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Looking Forward, Looking Back: Collective Memory and Neighborhood Identity in Two Urban Parks

Sofya Aptekar

Abstract

Collective memory and narratives of local history shape the ways people imagine a neighborhood's present situation and future development, processes that reflect tensions related to identity and struggles over resources. Using an urban culturalist lens and a focus on collective representations of place, I compare two nearby New York parks to uncover why, despite many similarities, they support different patterns of meaning making and use. Drawing on ethnographic observation, interviews, and secondary analysis, I show that multi-vocal and fragmented contexts of collective memory help explain the uneven nature of gentrification processes, with one park serving as its cultural fulcrum while the other is left at the sidelines.

Keywords: collective memory, neighborhoods, parks, public space, gentrification, ethnic succession, interactions

How urban dwellers experience and understand their neighborhoods has a lot to do with how they imagine local history. Stories about a neighborhood's past shape everyday meaning making and identity, and are, in turn, shaped by exigencies of the present and plans for the future (Borer 2010). In this article, I examine collective memories of a gentrifying New York neighborhood by focusing on two nearby parks. At first glance similar, these parks demonstrate how collective memory can help explain variability and unevenness in processes of neighborhood change. The ancient Greece-themed Athens Square Park is home to multiple neighborhood narratives and variable uses of its physical design that subvert the intentions of its creators to lay an ethnic claim on the neighborhood. In contrast, a fragmentation of social memory in Socrates Sculpture Park privileges narratives that help manufacture a marketable authenticity.

The role of culture in gentrification is often relegated to the study of cultural preferences of the gentry (e.g., Zukin 1995; see Brown-Saracino 2013). The urban culturalist approach that I use in this article demonstrates a wider role played by culture, particularly by collective memory, in shaping the meanings and collective representations of place (Borer 2006). Themselves significant, these patterns have consequences for who is included and excluded from neighborhood histories, identities—and places. Whose stories get told is influenced by inequalities in the distribution of power, but both elite interests and everyday practices of residents and visitors shape neighborhood identity, complicating simple narratives of villains and victims of gentrification (Brown-Saracino 2010; Deener 2007, 2010; Modan 2007; Patillo 2008). In gentrifying neighborhoods, culture becomes a prominent force within an unsettled cultural framework (Swidler 1986).

Public spaces are key nodes in the construction and contestation of neighborhood identities (Deener 2010; Shaw and Sullivan 2011). Public space design, as well as collective representations, meaning-making practices, and interactions, provide crucial data for studying the local culture of cities (Borer 2006, 2010; Suttles 1984). These cultural elements constitute and are used to construct imaginings of the past, present, and future of urban neighborhoods. Quotidian places are drawn into competing local narratives, not only discursively by powerful actors, but through routine interactions that occur in these places (Tissot 2011). The everyday practices, interactions, and representations that play out in public space help constitute symbolic boundaries of neighborhoods, defining who has the right to claim the neighborhood—and its future—as their own (Zelner 2015).

The comparison of two parks presented below illuminates the contested nature of collective imaginings of a single neighborhood and the differential trajectories taken in the construction of shared memory and identity through place. In the sections that follow, I describe the neighborhood context, explain methods of data collection and analysis, and present the comparison of the two parks. I conclude by discussing the leverage provided by the urban culturalist lens and collective memory in studying changing neighborhoods, as well as the specific implications of my findings.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY, GENTRIFICATION, AND INTERACTION IN PUBLIC SPACE

The urban culturalist framework for studying the city emphasizes the significance of meaning making in and through place, rather than treating place as simply contextual (Borer 2006; Gieryn 2000). Borer (2006) identifies collective memories and narratives, as well as the construction of meaning through place as key domains of urban culturalist research. Urban culture and collective identity accrues through layers of meaning anchored in place, which are observable through material culture, vernacular landscapes of public space, everyday interactions with place and among actors, and collective representations (Krase 2006, 2009; Suttles 1984; Zelner 2015).

Scholars of collective memory have tackled commemoration as public representation of social memory anchored in public space, such as memorials for wars (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991), terrorist attacks (Watts 2009), and political assassinations (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). Such memorials are constructed by specific actors who promote their narrative of the past; inevitably bearing the powerful stamp of present concerns, controversies, and struggles (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002, Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). Although I consider shared memory of a more ordinary nature, theories developed to explain public commemoration help shed light on how the use of past narratives is affected by the present and shapes collective identities, politics, and meaning making even when not dealing with particular traumatic past events. Vinitzky-Seroussi's (2002) distinction of multi-vocal and fragmented commemoration is particularly useful when analyzing contested narratives of the past in changing neighborhoods. In multi-vocal situations, people with diverse views of the past share a space of commemoration, where their differences do not preclude solidarity. Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002) contrasts the multi-vocality of collective memories at the Vietnam Memorial, analyzed in a seminal article by Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (1991), to fragmented commemoration, where conflicting

narratives of the past are directed at different audiences. She associates fragmented commemoration with the salience of the past to present-day politics and powerful agents working in a conflictual political culture.

