OUT OF BOUNDS: MAPPING UPTOWN YOUTH'S EVERYDAY MOBILITY THROUGH GEO-TAGGED PHOTO-MAKING

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Abstract

This participatory action research project took place at Bronx Community College located in the poorest congressional district in the USA. Using photography, writing, and mapping (through photo geo-tagging), our project aimed to promote a sense of belonging among BCC students by understanding what "community" means to them, what they experience as their communities' assets and challenges, and how they see their contribution and role within various communities. Expanding upon interpretations of data made by the entire research team, we present a spatial analysis of the geo-locations of participants' photographs in order to illustrate and make sense of their experience of belonging in the city. Findings indicate participants experienced the blatant socioeconomic disparities characteristic of NYC neighborhoods as they traversed from one environment to another, which impacted their sense of engagement, mobility, and investment in certain communities. Participants articulated the notion that they are "the one side of the two cities," illustrating a sense of otherness from the rest of the city. This finding was also supported by the geolocations of their photo-making, which clustered within the "small radius" in which their lives took place. Maps revealed that participants restricted their movement to the area north of Central Park/110th street, delineating participants' lived boundary of race and class. Overall, findings suggest that the resulting increase in participants' sense of ownership and agency over their communities was mediated by their deeper sense-making about their individual—and their communities'—position within the broader inequitable distribution of power and resources.

Contemporary urban settings in the USA are characterized by blatant socioeconomic disparities, which many young people experience as they traverse from one community environment to another. This participatory action research (PAR) project took place at Bronx Community College (BCC) located in South Bronx of New York City (NYC), which is part of the poorest congressional district in the USA. Ninety-seven percent of BCC students come from ethnic minority groups, and the graduation rate is 11%. Acknowledging the effect that financial strain and work have on community college students' high attrition rates (Seidman 2007; York 1993), several research projects (Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan 2000; Osterman 2000; Rodgers and Summers 2008) have focused on the notion of social integration, defined as "sense of belonging," as the crucial element in the process of increasing student retention (Vianna,

Hougaard, & Stetsenko 2014). It is this paradoxical idea of community colleges lacking a sense of community that provided the inspiration and need for the current project.

This project aimed to promote a sense of belonging among BCC students, by understanding what "community" means to them, what they experience as their communities' assets and challenges, and how they see their contribution and role within various communities, through the tools of photography and storytelling. The broad nature of these aims was intentional; it allowed the participants agency in shaping the project's direction. As the project progressed, aims narrowed into exploring young people's understanding of—and everyday experience with—class, race, and immigration issues characterizing the NYC context. In this paper, expanding upon interpretations of data made by the entire research team, we present a spatial analysis of the geo-locations of participants' photographs in order to illustrate and make sense of their experience of belonging in the city.

Methodology

To best meet project aims, as facilitators, we adopted a PAR approach where we worked with, rather than on, about, or for the young people involved (Torre and Fine 2006). We also used an adaptation of *photovoice*, a community-based participatory methodology originally established in the health sciences by Wang and Burris (1997), in order to engage students in examining localized urban issues impacting their lives.

In bi-weekly, two-hour workshops, participants received training in, and engaged with, PAR methodology, photography, and visual analysis. Each week, the research team came up with the topic for the following week's photo narrative "mission," and as facilitators, we constructed a prompt to engage the team with that topic. Among others, the mission topics that students found relevant to explore included: community, family, gentrification, sense of shame, sense of pride, and ideal community. Participants were also trained on how to geo-tag their photograph locations, which when input into Google's now retired Picasa program, allowed them to generate maps of their photos upon completion of data collection. At the conclusion of the project, each participant reviewed the geo-tag maps and completed individual exit interviews.

In analyzing their maps with photo geo-tags, the participants noticed that their lives largely took place within a "small radius" surrounding their neighborhoods in the Bronx and Upper Manhattan—with considerably fewer photos being made below Manhattan's 110th Street—which was linked to their perception of themselves as "the one side of the two cities. In the remainder of this paper, we engage with these interlinked observations as a jumping off point to further explore how participants' everyday experiences of class, race, and immigrations issues within the NYC context may have influenced, and been influenced by, their perception of being "other" and how they made sense of their movement within the city over the course of the project. We conducted a systematic spatial analysis of the geo-tagged maps, coupled with participants' photos and narratives, which support their observations. We present these findings below.

