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Benjamin Chesluk

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Introduction: Marginal Citizens and the Mystery of Corporate Culture

This article explores the relationship between space and citizenship in contemporary urban redevelopment. I root this exploration in the context of my ethnographic fieldwork in a job and life skills training program called “Times Square Ink.” which is located in the Times Square district of New York City. At Times Square Ink., a small number of ex-misdemeanor offenders work in a non-profit copy center while learning to conform to the Times Square area’s new corporate culture. Times Square is, of course, an important urban center, a theater and entertainment district located on the island of Manhattan at the triangular intersection of Broadway, Forty-Second Street, and Seventh Avenue. For the past thirty years, this area has been the object of a massive and much-debated redevelopment project. Since the 1970s, the redevelopment of Times Square has combined zoning law changes and “defensible space” architecture with “zero tolerance” policing and social services organizations. The result is a highly race- and class-inflected engineering program that targets both the physical and cultural parameters of urban space. This complex collaboration between various public and private organizations has radically reshaped the built, legal, economic, and social environments of the Times Square area (Berman; Chesluk; Gilfoyle 284; Reichl).
This reshaping is illustrative of similar processes of redevelopment taking place in urban spaces across the United States and elsewhere (Boyer; Davis 1990; Deutsche; Dorst; Frieden and Sagaly; Sorkin). These are not only reshappings of urban space; they also represent and constitute the reorganization of definitions of urban citizenship and public life. As James Donald writes, urban planners "who fantasize about turning the city into an efficient machine... want to render the city transparent, to get the city right, and so to produce the right citizens" (121). Cities and citizens are co-stars in a single imaginary social spectacle. A great number of recent ethnographies and other cultural critiques address the ways in which the issues of place-making and self-making articulate with one another in practices of spatial production and everyday life (Holston and Appadurai; Chevigny; Cintron; Goodman; Gregory; Ivy; Kondo; Martin; Stewart; Wright; Yngvesson). Built spaces are always organized around concepts of proper comportment within those spaces. Similarly, definitions of citizenship always revolve, at least implicitly, around the imagination of the spaces in which citizens act.

Looking carefully through an ethnographic lens at the redevelopment of Times Square provides us with a deeper understanding of the changing shape of cities and citizenship in the contemporary world. And the Times Square Ink. program, where a carefully selected group of trainees learn how to fit into a corporate milieu while working at the program's eponymous copy center, is a site in which to examine how some people experience these changes, not just on the macro-level of architecture, policy and public space, but also on the micro-level of the self. Just as zoning laws, public architecture, and policing practices have shifted to accommodate the imagined imperatives of corporate culture, the participants in the Times Square Ink. program are learning how to reshape or redefine their presentation and imagination of self in accordance with the norms and desires of the corporate world.2

The changes in Times Square are extremely visible, even visceral. The redevelopment has produced enormous shifts in both the makeup and scale of the area's businesses, architecture, and social life. Times Square's once booming market in pornography and other kinds of explicitly sexual entertainment has been almost completely displaced or shut down. In its place have risen towering new office buildings that house such global brand name tenants as Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, Reuters, Condé Nast, MTV, and Disney. The people involved with this redevelopment project—local property owners and real estate developers, along with various city and state regulatory agencies—have worked to remove the businesses and people they view as physical and social "blight." As they see it, the central problem of the redevelopment of Times Square has been to guarantee that the area's streetlife fits the profile that their hoped-for tenants and clients demand. They have found a variety of solutions, including redesigning the area's public spaces and calling for intensified police and private security patrols against so-called "quality of life" crimes—highly visible misdemeanors like prostitution, petty drug use, and public drunkenness (Smith; McArdle and Erzen).

