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Observation Report – Dr. Sadovnik
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The Stations of Urban Mourning: An Observation of Ongoing, Public, Grieving

Over the past year there have been three killings in my Jersey City Heights neighborhood. Each killing ground is a spoke of suffering less than one block from where I live. You cannot walk any stretch of sidewalk leaving my apartment without walking on concrete that was once stained with the last bloody droplets of a human life.

As I try to press meaning into these senseless killings I am reminded there is great truth in the oath of the street that “life is cheap.” However, dying, I have discovered, costs more than a corpse. Those who survive the street death of a loved one appear have a ritualistic and ongoing public grieving that this observation report will try to frame in a way that provides perspective on the *Stations of Urban Mourning*.

Observation Plan

I knew this observation report was due during the semester and reading the assigned texts for this course early I came up with a plan to organize my research and observe the three killing zones and their makeshift shrines. I chose to observe each site for 45 minutes on four days over four weeks. The Fleet Street and Oakland Avenue locations are around the corner from each other so travel time was less than 30 seconds. Travel time from Palisade Avenue to Fleet Street is less than a five minute walk. I live in a rough neighborhood and most of my Black and Latino neighbors think I am a cop no matter how I dress or behave. I have to be careful of what I wear every day. I dress to try to meet the low expectation of the street – not too flashy, not too White.

I also realized I would not be able to use video or audio recording techniques or take photographs or even take visible written notes to compose my observations because, as my neighbors warned me, I would be marked as an undercover cop doing surveillance and I would either be confronted by those I was observing and told to go away or I would be harassed or assaulted and, as my neighbors further warned me, saying I was doing a research project for Rutgers University would be the sort of lame cover story the cops would use to try to not arouse suspicion.

Here are the three observation sites and some background on the killings. I tried to pick holidays for observation because I dimly remembered in the past that holidays generally had more people visiting the shrines. As a five year resident of the Jersey City Heights on Concord Street situated between Fleet Street and Saint Pauls Avenue and I wanted to try to understand what purpose ongoing public shrines provide to those in mourning and why they are created at the site of the killing instead of somewhere more private and more protected from the elements. I was born and raised in Nebraska and I had never before seen this kind of open display of mourning until I moved to the urban East Coast.

Three Observation Sites

A Tree on Palisade Avenue:

(Between Fleet Street and Saint Pauls Avenue)

This tree is near Christ Hospital and the city-planted and city-owned sapling near the curb of the sidewalk is a marker where last summer two young children were killed by a car in the middle of busy Palisade Avenue.

General Pencil Company on Fleet Street:

(Between Baldwin Avenue and Oakland Avenue)

On November 1, 2004 two men, Willie Boy and G-Money were chased from a Jersey City bar and assassinated gangland style with 9mm gunshots in the back of their heads. G-Money and Willie Boy fell dead in front of the General Pencil Company.

85 Oakland Avenue:

(Between Fleet Street and Saint Pauls Avenue)

On January 14, 2005 the bodies of four family members were found murdered in their home.

Common Rituals

Each of the three observation sites shared common rituals. Each site had some sort of home-built shrine made of wood and nails, votive candles, balloons, flowers, cards, homemade posters and some kind of maintenance of the area that would clear debris and straighten up the shrine. The unique rituals of each observation point will also be shared in the direct observation of each site.

First Observation – Valentine’s day, Monday, February 14, 2005

A Tree on Palisade Avenue (5:30pm-6:15pm):

Palisade Avenue is a major thoroughfare in Jersey City. There are lots of cars and lots of people walking around so doing an observation here is the easiest of the three locations to go unnoticed. I sit twenty feet away from the tree on a metal bench in a small resting spot outside a covered parking lot. The tree is decorated with red, white and blue streamers. Bundles of flowers faintly smelling of lilac were tied to the tree with twine. Large posters with photos of the young boys are interlaced within the branches of

the tree. Candles of all sizes brightly burn on a small wooden table next to the tree. New stuffed animals, a bear and a giraffe, are tied to the tree trunk. In the past I would often walk by this tree and there were always fresh flowers. The faded flowers were always removed. Today is no different. Fresh flowers abound. No wilting or dead flowers are available. What appear to be two Latina teenagers arrive at the tree and they tie two red valentines to the tree limbs. The valentines swing in the breeze like Christmas ornaments. They kneel at the base of the tree and light a large red candle. They cross themselves, hold hands and stare at the candle's flame. 20 minutes after they arrive, they leave. I make my way closer to the tree and smell cinnamon from the red candle and see one word written on each valentine: "Always" on one; "Remember" on the other.