"We are the one side of the two cities"

Analysis of the ways in which participants engaged with photographic and narrative processes over time allowed for exploration of broader, master narratives that they affirmed, objected to, or challenged through their photo-making and storytelling about their own communities. At the beginning of the photo narrative missions, there was a "silent" dialogue between how the participants saw themselves and their communities, and how they think others perceived them (e.g. "People think the Bronx is not beautiful and that is dangerous"; "Some people think that because I go to BCC the work is easier, but that is not the case"; "Everybody wants to come to New York thinking it's all nice and glamorous, but it's not"). We also found that the participants used their photography to present a counter narrative that responded to an outsider's stereotypical perspective—and by Mission 10 their photo-making had changed. Not only were there more narratives that directly spoke to their feelings of otherness within the city told through their photos, but the participants engaged in more explicit conversations about race, class, power, and inequality in their writing.

The pivotal point of the project, which brought to the fore issues of inequality, happened three months into the project when the group conversation was initiated by engaging participants in a sequencing activity using archival photographs from the Bronx County Historical Society. This was the first meeting where we did not discuss participants' own photographs; it is as if this distance from their personal experience allowed them to work out some important struggles and dilemmas that had been silenced in previous meetings. Figure 1 represents a photo-sequence put together by one of the participants.

Figure 1. Photo sequencing storytelling activity

Though outside the scope of this paper to detail, it was during the open interpretation of photo sequences like Figure 1 that one participant said, "it's like we are the one side of the two cities," which prompted feelings of solidarity and further discussion of the ways in which NYC is divided along lines of race, class, and documentation status—and this reverberated throughout the remainder of the project. The participants' perception of being "the one side of the city" aligns with how Beverly Tatum (1997) describes identity development, in which the parts of ourselves that we notice are those that are reflected back to us as "other" by dominant groups. This perceptual "othering" was woven throughout participants' photo narratives and juxtaposed

the Bronx with Manhattan; people of color with white; working class with middle class; nature with concrete jungle; and immigrant with citizen. From the perspective of person-environment reciprocity within the field of environmental psychology, we receive valuable information about ourselves and the world directly through our movement within surrounding environments (Gibson 1986; Heft 2007). Thus, it can be argued that participants' perceptions of being other were, at least in part, shaped by their lived experience of the physical and social structure of the city itself. Through further analysis of the geo-locations of participants' photographs, and their interpretations of them, we were able to understand the relationships between their everyday experiences of a city divided and perceived confines of their life spaces.

"I should explore more, venture out"

Upon noticing most of their geo-tagged photos clustered around their neighborhood ("small radius"), one participant expressed, "I should explore more, venture out," which echoed the sentiments of much of the research team's interpretation of the maps. To systematically explore this finding, we conducted a spatial analysis of the geo-locations of photographs both by participant (i.e. mapping all of one young person's photos) and by mission (i.e. mapping all participant responses to each photo-making mission).

Analysis of individual participant's geo-tagged photographs supported the young people's observation that their lives unrolled on "one side of the city" with the majority of photographs (250 out of 283) clustering above Central Park North (110th street cutting East-West in Manhattan; see Figure 2), with a few notable by-mission exceptions described later.

Figure 2. Geotags of all photographs

All young people participating in the project lived north of the Central Park line illustrated in Figure 2 above, which is also where the vast majority of photographs were taken. This dividing line of 110th street (Central Park North) is important as the number of people living in poverty near or above this line increases drastically (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). In other words, the geo-locations of individual photos were limited to their immediate neighborhood and surrounding areas, with the exception of one participant who was dubbed "the explorer" of the group (see Figure 3 for three exemplary participant maps that illustrate clustering within their respective neighborhoods).