However, the redevelopers say that their goal has not been simply to drive the people they regard as "undesirable" from the Times Square area. Instead, they see themselves as giving these people the option to remake themselves as Times Square has been remade. Along with strictly punitive techniques of exclusion and intimidation, the redevelopers have heavily funded outreach and rehabilitative organizations like Times Square Ink. In a kind of urban renewal for the soul, Times Square Ink. functions as a site where the redevelopment of Times Square offers a small number of the people it targets as "undesirable" cleaned-up and reorganized selves to fit this cleaned-up and reorganized space. Appropriately, the Times Square Ink. program does this by training these people to operate sophisticated photocopying machines—hence, the "Ink." pun in the name of the program.

Times Square was first created at the turn of the twentieth century as a gamble by real estate speculators—an attempt to make a highly profitable theater district out of a neighborhood of saloons and brothels (Taylor). The current redevelopment of Times Square can be seen as a similar speculative leap—an attempt to turn a heterogeneous district of entertainment and vice establishments into a part of the city's corporate business core. This transformation parallels what critics have called the "FIRE" economy. Similarly, Steven Gregory suggests that, since the city's financial crisis in the mid-1970s, New York's city development authority has largely abandoned the socially exclusive residential and business zone. According to Fitch, the only industries (other than tourism) actively supported and promoted by the city are elite, white-collar professions such as finance, insurance, and real estate—the so-called "FIRE" economy. Similarly, Steven Gregory suggests that, since the city's financial crisis in the mid-1970s, New York's city development authority has largely abandoned the very concept of public planning. Instead, the city has confined itself to serving the private development market in Manhattan's central business district.

This form of privatized development is structured around the need to imagine "what corporations want," followed by the pre-emptive censorship of the everyday in order to meet these imagined needs. The planners and developers working to entice their desired corporate clientele must envision what sort of image these corporations wish to project—what sort of territory with which they might wish to affiliate themselves, and, implicitly, what sort of people should inhabit that de-
sired territory. They must then make that imagined territory and its inhabitants at least begin to overlap with the material reality of the property they control.

In this scheme, the institutions involved in what Davis calls the “infinite game” of urban redevelopment fix their imaginations on corporations that wield a great deal of power (Davis 1991). However, these corporations rarely exercise this power through direct demands upon city agencies or private developers. Rather, they make their impact felt through the work others carry out on their behalf, without their ever needing to ask. The Times Square developers’ successful courting of the Disney Corporation as a tenant makes this clear. Disney leased a theater on Forty-Second Street in 1995, and their participation in the redevelopment of Times Square has become the dominant public trope in shaping the discourse on what some call the “Disneyfication” of Times Square. Marshall Berman observes:

If Disney has played a role in [the redevelopment of Times Square], it has probably been indirect: not Disney making threats, but other people censoring themselves out of fear that Disney and all its capital might disappear. (83)

In other words, prospective corporate tenants can work their power over projects such as the redevelopment of Times Square largely by their imaginary presence. In many ways, this is the primary force they exert over planners’ and developers’ practices of knowing and shaping the city and its citizens.

The redevelopers’ attempts to cater to what they perceive as the desires of the corporate clientele they hope to attract shape every aspect of the redevelopment of Times Square. This is vividly materialized in the most public aspects of the redevelopment, such as the rewritten zoning laws governing skyscraper construction and advertising display, or the redesign of public spaces like Bryant Park and Forty-Second Street. But it is also present in more subtle ways. Here I refer to the less explicit, but equally meaningful, shifts in concepts of personhood that underlie and help to shape the Times Square redevelopment’s massive public transformations—changes such as those enacted though programs like Times Square Ink.

