhabited by people who are usually disregarded. His writing on East London, in particular, illuminates how working class and immigrant Londoners cope with processes from above – loosely termed “urban renewal” or “redevelopment” – and the racial and class dynamics that result. These aren’t inevitable, natural processes; they are policies implemented by specific people and groups, generally for their own benefit and not those who inhabit the vernacular landscapes of Hackney, Bow, or Whitechapel.

The dynamics between the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless in urban neighborhoods is also considered by Augoyard (2007), who investigated quotidian mobility of a group of residents of public housing in Grenoble. He noted that residents of the housing complex walked in the neighborhood in ways that functioned as combinations, connecting one place to another by a specific route, or as exclusions, in which certain places are avoided or skipped over. Some of these mobility practices reflected group dynamics between the white majority and specific immigrant groups. One practice in particular, where white (majority) residents bypassed areas known to belong to migrants, Augoyard termed “euphemism.” The meanings that these residents attached to the places they routinely skip over is, of course, shaped partly by their beliefs and feelings about group identities, especially as defined by ethnicity, language, and religion.

Use of space is a form of appropriation. Augoyard argues that appropriation is a matter of the relationship between forms of sociability and space. But usage, in these everyday settings, is temporary. Large scale mobilities connect to small scale mobilities and everyone who uses the public spaces in these neighborhoods is affected because we engage in these meaning-making practices in our quotidian routines.

In our work, we have combined spatial semiotics, an interactionist perspective, and quotidian mobility to study group dynamics and place-making in urban communities. Other visual researchers have elaborated on mobility-related methods, including mobile video ethnography (Pink et al., 2017; Spinney, 2011; Vannini, 2017). Not only are urban dwellers and urban researchers mobile, but increasingly, so are images (Caballero, 2019).

Using visual methods and visual data prioritizes the visual channel, of course. Though there is some theoretical justification for this (Simmel, 1997b), methods of

multimodal or sensory sociology/anthropology are gaining momentum (Pink, 2013, 2015). This emerging methodology is challenging researchers not only to increase the complexity of their data by adding additional sensory channels, but also to “to propose new ways of knowing and thinking across established debates and research problems” (Pink, 2013, p. 262). Most significantly, these methods advance the development of research strategies based on empathic encounters with individuals in communities under investigation. It is certainly the case that researchers in the field using walking methods to collect visual data are also taking in and processing multisensory inputs because, if we are able, we are also listening, touching, and smelling the urban landscape as we move about. When we speak of visual data, it is a result of complex multisensory processing; the visual channel may have priority, but it is not exclusive.

Walking as a method, like all ethnographic methods, is idiographic rather than nomothetic. Many sociologists today see this as an advantage, but we should acknowledge the ways it also limits the experience of urban space. Walking is a good way to see neighborhoods, but at the same time, a problematic way to see a city as a whole. Even very long walks cover only so much territory. The slower speed yields enormous richness – narrative and sensory – but at the cost of breadth. All walking studies are necessarily partial.

8.4 Observing Ethnic Brooklyn Change: The Case of Sunset Park

Since 1900, Brooklyn has been a “Roman Fountain” of immigration as the foreign-born proportion of the population has averaged 30% for most of the twentieth century (Krase, 2002). Most pertinent for this visual essay, the white population has decreased from 49.1% in 1980 to 35.8% in 2018 as the Asian population increased from 2% to 12.7%. In Sunset Park, the Asian population increased from 21.8% in 2000 to 32.7% in 2017.²

According to Mauk (1997), Norwegians came to Sunset Park in the mid-Nineteenth Century and by the 1920s dominated the area and, along with other white-ethnics, continued into the 1950s. The 1950s was when many Brooklyn neighborhoods, including Sunset Park, began to racially change. This out-migration is often referred to as “White Flight” and marked the beginning of the end for this once vibrant Scandinavian colony, which in the 1970s was slowly replaced by a vibrant Asian neighborhood. Vivian Aalborg Worley, citing the January 1959 edition of *Nordisk Tidende* (Nordic Journal), noted that the local paper contained

²Sources of Demographic Data: QuickFacts, Kings County (Brooklyn Borough), New York available at: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/kingscountybrooklynboroughnewyork>; Race, Brooklyn, New York 1980–2000 available at: http://www.censuscope.org/us/s36/c47/chart_race.html; Sunset Park, Community District Profile 7, 2017 available at: <https://communityprofiles.planning.nyc.gov/brooklyn/7>

advertisements for many Norwegian businesses, institutions and organizations such as *E. Danielsen Delikatesseforretning*, *Det Store Bakeri* and *Norske Delikatesse*. Such Norwegian stores imported foods from *gamlelandet* (old country).