General Pencil Company on Fleet Street (6:20pm-7:35pm):

Since November 1, 2004 I have been watching this shrine grow every day as I pass by it on my way to the Journal Square PATH station. I position myself across the street from the kill site so I can try to blend into the scene by semi-hiding behind a ganglion of parked and burnt-out cars. I have never seen such a dramatic, continued, concerted effort to maintain such a full-service shrine to the fallen. The names "G-Money" and "Willie Boy" are writ graffiti-like over the brick wall of the General Pencil company and on giant, Fenway-Park-Green-Monster-like, painted planks of wood covering the street-level windows of the second General Pencil Company building across the street from the kill zone. Even three and a half months after the murders the shrine is still huge and alive with action. The center of the shine is what appears to be an entire church pew used as a serving table with 85 candles, a giant color painting of Jesus looking skyward, a large tin of cinnamon rolls, three gallons of water in jugs, two Dunkin

Donuts coffee cartons, napkins and 51 insulated paper cups. At least ten cases of empty Corona beer bottles are neatly stacked to the side of the shrine. People sit in their cars, eating the food and they weep and watch the shrine. Four couples stand in front of the shrine and hug each other. The smell of pot permeates the air. The dancing flames of the candles animate the face of Jesus from a smile to a frown to a pensive state. 21 huge, red, helium-filled Mylar balloons all in the shape of hearts are stapled to the wooden façade of the building. The balloons rise and fall in the wind as if mimicking the breath of Jesus.

85 Oakland Avenue (7:35pm-8:12pm):

It has been exactly a month since the four bodies of Hossam Armanious' murdered family were discovered by the Jersey City police. I observe from across the street so as not to be mistaken for a mourner because the narrow shrine is basically the chain-link fence that marks the boundary of the home's front yard. I stand across the street on Saint Pauls Avenue and I can see the entire house without being seen by those visiting the shrine. Yellow police tape waves from the porch. A neon orange "Homicide" sign clings to the screen door of the house. Photographs of the entire family are tied to the chain-link fence. Three blue candles are even spaced in front of the house along the sidewalk. Brand new children's toys, still in the original box, lean against the fence. 20 bouquets of flowers, still in their paper wrapping, are jammed stems-first into holes in the fence. Three people walking on the sidewalk slow down to read the many cards and notes of sympathy taped to the metal gate leading to the front walkway of the house.

*Second Observation – Sunday, February 20, 2005***A Tree on Palisade Avenue (5:00am-5:45am):**

The streamers are gone. The flowers are fresh. No old flowers appear on the site. As if in slow motion, what appears to be three Filipino nurses dressed in scrubs and holding cups of coffee meander from the parking garage over to the tree. One nurse points to the picture of the younger boy. Next she points to the middle of the street. The other two nurses nod. Then the nurse points to the older boy's photo and points farther across the street. Her trembling finger draws a diagonal line across the air to where she had previously pointed to the middle of the street. Her finger hesitates there pointing to the middle of the street. The other nurses slowly nod and their heads drop a bit. The nurse then gives her coffee cup to another nurse and, using cupped hands with upward facing palms, she moves her outstretched hands from the street and, as if carrying a boy in each hand, gently brings her cupped palms back to the tree.

General Pencil Company on Fleet Street (5:50am-6:35am):

The remnants of a party are in evidence on this one-way street going East. 25 bottles of Colt 45 malt liquor are lined up in a row on the sidewalk. A two inch thick carpet of melted candle wax swirls across five feet of the sidewalk. Food tins are empty. Three trash bags are filled to the stretched maximum. Over the course of my observation, fifteen people, a mix of Latino, White and Black, and all dressed in funeral-like grey General Pencil Company uniforms, pass by the shrine on their way into the factory. None of them pauses to look at the shrine in any detail.

85 Oakland Avenue (6:35am-7:20am):

The flower bunches jammed into the chain-link fence are withered and dead. The sympathy cards are tattered and wet with rain. Cars race by the house going both North and South on Oakland Avenue. There is a smell of ammonia in the air. Two White Jersey City police officers wearing bright blue rubber gloves are on opposite ends of the front yard walking with their heads down. They are searching for something on the ground.

Third Observation – Saint Patrick’s Day, Thursday, March 17, 2005

A Tree on Palisade Avenue (2:00pm-2:45pm):

A wreath made of Green and White carnations has been built around the trunk of the tree with new photos of the two boys decorating its face. No withered flowers are in evidence. Unlighted new votive candles circle the tree trunk. Two elderly people – the man uses a cane, the woman uses a walker – make their way South on Palisade and momentarily stop to look at the decorated tree before moving on to their destination.

General Pencil Company on Fleet Street (2:50pm-3:35pm):

A party is in progress. Eighteen people are milling about. A boom box plays a Latin beat. A leprechaun ice cream cake melts atop a plastic folding table near the shrine. Empty bottles of Corona Extra and open cartons of 2% milk share the table with the cake. One Latino man wearing dark glasses, a Fumanchu moustache and a blue Do-Rag, fills his mouth with Corona beer and spits it on the “G-Money” and “Willie Boy” names written on the wall. The sidewalk is so heavy with people I cannot fully see the shrine from my vantage point. On my third slow stroll on the sidewalk to try to get a better angle on what is happening across the street, a few of the Latino men look at me and I get

the message not to pass by a fourth time. I turn the corner and head North up Oakland Avenue to observe the third station of mourning.

