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Title

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Journal

Teaching and Learning Anthropology, 7(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/T37161925

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COMMENTARY

The City and the Senses: Reflections on Teaching Urban Anthropology During the Pandemic

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Abstract

In Spring 2021, I taught Urban Anthropology entirely online. In lieu of the interviews, participant-observation, and neighborhood tours I normally would have included in the syllabus, I asked students to carry out a series of visual exercises in their local neighborhoods to document what it was like to live through the lockdown period of the pandemic. In retrospect, I have begun to think about how utilizing a multi-sensory approach to ethnography during this time might have produced even richer insights about urban life. In this commentary, I consider how while focusing on one sense, the visual, still allowed us to create an excellent snapshot of life in Indianapolis during the lockdown, utilizing more of our senses in representing local neighborhoods would have encouraged us to think even more deeply about how cities, like all human environments, are always in flux and responding at any given moment to a wide range of pressures, constraints, and opportunities.

Keywords: *urban neighborhoods; sensory ethnography; visual anthropology*

When I think back to what city life was like during the lockdown period of the pandemic, my first impulse is to recall not what the city *looked* like during that time but, rather, what it *sounded* like. I live by a major thoroughfare and usually weekday mornings and evenings are accompanied by a steady thrum of rush hour traffic as people move in and out of downtown Indianapolis to and from surrounding neighborhoods and suburbs. During the pandemic, however, with many people who had the option of doing so sheltering at home and working remotely, there was an almost eerie silence, as the volume of cars during working hours was drastically reduced. In contrast, however, nighttime under lockdown brought with it the loud shrieks of tires and revving engines, as many of the city's primary roads were transformed into racetracks, with cars and motorcycles speeding through now dark decanted motorways.

Yet, when I look back at my assignments for my *Urban Anthropology* class during the pandemic, rather than addressing the new soundscapes produced by lockdown, I relied

on *the visual* as the primary sense students would use to examine how the city was changing. This emphasis on the visual is certainly consistent with the primacy of the ocular that figures so prominently into our daily lives and our ethnographic work. While these assignments focusing on the visual generated some wonderfully creative and thought-provoking work, in retrospect they also challenged me to think about the multiple ways in which we experience our urban environments and how focusing on our other senses, in addition to the visual, might have expanded our methodological approaches to studying the city and added additional dimensions to our understanding of the city under lockdown.

In a fascinating article on “the sensuous city,” Low (2015, 296) asks, “[W]hat are the necessary methodological approaches that aid toward the production and examination of sensory ethnographies?” Low discusses how in walks with respondents around neighborhoods in Singapore, his companions commented on, for example, the smells that marked different ethnic enclaves. These observations then engendered discussions about the identities and “cultures” of the people who lived in those communities and assumptions about the nature of social life in these neighborhoods (303). Attention to smells and sounds would certainly have enhanced the assignments that I used in the *Urban Anthropology* class in the Spring of 2021.

When I first realized that I would have to teach *Urban Anthropology* synchronously and online that semester, I was initially flummoxed as to how I would approach the course without the interviews, participant-observation, and fieldtrips that I usually include in my syllabi. I began contemplating what alternative kinds of assignments I could devise that would call on the students to focus on how we could ethnographically understand and represent the nature of the city under lockdown while still adhering to restrictions like masking and social distancing. What could we learn about cities by considering what urban life now *looked* like under these conditions? While I was planning the course, I came across the website “Covid-19 and the Social Sciences,” sponsored by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC, n.d.). The website focused on representations of New York under lockdown, many of them visual. I drew several ideas for assignments from that website and by the end of the semester, I was so impressed by the quality of the students’ work that I wanted to share their projects with a broader audience. After the class was over, one of the students and I decided to publish a representative sample of their work on our own website, “Covid and the City: A View of the Pandemic from the Heartland.”¹ We wanted to showcase and differentiate our experiences of living through the pandemic in a regional city in the Midwest from the more ubiquitous representations of COVID lockdowns in global cities that had dominated the media coverage. The students who were willing to participate in this initiative provided us with capsule biographies to post alongside their contributions and gave their consent to have their work shared publicly.

¹ See <https://www.covidandthecity.org/>.

Several of the projects posted on the SSRC site emphasized the importance of the visual in particular for representing what was happening during lockdown.² For example, one task featured on the SSRC website under the heading, "A Time Capsule for Future Social Scientists," asked "prominent scholars to select a visual artifact of this time that will help future researchers understand the Covid-19 crisis" (SSRC, n.d.). Modeling my own assignment on this idea, I asked students to take a picture of some aspect of their life under conditions of lockdown and to submit it along with a paragraph of explanation.