Figure 3. Geo-locations of photographs by participant (three exemplars)
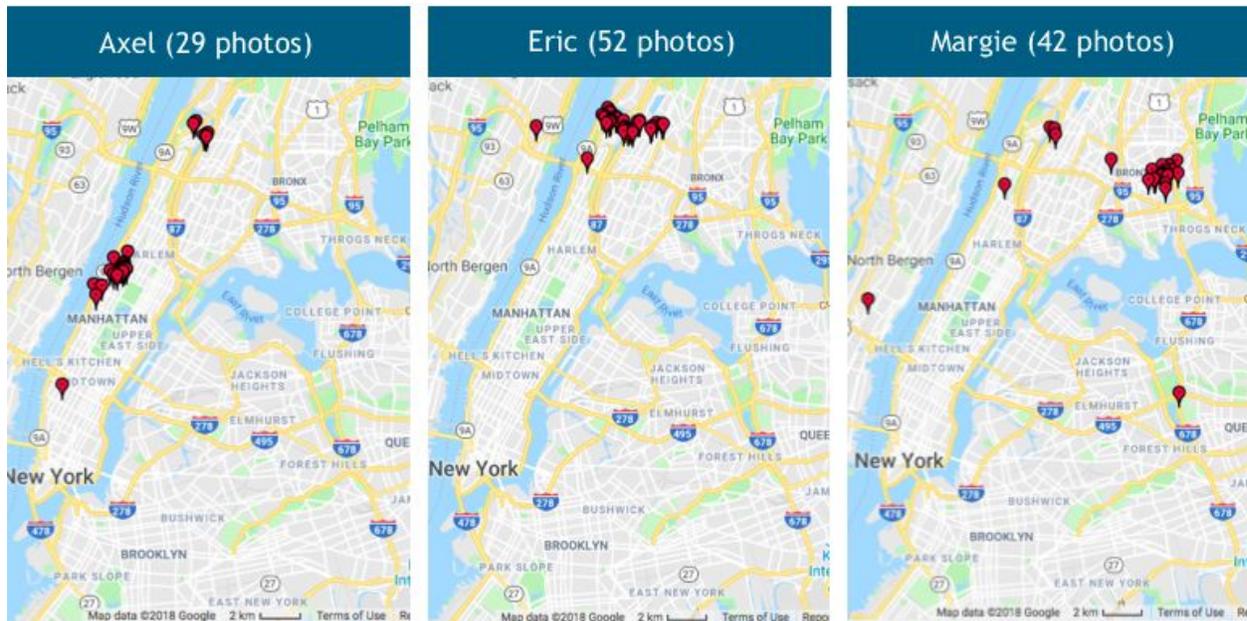
Overall, analysis of geo-tagged maps by mission, also supported the participants' observation that their lives took place on "one side of the city." Figure 4 (see below) includes exemplary geo-location maps for three photo-making missions: 02_Community, 06_Commute, and 09_Sense of Shame (the number prefacing the name of the mission refers to a particular mission's chronological order). In the Community and Commute missions, only one out of 23 of the participants' photos were taken below Central Park North; in the Shame mission, three out of 24 photos were taken below the line. Hence, a majority of photographs that participants made over the course of nine months were taken in the proximity to their homes and/or community college, with some notable exceptions.

Figure 4. Geo-locations of photographs by mission: "One side of the city"
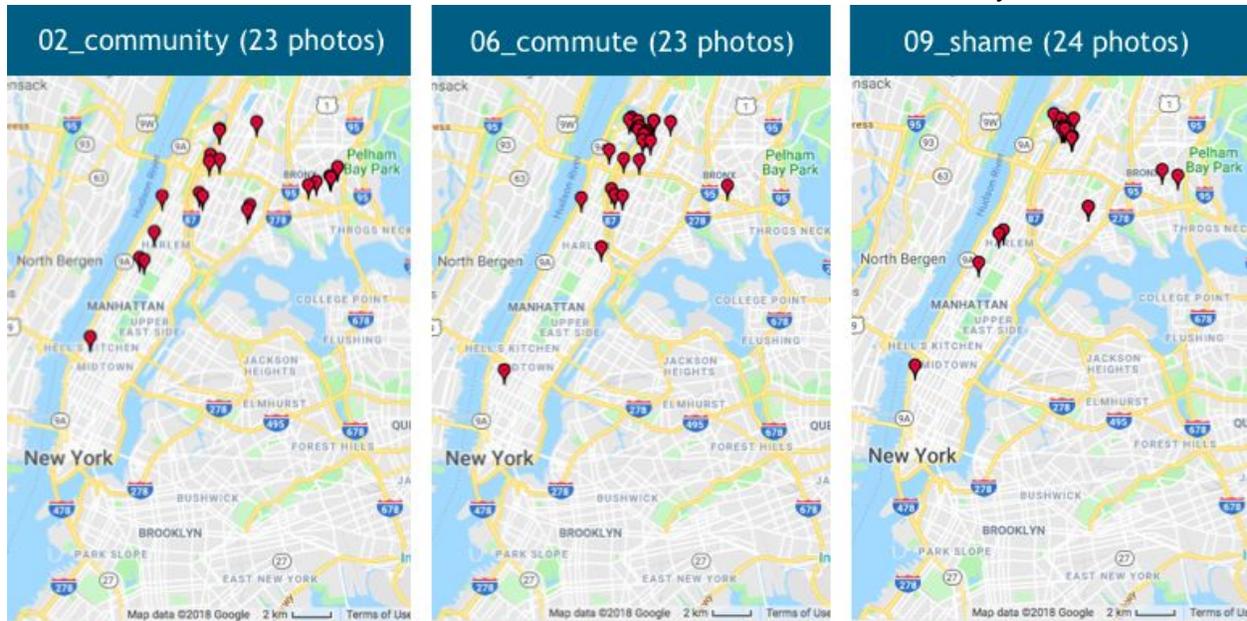
While photo geo-locations illustrate that participants' lives may be taking place within a "small radius" on "one side of the city," there were three striking exceptions to this pattern. The first photo-narrative mission that drew participants out of their areas was mission 07_Serenity. This same pattern dispersal around the city was found in missions 10_Pride and 12_Ideal Community suggesting that participants may travel outside of their "small radius" to find peace, serenity, and a sense of pride (see Figure 5). It could be argued that this "venturing out" of their immediate communities is attributed to participants' increased awareness of how confined their lives seem to be, since Pride and Ideal Community were among the last topics we explored. However, this line of reasoning does not apply to the Serenity mission, which occurred half way into the project.