The half-page business directory reflected Norwegian ethnicity with names like Hansen, Askeland, Nilsen, and Vang. Norwegian businesses offered unlimited services and “*vi snakker norsk*” (we speak Norwegian) was still well worth advertising. Sætre (2003) noted, “If you talk to Norwegian Americans who experienced Brooklyn during the 50s, they’ll remember how you could walk down the street without hearing anything but Norwegian being spoken. Everywhere, there were Norwegian bars and stores” (cited in Worley, 2007, p. 40).

Worley (2007) viewed Sunset Park as a palimpsest of Norwegian immigrants and its multiple layers of texts. She retold their story through their letters, photos, statistics, interviews, and literature. Worley noted that Sollors (1995) refers to the “– idea being that a neighborhood becomes the palimpsest, the parchment whereon ethnic groups (often immigrant) write and rewrite their histories. The parchment – the community – is reused according to ethnic, cultural or economic changes” (Worley, 2007, p. 61). Such reuse often entails changes of place names, uses of buildings, and local commodities such as foods. She cautioned however, that cultural knowledge is necessary to accurately interpret the signs in ethnic neighborhoods to reveal their heritage.

The 1965 US immigration law increased the ability of Asians to immigrate to the United States. Most Chinese immigrants at the time preferred to settle in New York’s traditional Chinatown but it was already overflowing. Therefore, new enclaves were established outside of Manhattan. Of special importance for Sunset Park’s Chinatown was the joint United Kingdom-China declaration of 1984. The anticipation of the turnover in 1997 generated the flight of entrepreneurs to New York City. It must be noted that like most neighborhoods located elsewhere in the world labeled “Chinatown” New York’s have been multiethnic in composition, and over time change in response to global capital and population flows (Hum, 2004; Zhou, 1992, 2001).

In the 1980s, Sunset Park’s economy was depressed. Brooklyn waterfront industries, which had long provided jobs for Scandinavians dried up when they moved to New Jersey. Local real estate values also sharply declined while crime increased. As a result, almost 90% of 8th Avenue stores were empty.

At the same time, the Chinese had already begun to move in. By 1988 there were approximately 3,000 Asian-Americans and 12 Asian-American-operated businesses in Sunset Park. Some were new arrivals from abroad, and others had come from the Manhattan Chinatown area. The Chinese had found a new frontier in Sunset Park. Property was relatively inexpensive and space was readily available. To the Chinese, the long-forgotten strip called Eighth Avenue was full of promise. After all, in the Chinese language, “Eight” is a lucky number since it sounds like the word for “prosper”. (Brooklyn Chinese-American Association, 2019)

It is easy to falsely assume the ethnic character of a neighborhood by misreading the symbolic environment of its commercial streets. As previously alluded to, even though Chinese immigrants dominated the residential scene of Sunset Park for at

least a decade before 1993 it wasn't recognized by the general public as a *real* "Chinatown" until the stores on the commercial strip visually announced their ethnic hegemony. At the time, many Chinese residents were doing much of their shopping in Manhattan's traditional Chinatown that was easily reached by subway. Ironically, whereas at first the Chinese were invisible in Sunset Park, other Asians (Burmese, Cambodian, Korean, Laotian Pakistani, Turkish, and Vietnamese) who share some of the territory with them now merely blend into the background.