The lenses of collective memory and collective imagination are helpful for understanding struggles over place-specific identity (Halbwachs 1992). Studying shared meanings that emerge in interaction with place sensitizes us to the vernacular landscapes and unintended uses of landmarks (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). Shared representations of neighborhoods are far from reflecting factual neighborhood history and present, or even their sociodemographic profile (Deener 2010). For instance, neighborhoods like Boston's North End continue to be identified with a particular ethnic group when it no longer has much of a residential presence, becoming an ethnic destination (Halter 2007). Powerful local actors are invested in particular definitions of neighborhoods, such as those that favor investment or development, and which may include the marketable authenticity of ethnic theme parks (Hackworth and Rekers, 2005; Krase 2003) or constructions of neighborhood past that draw tourists seeking a taste of the exotic (Gotham 2005). They may face resistance from others who have alternative narratives that support claims of less powerful constituencies (Mele 2000). The clashing performances of collective identity play out in public space, with people making sense of neighborhoods through their interaction with others and with the material culture of place (Mayorga-Gallo 2014; Mele 2000; Modan 2007).

The urban culturalist approach is well poised to contribute to the study of the demand side of gentrification—the social, economic, cultural, and infrastructure transformations of neighborhoods and displacement of older population groups resulting from an influx of capital (Brown-Saracino 2013). More generally, it provides a helpful lens for analyzing emplaced meaning making (Borer 2006) and place-based narratives of new and longtime residents (Patillo 2008) in contexts where the conflict over neighborhood identity and collective memory of place is heightened and memories and narratives compete for dominance (Mele 2000; Shepard and Smithsimon 2011). Gentrification scholars have shown that at least some gentrifiers are attracted to the cultural practices of the purportedly authentic Other in ethnic- and immigrant-identified neighborhoods (Halter 2007; Mele 2000; Zukin 2008). Although some are primarily interested in consuming authenticity, others do genuinely care about and work to preserve the culture of long-term residents (Brown-Saracino 2010). They can be similarly drawn to working-class

neighborhoods, which are repackaged by real estate developers as tough, edgy, or gritty enough to lend “psychic legitimacy and cultural credentials” not just to artists who tend to be at the forefront of gentrification (Zukin 2008: 729), but also to the more affluent gentrifiers that come later (Mele 2000). Meanwhile, class inequality can play a key role in tensions over norms in gentrifying neighborhoods, with middle class cultural norms of newcomers enjoying local institutional support as the unquestioned right way of doing things (Patillo 2008), and urban pioneers striving to cleanse the neighborhood of groups they associate with crime and decay (Brown-Saracino 2010).

As explained above, gentrifiers can be drawn by the ethnic charm of neighborhoods or the excitement of their working-class grit, constructing corresponding narratives of local history. There is also evidence that diversity— usually defined in terms of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation— serves as material for neighborhood identity and as an attraction. In her typology of gentrifiers, Brown-Saracino (2010) finds that both social preservationists and social homesteaders are drawn to diversity but that the latter are less interested in protecting specific old-timer groups and enjoy more vaguely defined diversity as an attractive amenity. In a study of a Philadelphia neighborhood known as diverse, Zelner (2015) shows how that neighborhood identity helps people make sense of their interactions with their neighbors, and ends up perpetuating racial inequalities. An ideology of diversity serves as a source for stories told by affluent whites about their neighborhood, and hence, about themselves as tolerant and progressive people. It privileges superficial celebration of difference and good intentions at the expense of outcomes, maintaining systems of inequality. In addition, it stands in stark opposition with the ways in which less powerful residents make sense of communities in which they live (Mayorga-Gallo 2014; Modan 2007).

The consumption of diversity takes place in the public spaces of neighborhoods. More generally, public space is paramount for understanding the processes of gentrification. People rely on sensory experiences of local public spaces to index neighborhood change by evaluating who is around and visible, and experience disruptions of embodied experiences of place attachment, meaning, and identity as their neighborhood changes (Langeegger 2015; Milligan 1998). Regulation of access to public space and public space behavior is a key site of struggle in gentrifying neighborhoods (Loughran 2014; Mele 2000; Patillo 2008; Shepard and Smithson 2011) and the collective memory of past struggles can shape emplaced narratives of particular

urban places (Abu-Lughod 1995). Increasingly unequal cities see a polarization of public spaces into those that are privileged and reflect consumption patterns of the middle class and those that are neglected and patronized by the poor (Loughran 2014). Various narratives of the local past are mobilized by different actors to shape present day formal and vernacular urban landscapes and chart the future of the neighborhood.

FIGURE 1. Map of Astoria and location of Socrates Sculpture Park and Athens Square Park

In the cases I present here, an ideology of diversity as well as narratives centered on ethnicity and class serve as sources of collective memories and imaginings of the neighborhood, and they play out specifically through physical and social configurations of place. Studying interactions in public space allows us to analyze the construction of symbolic boundaries in everyday life, beyond the discourse of powerful actors. Park users negotiate meaning through interaction with the material culture of places and with real and imagined others (Tissot 2011). Meaning making in interaction articulates with social norms and cultural practices in public spaces, which are particularly noteworthy under conditions of change, when collective narratives manifest through conflicts over proper behavior and use of public space (Langeegger 2015; Patillo 2008; Shaw and Sullivan 2011; Zukin 1995). In a context of gentrification and demographic change, I find the comparison of two nearby city parks a useful platform to examine competing collective narratives about the neighborhood as they are revealed through everyday meaning-making practices in place.