Times Square Ink reaches out to a select group of the “marginal citizens” of New York City—those who formerly found in Times Square a space of anonymity and safety. These marginal citizens include the people most strenuously demonized and rejected by the redevelopers: people who had no jobs, who were homeless, who worked as prostitutes, who had drug habits, who were (to some) unavoidably and threateningly different. The two dozen or so trainees during my year of ethnographic fieldwork at the program were mostly young, nearly all Black or Latino, and all poor. For them, Times Square prior to redevelopment—when it was supposedly in its most “blighted” state—represented a space of social possibility because certain forms of surveillance seemed to be suspended there (Delaney). As the young Black writer Kierna Mayo Dawsey reminiscies,

[For a welcome change, we Black and Latino youth weren’t the primary target of suspicious W]hite stares. The sideshow that was Times Square [in the 1980s] somehow shielded us from the piercing eyes that made browsing [in department stores] or chilling [in other public places] uncomfortable, even impossible. Eyes that too often reminded you that you weren’t exactly welcome in many parts of town . . . . Times Square was then . . . . a place for carefree congregation, a place to be that [was] not where your parents sent you, a place that somehow at once allowed for anonymity and attention. We did not know why we were at Times Square, so much as we understood why we weren’t somewhere else. (22)

The redevelopers see what Dawsey describes as Times Square’s former “carefree congregation” of otherwise discriminated against minority youth in a very different light. They treat these “undesirables” as generic signs of a social difference that their desired corporate tenants will refuse to assimilate. Along with censoring these people from the area’s street-level visual economy of difference, the redevelopers also fund organizations like Times Square Ink to assimilate a select number of them into the presumed cultural norms of the corporate sphere—to reverse, at least for these few, what Dawsey characterizes as the space’s former combination of “anonymity and attention.”

In so doing, the Times Square Ink program puts this small group of ex-“undesirables” in a position that, in some ways, parallels the place of the other people I studied during my fieldwork in the area—the city planners, real estate developers, architects, and police strategists who seek to exclude or transform them. Like the others involved in redeveloping Times Square, the Times Square Ink trainees develop expert knowledge in how to imagine the corporate world. They learn to manage their public and private identity in terms of an imagined system that will read their public appearance in order to decipher private or underlying meanings. Furthermore, Times Square Ink teaches the trainees to reshape the social texture of the everyday in order to accommodate this imagined system of reading and excluding difference. In this way, the trainees and the redevelopers face a series of parallel tensions, although they do so from radically different social perspectives and with different consequences. Unlike the other people involved with the redevelopment I studied during my year of fieldwork in the area, what is at stake for Times Square Ink’s trainees is their very “right to the city”—their ability to live and participate in the spaces of the city (Lefebvre 158). Furthermore, rather than working to shape laws, zoning codes or architecture, the only material upon which these marginal citizens can work any transformation is themselves.
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Learning to Manage Publicity and Privacy

Times Square Ink. is administered by an organization called the Midtown Community Court, which is located in a residential and theater district just north of Times Square. Affiliated with the city court system but funded by Broadway theater owners and private foundations, the Community Court was opened in 1993, in part as a result of efforts on the part of local property owners to protect the Broadway theater industry and the rest of Times Square from prostitutes, petty drug dealers, illegal street vendors, and the homeless (Feinblatt and Sviridoff). Real estate entrepreneurs and developers felt that these so-called “undesirables” threatened the desirability of Times Square real estate by their very presence in the area (Thompson). These developers, in turn, provided the financial and political capital for the Community Court’s core group of dedicated legal activists and social services experts. Their goal was to test what was then a highly experimental approach to dealing with misdemeanor crimes: to create an integrated, rehabilitation-oriented institution that would address local residents’ and property owners’ concerns while providing meaningful services and treatment to the offenders. Now, the police take anyone they arrest in the Times Square area for misdemeanor crimes like shoplifting, hopping turnstiles, or drinking in public to the Midtown Community Court instead of to the centralized courtroom in Lower Manhattan. If the defendant pleads guilty at the Community Court, the judge there can sentence him or her to community service— to be carried out immediately and in the immediate area—as well as to a mix of counseling and medical treatment, some of which is available in the Court building itself.