Here we look at a selection of photographs from a visual survey taken in 1993 and then rephotographed in 2019 to compare how the commercial vernacular landscape changed in response to the changing ethnic composition of the neighborhood. In a visual survey photographs are taken as the researcher travels through a neighborhood, in this case by walking, recording both the physical and social streetscapes. Like other ethnographer data, this method produces a many images, the significance of which may be known only later, upon reflection (Shortell & Krase, 2011; Zuev & Krase, 2018). As noted by Rieger "Perhaps the most reliable way we can use photography to study social change is through the systematic visual measurement technique of "Repeat Photography" or, simply, rephotography" (2011, p. 133; see also Rieger, 1996 and Doucet, 2019). Given the rapidly changing metropolitan landscapes there is clearly a value in such visual methods and techniques for sociological reconnaissance of globalization and de-industrialization.

Ethnic enclaves are products as well as sources of both social and cultural capital. When immigrants alter the territory allowed to them, they simultaneously become part of the transformed urban landscape (Krase, 2004, p. 18). Commercial store signs often announce ethnic identities. For example, in Muslim shopping areas in Brooklyn, one finds them in green and white, which are the colors of Islam. Similarly, Greek restaurants often display the national colors of blue and white. Visual referents are often made in news stories about ethnic neighborhoods. For example, "In Brooklyn, Wontons, Not Lapskaus" (1991) Yarrow wrote about the Atlantic restaurant popular with Norwegian-Americans in past decades.

Today, above the entrance on Eighth Avenue and 54th Street, a bright red-and-yellow sign proclaims "WeeKee's." And in one of New York's strangest ethnically hyphenated amalgams, the menu now describes the cuisine as "Chinese-Norwegian-American." (1991, p. 36)

In the Fall of 1993, I and my Brooklyn College students conducted a visual survey along 8th Avenue searching for visual traces of European ethnicity. Due to the large influx of Chinese immigrants, who had begun to take command of the busy shopping strip, it was difficult to find signs of the eighty-year long dominance of Scandinavians. Even Lutheran churches in the neighborhood, the dominant Norwegian religion, sported announcements in Chinese, Korean or Spanish for religious and other services. In a few instances, students saw Scandinavian names such as "Larsen" displayed in the front of a few neatly landscaped single-family houses on some of the side streets. On one set of doorbells, the names Durkin, Chen, and Boyle were found. For the photo essay in this chapter, I returned in the summer of 2019 to re-photograph on 8th Avenue what were the most apparent remnants of

Fig. 8.1 (a) 5906 8th Avenue, 1993, Lute Fisk Sign; (b) 5906 8th Avenue, 2019. Great 8 Restaurant

Scandinavian visual dominance in 1993. These follow below, with explanatory captions.

In 1993, this “Lute Fisk” sign was but one mysterious trace of Norwegian heritage in Bay Ridge, but only the informed understood that “Lute Fisk” was a traditional holiday food made from aged stockfish, or dried and salted whitefish, and lye. It is gelatinous in texture. As late as in 2004 that “Lute Fisk” sign was still hanging on the run-down storefront.

In 2019, other than the address number, there is no trace of the previous store. The rather “fancy” metal and glass door is now a common residential entranceway in the area. The “Great 8 Restaurant” speaks to the notion of the Chinese “lucky eight” which sounds like the word for prosperity.

The Thoralf Olsen Bakery sign in blue and white (Norwegian, Danish, and/or Finnish flags) stands out in many ways from the adjacent Chinese stores decked in red and gold that represent the hope for good luck and happiness.

Obviously Olsen’s Bakery is gone and replaced by the Shun Seafood Market. Next door is a Chinese Seafood supermarket in unusual, blue and white colors, perhaps to distinguish itself from its competing neighbor.

The owners and/or operators of Olsen’s Roofing & Home Improvements might not be closely related to those of the Thoralf Olsen Bakery in Fig. 8.2a. However, the name is ethnically iconic and as in Fig. 8.2a. the colors, blue, white, and red refer perhaps to the Norwegian, Danish, and/or Finnish flags. Again, the contrast to the gold and red next door is striking.

Fig. 8.2 (a) 5724–5718 8th Avenue, 1993, Thoralf Olsen Bakery; (b) 5724–5718 8th Avenue, 2019, Shun Seafood Market

Fig. 8.3 (a) 5822 8th Avenue, 1993, Olsen's Roofing & Home Improvements; (b) 5822 8th Avenue, 2019, New Luck Best Center and Yukee Wireless

Olsen's Roofing & Home Improvements has been replaced in colors, language, and commercial offerings by a wireless phone establishment and a variety store. It requires a greater knowledge of Mandarin as well as cultural meanings of colors to decipher this vernacular landscape. In front of New Lucky Best Center is a common sight in many immigrant neighborhoods where motorized bikes deliver goods ordered from the store.