ASTORIA, QUEENS

Athens Square Park and Socrates Sculpture Park are located about a mile apart in the neighborhood of Astoria, on the western edge of Queens in New York City (see Figure 1). For much of the twentieth century, Astoria was a working-class waterfront neighborhood with concentrated small industry, such as metal shops, industrial bakeries, and slaughterhouses attracting blue-collar workers. Now largely deindustrialized like much of the rest of the city, Astoria is defined in two major ways. First, it is said to be incredibly diverse— by residents, media, local politicians, and realtors— with diversity characterized primarily through ethnicity and immigration, not race. Census figures do indicate a high level of ethnoracial diversity (see Table 1). New immigrants from Bangladesh, Mexico, Algeria, Brazil, Tibet, and many other countries continue to arrive. The newcomers join more established immigrants and higher generations of European immigrants, as well as residentially segregated African American migrants from the South and their descendants, who tend to be left out of neighborhood narratives of more powerful actors such as politicians and business owners.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of Astoria.^a

	2000	2010
Race		
White	56%	60%
Black	6%	7%
Asian	15%	16%
Latino/Hispanic	29%	28%
Foreign born	53%	46% ^b
Mean household income ^c	\$45,675	\$51,254 ^b
Median gross rent ^c	\$961	\$1322 ^b

^aZipcodes 11102, 11103, 11106

^bAmerican Communities Survey 2008-2012 5-yr estimate. 2010 Census data not available at this geographic level.

^cIn 2010 dollars

Astoria is also known as New York's Greek neighborhood, marked so in tourist guidebooks and the collective imagination of New Yorkers. Several waves of twentieth century immigration made Astoria home to the largest concentration of Greek immigrants in the United States. At the height of Greek immigration, Astoria was already a multi-ethnic neighborhood, as many New York neighborhoods are multi-ethnic even when they are identified with particular immigrant populations (Hum 2004). Even so, and despite a significant residential decline in Greek American population in recent years, the neighborhood retains a strong Greek commercial and real estate presence (Alexiou 2013). Visitors are drawn to Astoria's representation as Greek, which foregrounds their encounter with sensory markers of Greekness: blue and white paint on buildings, Greek flags, domes of several Orthodox churches, Greek Cyrillic script on the windows of outdoor cafes and Greek markets, oversized posters advertising visits by musicians from Greece, sounds of Greek language and music emanating from cars, homes, and businesses, and the aromas of sidewalk gyro stands. This marketable "Greekness" of Astoria belies the diversity of the Greek population, which is divided by class, regional origin (with some even hailing from Egypt, post-Soviet Western Asia, and Turkey), rural and urban backgrounds, contexts of exit in different waves, generations in the United States, as well as drastic differences in political beliefs and religious conservatism. These differences tend to be hidden under the preponderance of collectively recognized stereotypical markers of Greekness, which on some commercial streets take a theme-park appearance, despite population decline (Krase 2003). Like other urbanites, Astorians engage with narratives of place to make sense of their identity, relationships, and interactions, and these narratives can be ambiguous and fragmented (Borer 2010).

Astoria is a neighborhood in flux. As new immigrants from all over the world settle in its small apartment buildings and subdivided houses, it is poised to undergo dramatic gentrification. Large high-rise luxury complexes are slated to be built along its long neglected but suddenly lucrative waterfront. Already, the neighborhood is dotted by new and renovated housing and services that cater to new affluent residents, and there is a notable uptick in rent (see Table 1). New and old residents, developers, and local leaders actively construct and reconstruct collective representations of neighborhood history and identity that play out in neighborhood public spaces. The multiplicity of narratives of neighborhood past, and hence present and future, appeal to different groups and are enacted through different places. Like in other gentrifying

neighborhoods, different actors mobilize different versions of the past to bear on different visions of neighborhood future (Mele 2000). Athens Square Park, featuring sculptures representing ancient Greece and flying a Greek flag, was constructed to look back in time and strengthen the neighborhood's Greek identity in the face of a demographic decline. Socrates Sculpture Park, on the other hand, draws on a narrative of delocalized diversity and historicized grittiness to look forward to a future of cultural and economic affluence and exclusivity.

METHODOLOGY

Using the urban culturalist approach, I began research by focusing on place as the location of culture, with the goal of empirically investigating shared and contested meanings (Borer 2006). The parks were selected as a strategically matched pair due to their location in the same neighborhood, similar names, and focus on sculpture—and yet different place character (Paulsen 2004). I conducted ethnographic fieldwork from the summer of 2011 through the summer of 2013, with a less intensive follow-up research period through the spring of 2014. I observed the two parks at different times of day and week, participating in organized and spontaneous activity. I took abbreviated notes and wrote detailed fieldnotes later in the day. Altogether, I rely on 75 single-spaced pages of fieldnotes.

