

# Spaces of Danger

CULTURE AND POWER IN THE EVERYDAY

EDITED BY

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With a Foreword by Paul Rabinow

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## CHAPTER 12

# A Bronx Chronicle

CINDI KATZ

The city [is] a mnemonic for the lonely walker: it conjures up more than his childhood and youth, more than its own history.

—WALTER BENJAMIN, "The Return of the Flâneur"

Allan Pred was an explorer of "topographical consciousness"—the shape of experience, the architectonics of memory, and the intertwining of memory and history, personal landscapes and geography, biography formation and place making, and place-making biography (Pred 1984; Demetz 1978, xvii). The sedimentations of place are not just what's in place, but also our fleeting encounters with what's there and what's missing, what was, what wasn't, what we imagined, what we dreamed, what we once found and what we have lost, what we hoped to find, what we excavated and what we buried. Geography, like history, is not fixed but drawn forth and made and remade every day. The sedimentations of place are archives that hold all these material social relations and practices, available for excavation and repositories of the new. A walker in city and country, Allan was always alive to the astounding encountered by chance amid the routine.

*It isn't that the past casts its light on what is present or that what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, an image is that in which the Then [and There] and the [Here and] Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning. (Walter Benjamin cited in Pred 1995, first epigraph)*

Memory, like history and geography, is not fixed but is also made, as it were, by the present. Walter Benjamin was fascinated as much by the process of remembering as by his own memories, a fascination I share. Allan was more other-directed in his explorations of consciousness formation and place, less interested in Benjamin's idea of remembrance as a "capacity for endless interpolations into what has been," (Benjamin 1978, 16) and more attentive to the endless interpolations of history and geography, and what's at stake in the particular ways they shoot through and shape each other. How remembering, as situated practice in a particular but constantly shifting present, can shatter everyday taken for granted sensibilities.

To remember, according to Benjamin reflecting on Proust, is to "open the

fan of memory." But, he cautions, one "never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside; that image, that taste, that touch . . . remembrance advances from small to the smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows ever mightier" (1978, 6). Those giant truths in the folds are inaccessible but approachable through a little unfolding. Who knows what may be shaken loose?

And so I risked opening a fan of memory of place, of time, of biographies unfolding in conjunctures and apart—at first as a "performance" in honor of Allan's retirement and too quickly after that in memoriam. My unfolding encompasses my own memories, but these are overlaid and infused with my mother's memories and Allan's memories as I imagine and have conjured them. Three Bronx childhoods intertwined in time and space, drawn forth in the now-time-space of walking the streets and visiting the spaces of our separately unfolding childhoods alone and with Allan's sister, Suzanne, and in conversation with my mother, Phyllis, and Allan's brother, Ralph. My walks and conversations a methodology for spatializing time and historicizing space, for "blasting" memories, histories, and geographies out of their complacencies to recognize time-spaces in new constellations that might have something to say about present moments—and spaces—of danger (Pred 1995, 23ff.).

*Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively concerned with here. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. For even if months and years appear here, it is in the form they have at the moment of recollection. This strange form—it may be called fleeting or eternal—is in neither case the stuff that life is made of. (Benjamin 1978, 28)*

These streets and spaces once felt like the world to me, but walking them now I experience how confined they were, almost shockingly so. In the folds of these times and spaces, we meet and can glimpse our shared geographies, diverging paths, (im)possible meeting points, densities of experience, and sedimentations of desire. These paths and nodes and divergences create a sort of magical time-geography, a fusion of Allan's interests in biography formation and place making, and the choreography of bodies in motion through time (Pred 1977).

*[Memory] goes along the streets in front of him, and each street is a vertiginous experience. Each leads downward . . . to a past that is all the more spellbinding as it is not just the author's own private past. (Benjamin 2005, 262)*

The streets, Benjamin tells us, are the home of the eternally restless. As I wander through this "Bronx Chronicle," which works the present to retrieve glimmers of the past, history and memory brought forth through vertiginous geographies, I proceed in a Predian fashion—infusing (and confusing) my thoughts and speculations with quotations, fragmentary thoughts, images, the drift of other temporalities, and the restless clashing spatialities of memory, dreams, fantasy, and encounter.

Montage is transgression  
of the (hyper)modern condition(ing)s  
out of which it is created.  
In demanding new associations,  
new connections that transcend taken-for-granted meanings,  
it also demands transgressions  
on the part of those who read it.