Everyone who passes through the Midtown Community Court, whether for an arraignment hearing, a community service assignment, a counseling appointment, or a bowl of soup, sits through a video presentation on Times Square Ink. If they apply to the program and are admitted, they enter together in small groups of about two to six trainees every month. The Times Square Ink. program itself consists of three “Modules.” These are distinct units of training, each lasting a month, and each marked by its own graduation ceremony. Module One meets in a small classroom in the basement of the Court building. Trainees work on vocabulary lists, run through public speaking drills, write autobiographical essays, and so forth. After Module One, they spend the next two months working in Times Square Ink.’s non-profit copy center, located in the third floor of the Court building. During Module Two, the first month in the copy center, trainees learn to use various copying and binding machines. Module Three is much the same except that, during this month, they prepare their résumés. They also begin to look for outside employment, usually through one of the “outsource” centers that provides technical support such as mailroom clerks, copying equipment, and document handlers to law firms and corporate offices in Times Square and throughout New York City.

A constant theme in the Times Square Ink. program is that, as the trainees learn to operate new technologies, they are also learning new ways of perceiving their own identity, their presentation of self. Throughout their course of training, the program’s instructors teach the trainees how to keep things about themselves private in order to construct a viable public persona for the workplace. They do this by engaging new forms of observing and attending to the self (cf. Foucault; Sennett). For example, on one occasion, I sat in on a visit to the Times Square Ink. copy center by a representative from the Fortune Society, an organization dedicated to helping ex-prisoners enter legitimate employment. The speaker from the Fortune Society addressed the group of a half-dozen trainees on how to navigate a job interview. He told them always to keep in mind what he called their “game plan.” “The employer has a plan, and so should you,” he said. He then defined what their “game plan” should be: “Bury the application.” He stressed that, throughout the interview, “Part of yourself is listening, and part of yourself is thinking.” The “thinking” part of the self, he said, should be strategizing how best to counter the interviewer’s forays. He advised the trainees to walk into a job interview armed with documents to back up every line on their résumé, every question on the application. Trainees should be prepared to pass these papers to the interviewer unasked. He gave an example:

Yes, I graduated from such-and-such high school, and here’s a copy of my diploma [voice rising for emphasis]. Yes, I learned a great deal from my time at Times Square Ink., and here’s a letter of reference from the program.

He stressed that, throughout the interview, “Part of yourself is listening, and part of yourself is thinking.” The “thinking” part of the self, he said, should be strategizing how best to counter the interviewer’s forays. He told them, “Answer every question with a question. He asks, ‘What salary do you expect?’ You answer with a question. ‘Well, what do people who work in this position usually make?’”

The speaker warned the trainees that they would need to keep these tactics in mind especially when answering questions about their criminal record, since nearly all of them had learned about Times Square Ink. while being held at the Midtown Community Court after an arrest. He advised the trainees to rush past any mention of conflicts with the law. Instead, they should reassure the interviewer that they had learned from their past: “Yes, I made some mistakes, and that’s how I found out about the Times Square Ink. program…”

The Fortune Society speaker also warned the trainees to always dress conservatively for interviews, in dark colors and with little or no jewelry. He cautioned, “Don’t take the focus off of you.” He told the trainees to be most careful when it came to answering the standard job interview question, “Tell me about yourself.” As he put it, “He doesn’t want to hear about your family, he doesn’t want to hear about your
hobbies, he wants to hear about you." He advised them to respond to
the standard question with a standard answer, something like, "I'm a
good worker, I learn quickly, I'm a self-starter..." In closing, he made
a point of warning the trainees about being, as he put it, "drawn into
informality." He advised them to be wary of casual or friendly-seeming
employers who might, in fact, be trying to trap them in over-familiar-
ity.