Ethnographic observation is well suited to interpretivist study of public space interactions and meaning making around material culture of parks (Lofland and Lofland 1995). In addition, I conducted unstructured interviews with users of the park. They sometimes occurred at the initiative of other park visitors who struck up conversations, but most were initiated by me. Because this research took place within the context of a larger neighborhood study, some of the interviews were with local residents I met outside the parks, while teaching adult English classes, volunteering at a local library and farmers' market, or working in a community garden. Altogether, I interviewed seventeen local residents. These interviews supplemented observational and participant data with more direct questioning of local residents' understandings of these parks and their definitions of neighborhood. I also utilized the methodology of walking with informants in and near the parks, variably referred to as participant walkthroughs, go-alongs, or transect walks (Low 2015). Combining participant observation and interviewing, I went along with informants who were moving about the neighborhood for their own purposes. This allowed me to participate in and analyze the sensorial production of

emplaced past, present, and future, interrogating meaning-making processes as they arose, and to see how the parks and other neighborhood places fit into everyday social practices in public space and the construction of cultural and moral boundaries (Kusenbach 2003). While emphasizing the primacy of the visual in social life (Krase 2016), I paid attention to multi-sensory experiences and productions of the past, including aural markers, memories of place-specific smells, and emplaced taste cultures (Borer 2013; Low 2015). I am a white middle class foreign-born woman in my thirties, who was occasionally misread as Greek.

I also conducted semistructured interviews with staff members of both parks and one of the Greek American leaders instrumental in Athens Square Park's creation. To understand the narratives of these parks and the surrounding neighborhood that were propagated by more powerful actors, I reviewed local media and texts produced by the organizations affiliated with the parks. Using this combination of methods, I examined the lived culture of the city (Borer 2006), the "cumulative texture of local culture" generated through individuals' interaction with it (Borer 2013; Suttles 1984:284), and collective memories of the neighborhood.

I analyzed data by reviewing my fieldnotes and interviews, identifying patterns of difference in meanings attached to these spaces and activities I observed within. Following an abductive approach, I conducted fieldwork while immersed in a range of theories about public space, diversity, and gentrification. I moved back and forth between empirical observation and theoretical generalizations, continuously returning to my fieldnotes and the field. This allowed me to test my evolving theoretical explanations of the cultural and social dynamics in these parks, as well as use interviews and secondary sources to answer questions as they arose (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

Looking Back: Athens Square Park

Athens Square Park is a small (under one acre) park on a busy shopping street, adjacent to an elementary school and two playgrounds. Visitors sitting on its many benches enjoy the shade of trees, surrounded by the ambient sounds of pigeon cooing, vehicular traffic, playing children, and the summertime jingle of ice cream trucks. Aside from cheap ice cream pops, parkgoers help themselves to flavored ices sold from pushcarts by immigrant Latinas or sip from large cups of soda from the 7-Eleven convenience store across the street. Homeless people spend time in the park, and are usually left alone by the scarce police, at least during the day. Bottle collectors look

through trash cans for refundable bottles. Teenage couples embrace in the corners amidst the crunching of discarded snack bags. Local white- and blue- collar workers take a break to eat, scratch off lottery tickets, and make calls.

What sets Athens Square Park apart from many similar parks is the profusion of ancient Greek symbols: a sunken circular amphitheater, surrounded by a set of large marble Doric columns, a bronze sculpture of Socrates, a bust of Aristotle, and a towering statue of Athena at its main entrance.¹ Greek and American flags flutter from poles behind the columns. (See Figures 2 and 3) After a failed attempt to re-name nearby Ditmars Boulevard as Athens Boulevard, prominent business and civic leaders in the Greek American community raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to supplement city funds and turn a rundown playground into this park dense with symbols of Greece. The creation of what one of its founders called “a little piece of Greece” (Avasthi 1995) was an attempt to strengthen the symbolic hold of the Greek American community on the neighborhood in the early 1990s, when an influx of new immigrant populations combined with an outpouring of upwardly mobile Greek Americans to the suburbs. By memorializing a glorious ancient past in marble, the park is an effort to buttress a narrative of the neighborhood as Greek. But while the design is meant to align with the shared memory of a Greek neighborhood and thus a neighborhood that has a Greek present and future, the vernacular use reflects a multi-vocality of narratives.

Even for local Greek residents, Athens Square Park holds multiple meanings. The ancient Greece-themed sculptures are a source of pride for some, and embarrassment for others. Sixty-something Stephanos, who regularly met other Greek men at the park, became agitated as he struggled to tell me how much there was to know about “what the number of the columns means, what the number of steps means.” Stephanos made clear that each symbolic element of the park evoked Greek identity. But the park frustrated several Greek immigrant informants with urban back- grounds, who disparaged the production of authenticity in this park as a failure, ruing the omission of more modern symbols. A longtime Astoria resident, Georgios, came to the park every day to people-watch, yet was careful to distance himself from other older Greek men: “There are too many Greeks in the park and they are always fighting. I don’t like to always talk

¹A sculpture of Sophocles was installed after fieldwork was completed.

with them. They come from villages.” Georgios felt that the park was an expression of identity for conservative Greek immigrants from the Greek periphery.