The well socialized do not comply with transgressive demands.  
The creative comply in their own way.  
(Pred 1997, 137)

*I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life—bios—graphically on a map. First I envisaged an ordinary map, but now I would incline to a general staff's map of a city center, if such a thing existed. Doubtless it does not, because of ignorance of the theater of future wars. I have evolved a system of signs, and on the gray background of such maps they would make a colorful show if I clearly marked in the houses of my friends and girl friends, the assembly halls of various collectives . . . the hotel and brothel rooms that I knew for one night, the decisive benches in the Tiergarten, the ways to different schools and the graves that I saw filled, the sites of prestigious cafés whose long-forgotten names daily crossed our lips, the tennis courts where empty apartment blocks stand today, and the halls emblazoned with gold and stucco that the terrors of dancing classes made almost the equal of gymnasiums. And even without this map, I still have the encouragement provided by an illustrious precursor, . . . Léon Daudet, exemplary at least in the title of his work, which exactly encompasses the best that I might achieve here: "Paris vécu." "Lived Berlin" does not sound so good, but is as real. (Benjamin 1978, 5)*

If "Lived Berlin" doesn't sound so good, what about "Lived Bronx"?

### Bios Graphed

On a satellite view map—protected by copyright laws and thus on the cutting room floor—I traced some of what I was able to reconstruct of Allan's paths

using different colors to signify his everyday walks to school, to play, to friends' houses, to candy stores and luncheonettes; his ambles to shopping streets; and the route to his grandmother's house. I also highlighted the street—only two blocks long—that traversed the space between his apartment building and the one where my mother grew up, where I was born and spent the first two years of my life.

My mother, five years older than Allan, went to all the same schools as he and his sister, Suzanne—P.S. 94, P.S. 80, and Evander Childs High School. Their routine geographies traced the same grounds—five years apart but also simultaneously—walks to school; hanging out over egg creams and malteds at the counter of Max's candy store; playing at a neighborhood park, "the Oval," but only on its west side, where my grandfather played shuffleboard, Allan played tennis, I was pushed in my baby carriage, Allan and Ralph played basketball, and my mother splashed in the wading pool. What, who was on the east side? They all scurried past the "haunted house" on the edge of the Oval, which it turns out was originally the reservoir keeper's house. But was that the only thing that scared them? That haunted their hallowed play spaces?

We all went to the same movie theater on Jerome Avenue; established as the Tuxedo, it was called the David Marcus by 1958 when I went to see *Gigi* with my mother's teenage cousins. I felt so grown up going with them to a matinee—I can't believe I was four, but in the dark of that deco theater Leslie Caron vanquished all those Disney cartoon heroines in my imagination. I've been singing ever since, or more accurately, imagining Maurice Chevalier singing to me, since I was already singing standing on chairs in kitchens all over the Bronx, perhaps even in the Preds' building since my father's closest friend grew up there.

The comings and goings, leavings and stayings, trajectories through places the same, but always made different, and yet still resonating with the same, even now. These confluences tantalize me and pique my imagination. Their diverse paths and projects a sort of intergenerational time-geography. In June 1953, Allan graduated from high school, and soon after took leave of the Bronx for Antioch. At that very moment—perhaps even to the day—my grandfather died in that apartment around the corner from the Preds'. Coming in from her job in the city, my mother discovered him, his hair still wet from an after-work shower, before they were to drive up to "the country" for the weekend. In her sadness and shock she wondered if and hoped that my grandmother had told him her secret—that she was pregnant. With me. The arriving, the never returning, the coming, the back and forthing, the staying; all tracing their space-times in these microcosms, resting in the folds of the fan of memory and ready to come alive, be reanimated here, now.

My mother—always alive to shared experience—was electrified by my journeys to find Allan's childhood geographies. I called her from Jerome Avenue as I traced the walk I took every Saturday afternoon with my grandmother until I was about ten years old (figure 12.1). She asks me if I'm getting in touch with her past. Trying to find Allan, I'm finding myself, as well as my mother, each of us now part of my topographical consciousness. I simultaneously wonder if finding myself can even sort of be a way to find Allan, to unfold the fan of his memory through my fantasy and projection; if "the art of straying" can bring us into others' lived geographies. Of course I've got Allan's sister and brother as guides.



FIGURE 12.1. Walking Jerome Avenue.

*If I chance today to pass through the streets of the quarter, I set foot in them with the same uneasiness that one feels when entering an attic unvisited for years. Valuable things may be lying around, but nobody remembers where. (Benjamin 1978, 20)*

Is it the doors? Surely they were not blood red in the 1940s. The lobby? So typical of the Bronx—deco, spacious, striving, arrived—so not the Lower East Side. Or the view from their first-floor windows, hard by the school? Those windows looked out from the room that Allan and Ralph turned into a nation, *Roomania*, its borders sometimes patrolled to exclude their younger sister, or schvesta, as they sometimes called Suzanne. But then calling her by the Yiddish word for sister was nothing compared to calling her rotunda or wretch, as they sometimes teased. Who is in those rooms now? Are the borders of *Roomania* intact? Do these children, named Hill, named Rios, play under the hallway steps like the Pred children did? Do brothers read bedtime stories to their younger sisters?