8.5 Observing East London

I (Shortell) made multiple walks through the neighborhoods of East London (in postal codes E1, E2, and E3), in 2013 and 2017, each several hours long, in which I observed the flows of people through urban public spaces. When I detected patterns of movement, various pushes and pulls of everyday mobility, I allowed myself to be carried along, stopping when I could to take reflexive field notes about the use of the space and forms of interaction observable in it. On some of these walks, I used a video camera attached to a shoulder bag to make a visual record.

In the following narrative, I have combined several walks into a single thread. As I look back over my field notes and video, I recall events and sights as if they were part of a coherent story that reflects my understanding of the visibility of group boundaries in contemporary London.³

Exiting the Whitechapel Tube station, opposite the Royal London Hospital, I am immediately thrust into a vortex where global mobilities and local mobilities intersect. There is a sidewalk market that stretches for several blocks, where most of the vendors and many of the shoppers appear to be immigrants. This is truly a sensory sociology: the sights, sounds, and odors of urban life here testify to the mixing of cultures as well as the pace of modern urban life.

I notice the ways that food and food practices mark the neighborhood as an immigrant place. There are vendors as well as established shops as I walk along Whitechapel Road toward Mile End Park. There are a few restaurants along the A11 but what catches my attention are the bakeries and smaller specialty shops. These signs of more or less geographically specific group identities combine with the visibility of individual identity characteristics to give a sense of the place. Similar to what Augoyard (2007) discovered, I imagine that some majority white Anglo Christians skip over places like this because it feels like a South Asian Muslim neighborhood. (I imagine also that some majority white Anglo Christians who have never been here would tell you how bad it is now, and that feelings like this fuel much of the Brexit fervor.)

³I organize the material in this way partly for the purposes of readability, but also because as I continue to reflect on the images and fieldnotes, even years after the walks, I organize the narrative this way in my own understanding. It is integrated into my understanding of these neighborhoods as places, or, in other words, my own form of place-making.

Fig. 8.4 (a) Pedestrians, Mile End Road at Globe Road. September 2013; (b) Workers at a South Asian Grocery, Mile End Road. September 2013; (c) Pedestrians on Mile End Road near White Horse Lane. September 2013; (d) Shahid Rahman Solicitors on Mile End Road. September 2013. Timothy Shortell

In ordinary urban routines, we aren't necessarily mindful of the difference between the built environment and the social environment when interpreting places. The signage on commercial streets like the A11 certainly provides abundant identity information. So too the appearance and behavior of the other urban dwellers I encounter here. For a while I am walking in pace with a small group, as shown in Fig. 8.4a; their appearance (physical traits and dress) suggests that this is an immigrant neighborhood.

Walking is a significant part of everyday routines for many urban dwellers. The streets here are busy. But I notice also another form of quotidian mobility connected to labor. There are people visible on the sidewalks who are working, and their presence also contributes to the identity of the place. At a wholesale grocer, I notice two men carting large bags of rice, shown in Fig. 8.4b.

Walking past the Ocean Estates public housing, I see families walking toward shopping on White Horse Lane. The large buildings sit perpendicular to the A11 with big yards and the sidewalk separating the traffic from the residences. In passing through this brief space, I pay more attention to the identity signs of the people than the built environment, as the residential structures are ambiguous, signifying a class location, perhaps, but little more. Most of the people I pass on the sidewalk appear to be South Asian, as shown in Fig. 8.4c.

Down the road on Beaumont Grove is a Jewish community center. It reminds me that one often sees Muslim and Jewish businesses adjacent in parts of Brooklyn I've studied with this walking method. I did not notice as much of a visibility of Jewish businesses in this London neighborhood. The Brenner Center provides "a therapeutic programme of activities" for those in need, including a kosher shop and a Friday Shabbat meal. The Center describes itself as "at the heart of East London's Jewish community for many years".⁴ Given the walk-in orientation of the center, it seems this part of London may be more like Brooklyn than I realized.