85 Oakland Avenue (3:35pm-4:20pm):

Piles of dead flowers are now two feet high on the sidewalk in front of the house. Trash litters the front lawn. Two deflated rubber balloons are dead on the ground. The yellow police tape is faded, but untouched on the porch. The boxes of toys are still there but without the toys inside. The neon orange “Homicide” sign is still hanging on the screen door by a piece of silver duct tape. The Latino men I saw 15 minutes before at the General Pencil Company turn the corner North on Oakland Avenue and see me. They point at me and quicken their pace up the street. In order to appear to fit into the scene I am observing, I kneel in front of the rotting flowers and I cross myself in a feeble imitation of the behavior I previously observed. I slowly stood up. I waved once at the guys coming up the street to let them know I was cool, I had a purpose, and I was not frightened of them. I then nonchalantly crossed Oakland Avenue, dodging two cars careening at me from opposite directions and made it to Saint Pauls Avenue walking East. The men did not follow.

Final Observation – Easter Sunday, March 27, 2005

A Tree on Palisade Avenue (10:00am-10:45am):

A brand-new three-foot high stuffed white bunny rabbit is nestled under the tree. It has giant floppy pink ears and its wicker basket holds small chocolate eggs wrapped in primary colors aluminum foil. 12 white roses are nestled in the crook of the bunny’s arm. The sidewalk looks as if it had recently been scrubbed in a five foot radius around the tree because the rest of the sidewalk is dingy and soot-stained. What appears to be an

impeccably dressed Latino family of five; mother, father, two daughters and a young son, determinedly make their way across Palisade Avenue to the tree. The young boy leaves a small green Gideon's bible in the bunny's basket. The mother pins what appears to be a church bulletin to the bunny's ear. The father touches the tree branches between his fingers and caresses them. The two girls stand there unmoving. After five minutes of silence, they leave and walk North up Palisade Avenue toward the hospital.

General Pencil Company on Fleet Street (10:50am-11:35am):

Two blue sleeping bags are next to the shrine. It appears one person was sleeping in each bag. The votive candles are burned down to black nubs. The carpet of spilled candle wax remains larger and thicker than ever. Piles of empty Corona and Jack Daniels bottles haphazardly litter the sidewalk and the gutters. There is one jug of water on the shrine. No cups. No napkins. No food. Two dark-skinned men arrive on motorcycles and they hop the curb from the street to the sidewalk and park their bikes. They drink directly from the jug. They look around the building and surrounding area for something. It appears they do not find what they want so they sit back down on their motorcycles and appear to drift away in thought. Their black leather jackets betray their sobs as the embroidered logo sewn on the back of their jackets shakes with emotion. After ten minutes, the motorcycle men rev up their bikes and gun the motors and smoke the tires. They peel away going West on Fleet Street – the wrong way down the one way street – and disappear legally turning South on Oakland Avenue. If there are people in the sleeping bags the noise from the motorcycles did not move them. The air is acrid with creamy smoke.

85 Oakland Avenue (11:35am-12:20pm):

The shrine area is clean. The sidewalk is free of rotting flowers. The trash is gone from the front yard. The ugly and frayed yellow police tape around the porch and now grungy neon orange “Homicide” sign beyond remain untouched. Twenty rows of one inch red ribbon is threaded through each link in the chain fence facing Oakland Avenue making a mottled ruddy mouth for the face of the grimy green house. When the clouds shift five minutes later the sunshine changes the ribbon into ruby satin lips glimmering against the morning sky. What appears to be two young Puerto Rican girls wearing black bubble coats and dressed in what appears to be school uniforms – identical white socks, the same shiny black shoes and similar plaid skirts – are sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk and drawing hopscotch squares in blue and pink chalk in front of the house.

Conclusion

Observing the three stations of urban mourning was an enlightening experience. At times, instead of observing live visitors, I felt I was actually observing the results of the invisible who tended the shrines in my absence. The invented shrines were all different in meaning but were also all identical in purpose: The shrines create public pathways for ongoing shared community grieving at the whim of each person. It would be an interesting project to study in a concerted manner how an urban neighborhood grieves losses of community and when and how and if ever that ongoing public grieving is put to a public end.

(Note: On March 31, 2005 I noticed on my way to the PATH station that the General Pencil Company shrine was missing. It wasn't just missing – 24 hours earlier the shrine was still there – it was as if had never existed in the first place because any evidence of its being had been wiped away. The seven-foot wide marbled four inch thick carpet of spent candle wax was gone from the sidewalk. The graffiti had been scrubbed away or had been covered with fresh green paint. No more trash. The pew was absent. The bottles were no where to be found. Everything vanished five months to the day after the murders of G-Money and Willie Boy.)