FIGURE 2. Athens Square Park

FIGURE 3. Athens Square Park

While the Greek symbols of the park elicited a variety of responses from local Greeks I spoke to, the interaction of visitors with the park design and the sensual spectacle of the park occupied by everyday visitors further undermined attempts to construct a collective memory of Greekness. Because the park is relatively open, with multiple entrances, a profusion of benches, and ample shade, it showcases the actual diversity of local residents, who are increasingly less likely to be Greek. Although Greek immigrants, particularly men, do gather among the Greek symbols, the park concentrates and makes visible (and audible) the new demographic reality of the neighborhood. A small group of older Sikh men meets regularly for conversation. Large groups of North African mothers, many in headscarves, congregate around tables. Rows of traditionally attired Bangladeshi women sit on adjacent benches, creating a line of color for passersby with their bright *shalwar kameez*. Ironically, this diversity is exhibited within a design that intentionally foregrounds one group. The founders of the park did not intend to exclude new immigrants from this public space, but it was designed to be a place that symbolically claimed Astoria as a Greek neighborhood, to serve as a space of identity and community for that group. Instead, it has become a poignant witness to its diminishing significance, and part of a narrative of loss, as when middle-aged Spiros complained about the influx of Bangladeshis and North Africans who sullied Athens Square Park with culturally uncouth practices of spitting and pigeon

feeding.²

While some were troubled by the unrealized promise of Athens Square Park as a symbol of vitality of the Greek community, for others, it fit easily into a narrative of ethnic succession. The Astoria-specific succession narrative that I heard repeatedly during fieldwork vastly simplifies the complexity of multiple migration waves, conflicts, and intermarriage into a tale of Germans and Irish replaced by Italians, who were replaced by Greeks, who are now replaced by a multitude of others.³ There is evidence that many New Yorkers consider successive waves of neighborhood settlement to be a normal fact of life (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters 2004). This understanding of history makes Greeks just one group among many, and one whose decline makes room for newcomers. The narrative of succession was captured by a longtime local politician:

A lot of neighborhoods claim to be diverse and they are, but we have a different kind of diversity. We have not only people from all over the world, but we have a mix of old and new. We have, I'd say, fifty percent of the population that has been here for fifty years. And then another size, proportion, margin that just came in from all over the world. And then we have people from Manhattan, which is right across the river ... They come here for two reasons. It's really cool and it's much cheaper than Manhattan. You can go up and down and have food from all over the place. Sit outside in the little Greek cafes or also Russian cafes. (then-City Council member Peter Vallone, Jr, 07/2012)

As a politician, Vallone was engaging in impression management in presenting his neighborhood in the most advantageous light. In distinguishing Astoria from other diverse neighborhoods, he referenced the purportedly unique mix of old and new, which complemented the scene of ethnoracial diversity unfolding around him in Athens Square Park as he spoke.

Crucially, Vallone framed his neighborhood narrative of earlier and later immigrant influxes in terms of the consumption of food by “people from Manhattan.” But while affluent

² Jerolmack (2013) provides a compelling analysis of battles over pigeon feeding in urban public space.

³ Only when talking to African American informants, did I hear versions of the succession narrative that included that group.

visitors from elsewhere in the city do, indeed, come to Astoria for the food, and increasingly for the rents, the sensory and aesthetic experience of Athens Square Park fails to connect to more affluent taste cultures (Gans 1999; Loughran 2014). “There is nothing there. It’s a waste of space,” said Laura, a thirty-something transplant to the neighborhood, making an unfavorable comparison to Socrates Sculpture Park, which better fit her mode of cultural consumption as a worker in Manhattan’s music industry. Another informant, Melanie, an attorney, recounted her partner’s one visit to Athens Square Park with their young child. Expressing disgust, she recounted the park as dirty and unsafe, in part because her partner saw old men looking at pornographic pictures. Neither its particular representation of Greekness, nor its diversity or unsavory feel, currently hold much appeal to gentrifiers. It remains on the sidelines of the upscale building boom in the surrounding neighborhood, and the rising rents are not yet reflected in its working class taste cultures.

Vernacular uses of the park reveal further discontinuities with the intention to replicate a formal and dignified symbol of ethnic pride, a “Temple of Delphi” setting “where people would meet to have philosophical discussions” (Avasthi 1995). Children constantly climb onto the lap of the Socrates sculpture. Socrates’s bronze fingernails and toenails are repeatedly painted in various bright shades of nail polish. The amphitheater is occupied by boisterous informal soccer matches played by local schoolboys, who are far more likely to yell at each other in Spanish, Arabic, and English than in Greek. Young visitors pose for ironic selfies with the sculptures. One Yelp reviewer described the park’s appearance as “Guido chic,” evoking a negative stereotype of working class white ethnics, particularly Italian New Yorkers (Tricarico 2014). Despite the large sums spent on Greek symbols, the collective memory of Astoria as a Greek neighborhood attempts and fails to project a strong Greek character into the future of the neighborhood, relegating its Greekness to the past. Athens Square Park means different things to different people. Within the same space, different stories of the neighborhood’s past coexist, and Greek immigrant history is of variable relevance, sharing the park with other collective narratives of the neighborhood’s past, present, and future. Given this pattern of multi-vocality, the lack of urgency around shared memories of the past allows a mostly consensual and peaceful coexistence in the park (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991).