This assignment, which I called "Visual Artifacts of the Corona Virus Era,"³ very much resonated with the students, and I selected a range of their images to showcase on our website. For example, one photo documented the racial justice demonstrations that took place in Indianapolis during the summer of 2020. It shows a student from the class holding a sign that says, "The system was never really broken; it was built this way." Activities undertaken at home during lockdown were another popular theme. One student submitted an image of an elaborate cake she had baked. As she explained, "Like many others, I started to invest in learning how to cook new recipes or taking on more intensive baking projects. This made the whole process of feeding oneself much more interesting in a way that trying new restaurants would be and helps contribute to a feeling of accomplishment and skill development." Yet another interesting image showed the giant dinosaur sculptures that reside outside of our Children's Museum, now newly fitted with surgical masks. The student explained how she and a friend would chuckle at the dinosaurs while on their daily walks. As she speculated, "I think that this image is very telling of where we are in this current period of history. The fact that not only is the whole world wearing masks, but now even these inanimate objects are too. I wonder if they chose to put the masks on the dinosaurs to encourage mask wearing almost sending the message of 'if the dinosaurs are wearing one then you should be too,' or if it was for more of a quirky, fun thing to do." A more poignant submission showed a student with her hand pressed to one side of a glass door, her grandfather's hand pressed to hers on the other. As she explained, her grandfather was in a nursing home, suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Her description of the photo read, "We all were hanging onto hope that we could have this moment together, being able to see each other face to face, seeing his smile once again. The pandemic may have taken hugging, laughing, and touching away, but it will never take away the hope a family feels after seeing their loved one once again."

As a collection, the compilation of the student's visual artifacts constituted an impressive collage, illustrating multiple dimensions of the COVID lockdown in Indianapolis. In the future, I would use this assignment again and would ask the students to document images of the city that highlight such unsettled dimensions of urban life as gentrification and displacement, consumption, and abandonment. In addition, I now realize that another way to have approached this assignment would have been to ask the students to include

² A shorter article that I wrote for the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) newsletter also describes some of these assignments (Hyatt 2021).

³ See <https://www.covidandthecity.org/visual-artifacts-of-the-corona-virus-era/>.

a recording and description of the *sounds* that accompanied a number of the scenes they presented – sounds of clinking dishes and the thud of a cake pan coming out of the oven, or the rhythmic chants of the racial justice protests. And the smells – the smells of a freshly baked cake or the medicinal odors of a home for the elderly (see Allen 2023 for a discussion of understanding the effects of COVID-19 through smell). Asking students to include attention to both sound and smell, along with their documentation and analysis of the visual, would have made for even richer evocations of life during this extraordinary period.

Another one of my assignments was inspired by CityLab's 2020 Maplab project. Entitled "Your Year in Maps" (Bliss and Martin 2020; Poon 2020), CityLab asked people around the world to create maps showing how their landscapes had been reshaped by the pandemic. One of my colleagues, Paul Mullins (Mullins et al. 2023, 49), had also asked his students to create maps of how they were experiencing what he called "Covid spatiality." Mullins et al. found that the students' maps "expressed a fevered definition of place." Rather than seeing their retreat into their homes as a moment of refuge or retreat, they experienced their domestic environments as sites of anxiety and as physically and emotionally draining. In comparison, I also asked my students to create maps⁴ illustrating how their experiences of familiar neighborhoods had changed since lockdown. One of my students drew the sights they could see from the vantage point of their front porch. They used that perspective to talk about the activist endeavors in which they had been involved and which, to some extent, they were trying to sustain. As they explained, "The next location [outside of the porch] that I drew was a glimpse of the park, the American Legion Lawn, which is across the street from the main entrance of the Indianapolis Public Library off of St Clair Street. This location is significant to me because for over three years I have been working with various community members to develop and maintain mutual aid networks throughout the city. ... [T]he park has been a primary location for meeting with all kinds of people throughout our networks and sharing aid and resources."

Mullins' students had also mapped some of the spaces they encountered outside of their homes, most frequently in grocery stores. One of his students "lamented the failure of Wal-Mart shoppers to observe public health codes, calling violators 'maskless heathens'" (Mullins et al. 2023, 51). In comparison, one of the students in my class pictured herself as a bee, flitting around to specific places that she continued to frequent, even during lockdown. As she wrote, "For my map project I decided to show what many of my Fridays looked like during the summer in the pandemic as my experience with the city was most different then, even compared to now." She represented the bee flying to her workplace and, among other places, to a bar that had remained open, even though they were only serving patrons outdoors. She appreciated the re-emergence of a lively street life created by the bars' and restaurants' use of outdoor space. As she explained, "Broad Ripple Avenue [a major thoroughfare through an entertainment district, popular with young people] itself was closed to traffic but open to pedestrians. This enabled people to

⁴ See <https://www.covidandthecity.org/mapping-the-city/>.

walk around and line the formerly high trafficked road. Some people came with a mic and played music, others came with their dogs, and some would come just to walk around.” (And here is an interesting reference to sounds that I did not pick up on at the time).

I would utilize the map assignment again in future classes to illustrate and compare students’ different views of what each of them consider to be key landmarks in “their” individualized perspectives and experiences of the city. Paying attention to how each of us situates ourselves within our local social and material landscapes – what routes we travel, what venues we visit, what businesses we patronize – is one way to understand how race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and other markers of identity always contour our experiences of the city and under a range of conditions. And, along with the mapping, I would also ask the students to include documentation of the sounds and smells at each of the sites they visited.