Following a young man into my great aunt's building a few blocks away, I explained my connection with the building. I could almost smell her stuffed cabbage as the same old dank lobby smell engulfed me. Holding the door for me, he quietly said, "Oh, it must have been different then." "Not really," I replied, but he wasn't really listening. Crowded working-class strivers then and now—my aunt lived with her husband, two children, and for a long while her father in a one-bedroom apartment. I never even wondered where everybody slept. Maybe I was too absorbed in the scents of my aunt's cooking or maintaining the little bubble of quiet I always tried to keep around me in the vibrant



FIGURE 12.2. Sammy's appetizing.



FIGURE 12.3. Pavement palimpsest.



FIGURE 12.4. A crossroads of empire, revolution, and license plates.

coming. "Ne crack pas," Allan would say, already playing with language as a child. "Ne panic pas."

*The Kaiser Friedrich School stands close by the municipal railway yard . . . you can look down into its playground. And because, once liberated from it, I frequently took the opportunity to do this, it now stands before me quite uselessly, similar*

chaos of my family, but I think that it all just made sense—it was our taken-for-granted world. Its geographies of power and inequality embodied and obscured in our everyday practices, made intelligible to me in a flash as I entered and explored this region of my topographical consciousness. That world is still visible in signs, which are everywhere once you look (figures 12.2 and 12.3).

Kings College Place at the corner of Gun Hill Road—a colonial past intersects with a revolutionary war. Where are imaginations formed? Through the alchemy of space and sign? Allan stood at this corner, his corner, counting the out-of-state license plates driving up and down Gun Hill Road—always already a geographer, imagining other worlds (figure 12.4). The Pred apartment was on Kings College Place—a grand name for a one-block street that ends in a cemetery. His elementary school was next door to his building, and just next to it sprawled the huge and beautiful Woodlawn Cemetery (figures 12.5 and 12.6). That was it. Home, school, cemetery. Is it any wonder he didn't stay?

The sedimentations of our everyday spaces ricochet through our be-

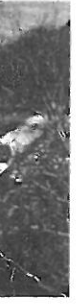


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FIGURE 12.5. The view from the school.



FIGURE 12.6. Public School 94 and 3508 Kings College Place (the Preds' building).

to one of those Mexican temples that were excavated much too early and inexpertly, their frescoes having been long effaced by rain by the time the excavation of ceremonial implements and papyri, which might have thrown some light on these images, could at last seriously begin. So I have to make do with what is resurrected only today, isolated pieces of interior that have broken away and yet contain the whole within them, while the whole, standing out there before me, has lost its details without a trace. (Benjamin 1978, 50)

Between two peals of the bell lay the break, the second precipitating the shuffling, chattering uproar with which the mass of pupils, streaming through only two doors, surged up the narrow stairway from floor to floor. These staircases I have always hated: hated when forced

to climb them in the midst of the herd, a forest of calves and feet before me, defenselessly exposed to the bad odors emanating from all the bodies pressing so closely against mine, hated no less when, arriving late, passing deserted corridors . . . woe if the door was already shut. (Benjamin 1978, 52; figure 12.7)

Did Allan feel such revulsion in these spaces? Did my mother? Entering school was terrifying mostly because the school “officers”—sixth graders in special vests—exulted in their power to keep us to the right on stairways, to march “single file”—no talking—to our classrooms, to “report” us if we transgressed. A rogue “officer” once chased me all the way home. I can still hear him growling, “Walk!!” as I raced to get away, terrorized. I never walked so fast. I couldn’t catch my breath enough to remember that his power—bogus in any case—was terri-



FIGURE 12.7. Deserted corridor.

torial, delimited by the school grounds. Power, space, terror. "Defenselessly exposed," I was sure he'd "report" me if I ran.

My mother's brother—also an Allan—did not escape his staircase tormenters. Cornered on the stairway of a nearby apartment building, he was beaten up by kids snarling that he'd killed their Christ.