Looking Forward: Socrates Sculpture Park

A mere mile away, with a name referencing the Greek identity of the neighborhood and sculptures, Socrates Sculpture Park provides a study in contrast. The park is located on the East River waterfront with spectacular views of Manhattan. Although, at four-plus acres, it is larger than Athens Square Park, it provides fewer private nooks and has longer sightlines. (See Figures 4 and 5). There are few places to sit and much less shade— and few elderly people. A tall fence protects from street noise, but signals from passing boat traffic and the saltwater smell mark the park as a waterfront space. On a hot summer Saturday, I observed a half a dozen mostly white visitors with bicycles, some stretched out on grass, others strolling among the large sculptures. Park staff report that the sculptures and programming such as film screenings attract many visitors from Manhattan and Brooklyn, as well as tourists. A toddler's birthday party was marked by a circle of red balloons and a row of expensive strollers. A farmers' market featured artisanal breads, organic vegetables, and a gourmet coffee stall, run by white men with bushy beards and chunky glasses. An African American worker in a bright orange t-shirt dragged a trash can across the grass. Another African American man wearing a security guard uniform strolled by the waterfront edge.

While it is adjacent to a sculpture museum and new luxury apartment buildings, Socrates Sculpture Park is in a working class immigrant neighborhood, with lingering presence of light industry, and within sight of a large, predominantly African American public housing development. The park was founded in the 1980s in an initiative spearheaded by an internationally prominent sculptor well integrated into the power structure of the city. Its mission is to provide an interactive exhibition space for emerging artists while revitalizing the community through art. According to its founder, "It was a garbage dump, it was miserable. Now you see beautiful young ladies with very short skirts jogging past— absolutely safe" (Dawson 2014). This narrative of development and improvement of a remote area— and the park's current and future role as a fulcrum of development and marketing— is explicitly acknowledged in its city Parks Department description as "a catalyst for economic development in the neighborhood" (NYC Parks 2015). Although both parks are run by private– public partnerships, the private component is more evident here, not only in the design, but in the private security detail supplementing city police force.

FIGURE 4. Socrates Sculpture Park

As is often the case in gentrifying neighborhoods, the spectacle of diversity is part of the attraction for newcomers (Brown-Saracino 2010; Zukin 1995). Astoria is a diverse neighborhood in terms of race, ethnicity, immigration status, and class, but it is not Astoria's specific diversity, or its history as a Greek neighborhood, that is used to construct an identity for Socrates Sculpture Park and the surrounding area.

Instead, park staff draw on a generic Queens diversity to define the park and its neighborhood and capitalize on the marketable, feel-good "diversity dividend" (Hall and Rath 2007). Several film and food events, for instance, were held to celebrate the "cultural diversity of Queens." These featured Queens-based chefs and films made across the world, without any particular connection to New York. Reaching for the vaguer diversity of Queens makes sense because the flavor of Astoria's diversity is too immediate and interferes with the construction of narratives of development, safety, and the delectable spectacle. Despite gentrification, the area still lacks many basic services such as supermarkets and doctors, and houses poor marginalized communities. Circumventing emplaced diversity in favor of a vaguer, delocalized one, also avoids white old-timers' construction of the long-polluted waterfront as dangerous because of its proximity to "the projects."

FIGURE 5. Socrates Sculpture Park

Diversity not anchored in the actual neighborhood enables park staff, local developers, and residents of new luxury housing to situate their cosmopolitan narrative beyond Astoria, connecting instead to neighborhoods farther along in the process of gentrification. This was evident during my interview with Natalia, a young white mother in her early thirties. Considering Socrates Sculpture Park through her window, Natalia recounted how she was convinced by her husband to move:

When [my husband] brought me over here ... I went to Socrates [Sculpture Park] to look at some sculptures, we went to the Noguchi Museum. I thought it was very nice. We were out by Long Island City where Pepsi sign was and then he brought me here ...

Initially reluctant to leave Manhattan, Natalia felt more at ease after experiencing the culturally resonant spaces of Socrates Sculpture Park and the nearby sculpture museum, discursively connecting them to the glittering towers of Long Island City a few miles south. The mode of cultural consumption in these spaces aligned with tastes and dispositions of affluent new residents of the area. With its privately managed landscaping, waterfront views, and opportunities to consume art, the park created what Zukin calls a site of visual delectation, one of the “urban oases where everyone *appears* to be middle class” (Zukin 1995:10). Natalia went on

to explain how she leapfrogged between *islands of affluence* on both sides of the East River:

[My son] went to school in Long Island City ... where it's like really fancy and developed.