Figure 5. Geo-locations of photographs by mission: "The other side of the two cities"
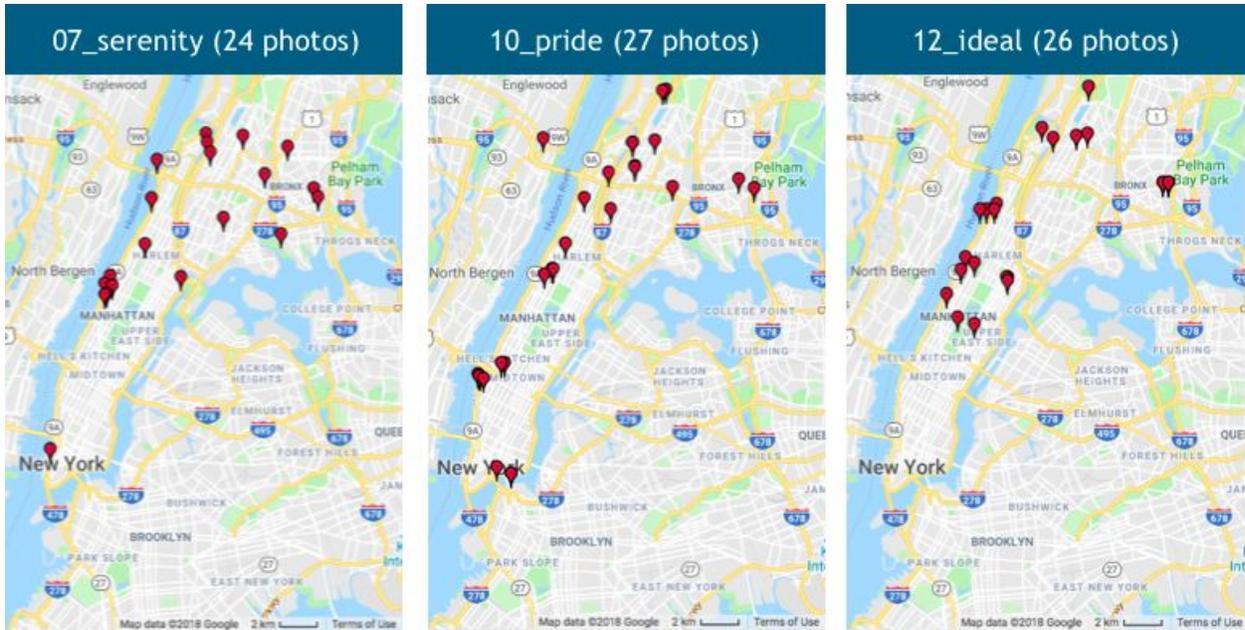
Discussion

The overarching goal of this participatory photo-mapping project was to understand—and ultimately promote—uptown youth's sense of belonging within the NYC context by exploring what "community" means to them. In this paper, we have explored participants' sense of belonging at the city-level through spatial analysis of their geo-tagged photographs, informed by participants' own interpretations of the maps. Together, findings suggest that participants' everyday experiences of race, class, and immigration issues not only contributed to their perception of themselves as "the one side of the two cities," but also shaped their everyday mobility. However, given the reciprocal, that is, mutually constitutive nature of the person-environment relationship, it should be acknowledged that these young people's history of limited everyday mobility played an important role in shaping their experiences related to class, race, and documentation status.

The embodiment of these issues were reflected in the participants largely restricting the movement of their bodies to Uptown Manhattan and the Bronx throughout much of the project. The act of photo-making and subsequent mapping of photographs allowed us to visually depict the participants' lived boundary of race and class—Central Park North/110th street—and allowed for discussion of the social and institutional structures that support inequality, and what can be done to challenge it. At the conclusion of the project, the research team defined community, and presented it as: "Community means that you care about something and that you have the power to change something about it." Essential to feeling powerful is feeling a sense of belonging; participants' declaration that they should "explore more, venture out," as well as many photos in the final missions being taken in Lower Manhattan, suggests that their sense of ownership and belonging in NYC was enhanced, mediated by their deeper understanding of their individual—and their communities'—position within the broader inequitable distribution of power and resources.

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