*For such a mob of school children is among the most formless and ignoble of all masses. . . . The corridors, and the classrooms that finally came into view, are among the horrors that have embedded themselves most ineradicably in me, that is to say in my dreams; and these have taken revenge on the monotony, the cold torpor that overcame me at each crossing of the classroom thresholds, by turning themselves into the arena of the most extravagant events. (Benjamin 1978, 13)*

Suzanne and I caress the auditorium chairs as if they were ancient tablets (figure 12.8). Their patina of everydayness doesn't hide that. Suzanne, Allan, my mother, my uncle, and the pupils right at that moment imprisoned in their



FIGURE 12.8. Hieroglyphics of child-time.

classrooms have touched their ancient solidity, heard that grand piano sitting just under the stage, and wriggled in those seats bored or with excited anticipation. Where in the hieroglyphics are they? Was Allan's name etched in one of the seats? My mother surely would have carved hers, kidding around with her friends during the "cold torpor" of Mrs. Rat's (!) droning introductions to assembly.

The assembled were not homogenous, even in this little corner of Jewish strivers in the Bronx. Anti-Semitism hid in the stairways. The apartments' deco lobbies an ornamentation of racism, an announcement of class distinction. So *not* the Lower East Side. "We left there," my grandmother would say, or was it, "We left there"? Situated ignorance walked the streets, haunted our everyday spaces. Who *was* on the east side of the Oval?

From school Allan—mirthful but always already Allan—brought home his friend and fellow basketball player, Clinton Jeffries, whose nonwhiteness released a storm of unacknowledged prejudice in his household and in his building. Such everyday encounters with racism, "even in" the left-liberal outer reaches of *Romania*, were surely foundational to Allan's evolving concerns with injustice and were neither excused nor forgotten by him.

Canny Allan might even have developed some of his spatial awareness in

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the course of his everyday paths and projects. Most kids just chafe against being corralled or try to subvert the ways schools spatialize discipline, but perhaps Allan came to consciousness about the spatiality of power walking the school's corridors, inhabiting its well-ordered spaces. He would have daily seen that writing on the doors—carefully stenciled gold on solid wood—formally announcing the importance of the thresholds it marks. Self-importance fused with purpose, “Closet,” “Teachers’ Rest Room,” “Boys,” “Principal,” “General Medical.” Language as power, language as practice (figure 12.9).



FIGURE 12.9. Marks of catastrophic encounters?

*Just as a certain kind of significant dream survives awakening in the form of words when all the rest of the dream content has vanished, here isolated words have remained in place as marks of catastrophic encounters. (Benjamin 1978, 14)*

And if that was not enough, the cemetery was just outside the school's large windows. No talking, single file.

*For childhood, knowing no preconceived opinions, has none about life. It is as dearly attached (though with just as strong reservations) to the realm of the dead, where it juts into the living, as to life itself. (Benjamin 1978, 28)*

Walking the school's corridors now, we sensed the warmth of the dark wood, remembered furtive gulps at the water fountain while trying to bend over it in just the right way, recalled the chemical-clean smell of the “lavatories,” and practically danced into the light-filled gym. Measuring ourselves against the wooden yardstick built into the gymnasium wall, we thought of how many students—Allan, my mother, Suzanne among them—were measured annually—pressed back, shoulders down, head straight—right there (figure 12.10). Allan must have hung his stuff on the carefully num-



FIGURE 12.10. Embodied time, ordered space (Suzanne Pred Bass).

bered hooks lining the walls of the gym. Measurement, mathematical order, cleanliness, keeping time. Clocks loomed everywhere, many in cages to stop stopping time by the flying objects of the as-yet-undisciplined. Industrial clock time seeping into children's pores. Time disciplined every little body that ever walked those halls. Time measured by clocks, bells, inches, promotion, seasons, death. Signs rusting, bells ringing (figure 12.11).

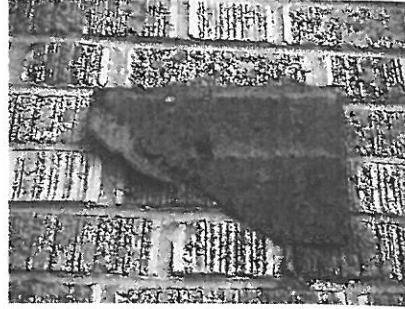


FIGURE 12.11. No loitering . . .

*The school clock that held sway above our heads . . . the invisible bars of our timetable*

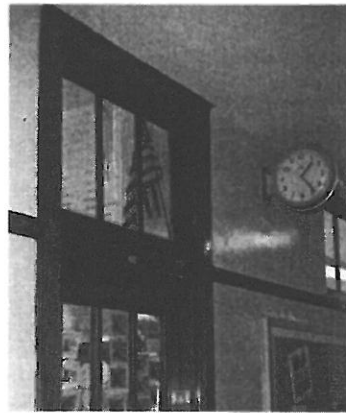


FIGURE 12.12. Keeping time.