Many of the food businesses here testify to the immigrant presence in this neighborhood. This is so familiar to urban dwellers that we generally read these signs without thinking about identity in this way. The slow pace of my walk has allowed me to notice more instances in the commercial landscape of identity signification. I see here, for example, multiple signs of professional services, such as lawyers, accountants, communications, and travel agencies, as shown in Fig. 8.4d.

I double back on Whitechapel Road toward Brick Lane. I know that the curry shops there are no longer the best place to get South Asian food in London, but they are cheap, and I am hungry. More importantly, I want to see how the ethnic theme park that Brick Lane has become melts into the creative class gentrification signaled by the Old Spitalfields Market and Truman Brewery.

Past the hospital is the East London Mosque and London Muslim Center. I am attentive to the signs of religious identity, manifest in signs of religious practice rather than other elements of culture. Visible spaces for the practice of faith traditions have often been a site of social conflict regarding immigration in Europe and the U.S. recently.

Turning onto Brick Lane from the A11, the signs of commodified ethnic culture are ubiquitous. There is an interesting archaeology of identities here, as some of the historical markers are visible. The next layer, as it were, consists of the signs of ethnic succession in the twentieth century. On the surface is the consolidation of the ethnic theme park.

There are lots of curry restaurants here, but also the familiar businesses of immigrant neighborhoods in global cities (Krase & Shortell, 2015; Shortell & Krase, 2013). There are other discount retailers and quite a few realtors, as there seems to be a lot of spaces for sale or lease, as shown in Fig. 8.5a.

⁴ See <https://www.jewishcare.org/how-we-can-help-you/community/44-stepney-jewish-community-centre>

Fig. 8.5 (a) Immigrant businesses on Brick Lane. May 2017; (b) Storefront mosque on Brick Lane. May 2017; (c) Old Spitalfields Market. May 2017; (d) Pedestrians on Commercial Street. May 2017. Timothy Shortell

Past Fournier Street continuing on Brick Lane, I see a storefront mosque. It is adjacent to several immigrant businesses, similar to what I saw on Mile End Road, as shown in Fig. 8.5b. In addition to travel and communications services, there are an accounting firm, a health and safety consultant, and a barber that appear to be immigrant owned businesses.

On the next block is the Old Truman Brewery, now an upscale shopping mall and food court. The street feels less like an immigrant neighborhood and more like a well-gentrified one, lots of young workers, students, and urban hipsters. So I turn down Hanbury Street heading toward Commercial Street. I want to get a photo of Christ Church Spitalfields, a Hawksmoor designed eighteenth century building that anchors the historical neighborhood.

But first, I encounter another gentrification site, the Old Spitalfields Market, another upscale shopping mall and food court, as shown in Fig. 8.5c. The shops include some mid-luxury brands but in the central bazaar is largely small vendors selling clothing, luggage, jewelry, and the like. Many of the shoppers are nonwhite. This is a kind of cosmopolitan canopy (Anderson, 2011).

Leaving the shopping mall, I head down Commercial Street to get back to the Underground at Aldgate East. This seems to be the edge of the gentrification and immigrant neighborhood. The signs, in both the built landscape and the presence of a variety of urban dwellers, are mixed, by ethnicity, class, and religion, as seen in Fig. 8.5d. This is what we might call a liminal space in a global city.

8.6 Conclusion

Photo essays, like the two illustrated here, draw on the narrative power of images to create thick description of the social world. Images, of course, don't speak for themselves. As researchers, we take responsibility for the way we use images as data. Even when we admit that we don't know what an image shows, or when we are not sure of everything that it shows, we are taking a position relative to the image and our own interpretations. But, as Pauwels (2015) has pointed out, this is true of other forms of scholarly communication in visual sociology also.

Using images to tell the story of migration draws on our common experiences in urban settings and of mobilities, both global and everyday. Seeing vernacular landscapes, as Simmel (1924, 1997a) noted, is central to how we experience them and understand them in our lives as urban dwellers, not just as urban researchers. Seeing the city as we move around in it gives us an understanding of urban life that images of neighborhoods reference, both directly and indirectly. The viewer of these images possesses that lived experience too, and the visual essay can make stories about which even the researcher is not fully aware.

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