Students also wrote research blogs⁵ addressing different dimensions of their COVID-related lives.⁶ The blogs addressed some very poignant topics, including struggles with mental health and substance disorders; frontline work as a server in a nursing home; inequitable access to the vaccine (which became more widely available toward the end of the semester); and a survey of changes in housing values, as gentrification continued apace in some communities. Over the past few years, I have discovered that students enjoy writing this kind of short-form essay, often couched from a personal point of view and aimed at a broad public readership.

The final assignment asked students to contemplate how their environment had been changed by COVID and to predict how such changes might shape the city of the future.⁷ They were given the option of presenting their predictions about what the post-pandemic city might look like as PowerPoints, maps, or some other kind of visual representation, along with a brief explanatory essay. Again, the projects were creative and thoughtful. One student created a StoryMap,⁸ imagining how the downtown would look if the largely vacant government and other office buildings were transformed into housing; another student looked at how the Boys and Girls Club program where she continued to work had changed in response to safety precautions and speculated (correctly, as it turned out) that many of these measures – such as ever-present hand sanitation stations and requiring parents to wait for their children outdoors – would be permanent.

In one of the most interesting presentations,⁹ another student showed how residents of his neighborhood were responding to the increase in food insecurity by building several raised beds (because of the high level of lead and other chemicals in the soil) to be used

⁵ See <https://www.covidandthecity.org/research-blogs-bios/>.

⁶ This was another assignment inspired by one of the Social Science Research Council’s features that they called “Autoethnographies of a Pandemic from Brooklyn’s Epicenter” (SSRC, n.d.)

⁷ See <https://www.covidandthecity.org/thinking-about-the-post-pandemic-city/>.

⁸ See <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9ed4bc7b656d4562b02af3340be2dd52>.

⁹ See <https://www.covidandthecity.org/neighbors-feeding-neighbors-in-little-flower-by-danny-carroll/>.

for cultivating vegetables in front of their residences, for the purpose of encouraging people to raise food to be shared. This student analyzed the impact of the “Neighbors Feeding Neighbors” initiative, noting that it was not clear whether the food grown was actually reaching the neediest. He included maps and illustrations to document the location of the vegetable gardens within the neighborhood, showing that most of the raised beds were on the nicer blocks and/or in front of houses that sported “Black Lives Matter” signs, Pride flags, or pro-immigration banners. As the student wrote, “The presence of these signs and flags are an interesting indicator of the type of individual or family that would be interested in participating in an effort such as Neighbors Feeding Neighbors. ... The locations of the community raised beds are also an interesting indicator of demographic of who would participate in such an effort like Neighbors Feeding Neighbors.” These observations led the student to conjecture that such efforts, which have been encouraged by our local government, may not be a viable long-term solution to addressing hunger.

What began as a teaching venture born of necessity that I had expected to be onerous and challenging turned out to be a way for us to use visual representations and short reflections to examine our own metropolitan environment under conditions of extreme and rapid transition. Looking at the website now, two years later, elicits an almost visceral response on my part as the students’ work is so strongly reminiscent of that historical period.

Although this kind of lockdown experience may or may not be repeated in our lifetimes, the fact is that all environments, urban and otherwise, are always in a process of transformation, albeit usually at a smaller scale. While the visual dimensions of the city under lockdown may have been the most obvious way to look at change, had I incorporated attention to other senses, the results might have expanded our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on our urban environment even more – the silences, for example, that indicated the drastic reduction of the traffic flow, and the absence of aromas emanating from now-shuttered restaurants.

Students in my *Urban Anthropology* classes over the years have often tended to treat our local landscapes as though they are either inevitable or static. They characterize neighborhoods as “blighted” or “wealthy,” and seem to almost assume that it is “natural” that some communities have suffered the predations of deindustrialization while others are enjoying the fruits of redevelopment and real estate investment. I have always sought to challenge these views by incorporating historical material into my courses, showing how the neighborhood formations we see today are actually fairly recent inventions. Seeing the visual evidence of urban change and adaptation in real time during the lockdown period of the pandemic heightened our awareness of the fact that our metropolitan landscape is, in fact, extraordinarily malleable and that the many other changes that had taken place during earlier historical periods – like the highways that slashed across poor and Black neighborhoods and the decisions by corporations to forsake manufacturing in American

cities for cheaper labor elsewhere – were a product of human agency and are therefore always subject to change and negotiation. This historical moment encouraged me to think about the ways in which our assignments should always be creative and flexible enough to allow students to use different strategies, including deploying all of our senses, to represent cities as living organisms – that is, as volatile bodies that are constantly in flux and that are always responding, at any given moment, to a wide range of pressures, constraints, and opportunities.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Samantha Riley, who set up our amazing website. Kudos to all the students who took this course, with a particular tip of the hat to those students whose work I have discussed in this essay, including Kayla Allen-Brown, Nicole Blackburn, Heather Blankenbaker, Jackie Carnaghi, Dana Dobbins, Ben Clark, Ryan Considine, Thomas Dylan Goldberg, Hunter Taylor, Danny Carroll, and Mason Johnson.

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