*... the lower panes of the classroom windows were of frosted glass. "Vagabond clouds, sailors of the skies" had for us the absolute precision that the verse holds for prisoners. Moreover, little about the actual classrooms has remained in my memory except these exact emblems of imprisonment: the frosted windows and the infamous carved wooden battlements over the doors. . . . Heraldic and chivalrous obtuseness shone forth wherever possible. (Benjamin 1978, 13-14)*

Unruly bodies ruled by the orderings of space and time, of history and geography (figure 12.12).

But the city was just outside. Streets where cars with the license plates from far away passed under the elevated train tracks over Jerome Avenue just a few blocks down the hill. Those elevated trains whooshed underground into Manhattan and beyond every few minutes (figure 12.13).

*The city splits into its dialectical poles. It becomes a landscape that opens up to him and a parlor that encloses him. (Benjamin 2005, 263)*

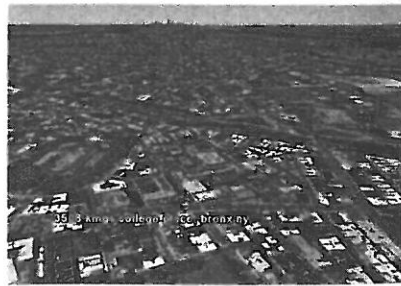


FIGURE 12.13. Looking southwest.

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“Ne panic pas!”

*To depict a city as a native would call for other, deeper motives—the motives of the person who journeys into the past, rather than to foreign parts. . . . [The native] does not describe, he narrates. (Benjamin 2005, 262)*

My narration, a text of dirt. Bronx dirt, a kaleidoscope of minuscule shards of broken glass, rock dust, and urban debris compacted to near solidity. This dirt, which I would hack at with a teaspoon, was what I thought earth was. I was shocked when I encountered something a little loamier many years later. And granite—sturdy, amphibious—the result of glaciation I now understand. Its formations are my ur-landscape, where I always feel most at home. I’ve encountered this landscape in Scandinavia—no doubt Allan did too.

*[The native] does not describe, he narrates. Even more, he repeats what he has heard. (Benjamin 2005, 262)*

What I heard from Suzanne and Ralph was that Allan was even-keeled in an intense, crowded, lively household. That he was a gentle and protective big brother. That his best friend, Howie Orlon, lived on Bainbridge Street, their grandmother around the corner. That Allan and Ralph had their own language (are we surprised?). “Hock the lab” was one of its idioms and meant playing basketball (though Ralph refrained from giving me the etymology of the phrase). Neither one “nonco” (uncoordinated), the brothers and their friends played endless games of basketball in schoolyards, in the gym, in the Oval. Allan, of course, loved to wander the commercial streets of the neighborhood, gazing in the windows and eating at local haunts like the Tuxedo luncheonette (now the Caribe), Max’s, Jade Garden, Schweller’s Delicatessen.

But it was all so small, “a parlor that enclosed” him, us. I thought the whole world was along Jerome Avenue. I know that sounds clichéd, but to my child eyes it really did seem to have everything. It was years later that I realized the Tuxedo Theater was not the Paramount where my mother had swooned at ten thousand consecutive shows of Frank Sinatra, that when I sat on my father’s shoulders watching Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, we were not in the Bronx. That Katz’s deli—now Pollo a la Carbon—was not *the* Katz’s Delicatessen (it wasn’t even Schweller’s, which was down the street), but just a good place to indulge in a frankfurter. My grandmother loved nothing more. As we indulged, she’d always say that the first bite’s juicy spurt meant that the frankfurter was kosher. A ridiculous idea that I never really questioned until it came back to me cupping my hands to see inside the steamed-up window of Pollo a la Carbon.

Situated ignorance?

Allan refused the confinement, looked away, went away. But his intellectual commitment to “sites”—sites of origin, sites of production, sites of power, sites of everyday life—and insistence on the local origins of everything global have their roots in *Roomania*. Kings College Place and Gun Hill Road—“a confluence of confluences” as he might call it.

*Every space of daily life, every site at which women and men bodily engage in everyday practice, every meaning-filled location of the quotidian, is riddled with the unspeakable. (Pred 2001, 119)*

Allan's work reached into the unspeakable, excavated the beauty and horror of its material forms and practices, and brilliantly illuminated their connections to histories' and geographies' unfolding. It still dances off the page, spellbinding.

## NOTE

All photos by Cindi Katz, except for figure 12.1 by Suzanne Pred Bass.

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