We would go to our playdates in Manhattan still almost twice or three times a week. And we would go to Brooklyn to see my parents once a week. So we were only in Astoria, um ...

Zooming around in a car and multiple forms of privilege allowed Natalia to avoid engaging with or being affected by her immediate surroundings, with their racial segregation, isolation, and dearth of services. She could consume Socrates Sculpture Park and its version of diversity, and it served as a touchstone in her understanding of a neighborhood that was suitable for her family. The park was key in how she first made sense of the neighborhood when she arrived, and it is not difficult to imagine that cultivating these narratives of place can help attract others like her to visit or live. In a classic pattern of artists paving way for the influx of affluent new residents, this park helps to anchor a zone distinguished by a set of cultural consumption practices comfortable for the urban gentry.

Vague celebrations of consumable diversity are spiced up by a representation of the neighborhood's past that gives a titillating edge of historicized disorder. As the "Astoria archeology" page of a nearby luxury development's website states: "Today, remnants of Astoria's heritage are everywhere. At various times gritty, raw and beautiful, these relics help give this unique neighborhood its authenticity and sense of place" (Big Apple Property Management 2015). With its founding story of being converted from an illegal dump, Socrates Sculpture Park contributes to the experience of "nostalgic ambience" (Halter 2007:212) and supports a story of development that makes the area safe, yet exotic and tantalizing for affluent newcomers (Gotham 2005). In mining the neighborhood for cultural material that radiates authenticity and just the right amount of dangerous past to affluent newcomers, the working class and poor residents are discursively relegated to the past. This *historicized* sense of disorder contrasts with how some affluent newcomers experience the present-tense disorder of Athens Square Park (e.g., Melanie's experience above).

Construction and promotion of a shared memory of the area around Socrates Sculpture Park as having an edge of exciting disorder, and the delocalizing of its diversity articulate with patterns of indirect and direct social exclusion. It tends to be a multi-racial and multi-ethnic space, but there are often many more white visitors than in other nearby public spaces. In

discussing the park in a local English conversation group, several working class Latina immigrants admitted that they thought it was a museum, citing the tented table at the gate, which they thought was for collecting entry fees. The banners advertising exhibits, the difficulty of seeing past the fence, the dearth of park benches, and young white visitors taking in modern sculptures contributed to this way of interpreting the space.

Others were unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the modes of cultural consumption prevalent in the park even when they did use it. On a summertime go-along with a middle-aged Caribbean immigrant informant, I walked into Socrates Sculpture Park and approached a large white tent. Noticing the aproned staff and containers of food, Janice yelled out: “Any samples?” twice, not getting a response. Flustered, she attempted to save face at this breakdown in interaction by shrugging and saying “Oh well, I guess they don’t hear me” (Goffman 1967). Later, I found out that the tent was an art project and provided free “local” food, made by a Thai restaurant elsewhere in Queens. We then approached a set of miniature replicas of the local smokestacks—yet another example of artistic repurposing of the area’s industrial character for middle class cultural consumption. Janice paused to read the signage, appearing frustrated: “Why do they write stuff like this? How are we supposed to know what they mean?” The smokestacks were part of an exhibit of visions for neighborhood growth. But the fanciful concepts felt flat for Janice, for whom the smokestacks were not a symbol of an edgy up-and-coming neighborhood but a reminder of the “asthma alley” past and present of the neighborhood. Her reactions show how different strands of social memory can weave through the space of the park, stitching together close-by signifiers and systems of shared meanings that contrast with the mental maps connecting distant *islands of affluence* and consumable urbanity.

While non-Greeks filled Athens Square Park, highlighting the juxtaposition of multiple shared memories of Astoria’s past, use of space that deviated from the normative order stemming from a particular representation of the past, present, and future was marginalized in Socrates Sculpture Park, sometimes literally. Teenagers of color climbed over the railing and sat on the rocks by the water, which is also where local immigrants and African Americans fished. Men from the nearby rehabilitation facility stayed hidden in the border hedges. Entering the park behind an African American family, I overheard the oldest child anxiously direct the group to the far corner of the park. They quickly walked through the clusters of mostly white visitors to the waterfront edge. Cultural patterns of consumption and material culture of the park made direct

exclusion unnecessary in many cases, although police and security did occasionally eject teenagers, and boundaries around activities like art workshops were protected from those who did not seem to belong (Aptekar 2015). Rare community-oriented events, such as a Día de los Muertos celebration, attracted many immigrant and working-class locals, but they were exceptions that proved the rule because they were so different from the everyday use of the park.

Meant to be a space to showcase art and to attract appreciative cultural consumers, Socrates Sculpture Park succeeded by tapping into a narrative of neighborhood improvement. Instead of constructing a local identity based on a particular ethnic group or even local ethnic diversity, the park employed a more delocalized notion of diversity and historicized the area's poverty and isolation. Collective memory is flexible in what counts for history, but these choices structure how the present and future of the neighborhood are understood. While alternative meaning making in the park is relegated to the margins, the dominant representations of the park draw on a particular shared memory of the neighborhood that helps anchor an expanding node of cultural consumption appealing to middle class customers. Rather than hosting coexisting narratives of the neighborhood's past, present, and future, Socrates Sculpture Park presents a picture of fragmentation, as the past is more actively brought to bear on the present in an active effort to create a cultural fulcrum of local gentrification. Emplaced narratives help construct shared memory that leaves little room for working class and immigrant residents.

CONCLUSIONS

An attempt to buttress a narrative of Astoria as a Greek neighborhood, Athens Square Park reveals a multi-vocality of collective imaginings of the neighborhood's past, present, and future. The design and patterns of meaning making do not resonate with affluent new residents, leaving the park on the sidelines of gentrification. In contrast, Socrates Sculpture Park, with a fragmentation of collective memory, is the fulcrum of gentrification. Active historicizing of the neighborhood as formerly working class, combined with a delocalized celebration of diversity, help make it a key space of elite cultural consumption. While Athens Square Parks looks back on an ethnic past, Socrates Sculpture Park looks forward to a future of increasing affluence and exclusivity.

The urban culturalist approach used in this article to examine collective narratives associated with local places departs from a premise that urban dwellers need symbolic

representations to make sense of the intense built environment that surrounds them (Borer 2006, 2010). Place-based understandings of past, present, and future shape how space is produced and meanings are made in interaction with the built environment. In comparing this strategically matched pair of parks, I extended theoretical frameworks developed by scholars of collective memory to move beyond the commemoration of specific events to routine neighborhood histories and identities that reside in and are reproduced through place. The contrast between multi-vocal and fragmented memory, while developed to explain commemorations of major traumatic events (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991), can nevertheless be helpful in understanding divergent outcomes in these two parks through analysis of how space is socially produced and reproduced. In Socrates Sculpture Park, one set of social memories excludes alternative narratives and people who make sense of their own identities through them. Without proposing causal certainties, it is clear that collective memory has the potential to shape not only the demand side of gentrification—what the gentry wants—but how the process itself unfolds, which groups are included and which are excluded. A study of emplaced social memory can point to the consequences of meaning-making and collective representations, including differences in how status and privilege come to accrue to place (Borer 2006; Loughran 2014).

Collective memory articulates with gentrification processes, contributing to unevenness of gentrification. The experience of Athens Square Park and Socrates Sculpture Park shows how the polarization of public spaces referred to by Loughran (2014) can take place in the same neighborhood at the same time. This unevenness is not simply a consequence of differences in housing stock or zoning laws below the neighborhood level, or even the well-documented role of artists in gentrification (Mele 2000; Zukin 1995). Contested collective imaginings of the neighborhood help create this texture. Athens Square Park is not nearly as useful as a cultural tool for anchoring luxury development in the neighborhood as Socrates Sculpture Park because the cultural material of the park does not resonate as well with the cultural sensibilities of the gentry.

There is plenty of evidence that ethnicity, particularly white ethnicity, can be an exotic element of attraction for affluent newcomers (e.g., Zukin et al 2015), and many are drawn to diversity. Yet, in Astoria, where one can tell compelling local stories of both Greekness and diversity, the neighborhood identity promoted by Socrates Sculpture Park is delocalized. The

delocalization and vagueness of diversity narratives more effortlessly resonate with the imperatives of gentrification, avoiding engagement with actual lived demographic complexity. Perhaps, unlike the North End of Boston or Little Italy of Manhattan, Astoria's Greekness has not yet reached the appeal of an ethnic theme park. Future research should investigate the conditions under which ethnicity and diversity are mobilized in their local specificity, and when delocalized narratives are used instead. Fragmentation of collective memory should be a useful facet of such an investigation, particularly in gentrifying neighborhoods where constructions of the past can become highly relevant in struggles over the future.

Collective memory is always selective, not simply massaging the past into a shape that fits a particular story, but also leaving out whole narrative strands. Stories of Astoria as Greek, as ethnically diverse, or as an up-and-coming cultural attraction, all leave out histories and present-day realities of racial segregation, immigrant exploitation, displacement, and racialized turf wars. In the neoliberal city, claiming of space to give voice to marginalized narratives is relegated to the periphery at best. Limited, if any, symbolic space is afforded to African Americans in the construction of collective memory through these two Queens parks. Not viewed as a group contributing to diversity, let alone a group that might help define the identity of the neighborhood, the spatially segregated population of African Americans is instead associated with danger and crime. This situation raises empirical questions ripe for further investigation to pinpoint conditions that result in inclusion or exclusion of racialized populations in the identities of diverse neighborhoods.

Examining the lived culture of urban places is a crucial element in the study of gentrification, and one that has not been explored sufficiently. Moreover, patterns of neighborhood identity narratives and collective imaginings of place help us understand urban life in contexts of unsettledness and change beyond gentrification. For instance, the urban culturalist theoretical lens and methodological approaches could be equally illuminating in neighborhoods experiencing effects of drastic or gradual climate change.

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