The Fortune Society speaker's presentation framed the job inter-
view as a situation in which the trainees would be required to put on a
particular kind of performance. They would need to show that they
could listen and respond both deferentially and strategically at all
times. This sense of the strategizing self, hiding in public behind the
trainees' crafted interview persona, was encapsulated in the speaker's
advice: "Part of yourself is listening, and part of yourself is thinking."
This presentation reminded me of an early conversation I had with the
Times Square Ink. instructor who manages the copy center. He laughed
when he told me that he deliberately acts the part of a difficult boss
when he deals with the trainees at work. He does this, he said, in order
to "test" them. He tells them jokes, and then yells at them for no
reason. He acts like a friend, and then harshly reprimands them for
small slip-ups. In other words, he models the role that the speaker from
the Fortune Society claimed that employers take on in job inter-
views.

The Times Square Ink. instructors tell the trainees that they must
learn a particular form of emotional self-discipline in order to deal with
these ongoing tests. The trainees spend part of the first month in the
program learning about "anger management." One handout they re-
ceive, "What Is Anger?" demonstrates the proper method of managing
one's angry or frustrated emotions in public. The handout shows two
figures in the throes of anger. The first figure stands at a desk or table,
pounding its fist and knocking over a vase. Lightning bolts of anger
leap from its mouth toward the person who sits, aghast, across the
table. By contrast, the second figure blows off steam by lifting weights,
making the "OK" sign with thumb and finger while smiling at its own
raging reflection in a mirror. The two illustrations demonstrate some of
the risks of letting anger affect one's social behavior. In the first illustra-
tion, the figure violently expressing itself in public puts itself in danger
by making others feel threatened. In the second illustration, the figure
safely recuperates its anger as productive energy in private, alone in
front of the mirror, presumably at home.

Times Square Ink. teaches its trainees that they have violent or vis-
ceral feelings that have contributed to their lack of success in the main-
stream economy. During a Module One class, the instructor asked a
new batch of trainees to describe their previous experiences with work.
The students shared common experiences, things I heard nearly all the
trainees talk about at one time or another: having trouble finding a job;
getting fired for what they thought were unfair reasons; hoping that
Times Square Ink. would help their chances. As the trainees went
around the table in turn, the instructor made comments that began to
give a new shape to their stories. Specifically, she diverted the students' 
stories about their work histories away from overtly structural issues,
such as employers' racism, and towards the students' own emotions
and behavior patterns. One young man in particular, loquacious and
stylishly dressed, made repeated mention of the "racist" and unreason-
able bosses who, he said, had forced him to quit one job and then an-
other. After the second such comment, the instructor cut him off with a
quick, "We'll get to all that later." She mentioned that he might want to
concentrate on his own behavior, rather than that of his employers. As
she put it in a general comment to the group, "We all know the rules,
but sometimes we choose not to follow them."

In much the same way that the larger redevelopment of Times
Square has radically curtailed the area's former, highly public market
in sexual commerce, so the Times Square Ink. instructors tell the train-
ees that they must learn to displace these potentially self-jeopardizing
feelings, to remove them from the public sphere and to relegate them
to the private world of the self. They learn to manage this displacement
through a self-disciplining internal dialogue. I once heard one graduate
from the program ask an instructor for advice on how to handle inter-
personal conflicts with a co-worker, someone who seemed to hold a
grudge against him and who went out of their way to aggravate him at
every turn. The instructor's advice was blunt: "Fake it." Endure the
conflict to keep the job. The self that reacts to such conflicts is hidden
somewhere inside, somewhere private.

The program's rationale—the common sense it projects—is simple.
Times Square Ink. teaches that one must both know the self and hide
the self. This talk about the self, in turn, gets folded into the program's
ongoing testing of the trainees' abilities to package themselves for
work. Times Square Ink. instructors push the trainees to construct
"five-year plans" for themselves. I occasionally heard the instructors
ask the trainees rhetorical questions about these plans: "Where do you
see yourself in five years? What is it going to take for you to get there?"
The copy center manager liked to question trainees about their five-
year plans during moments when they showed self-doubt or got into
conflict with him or with their fellow trainees. I saw him do so on sev-
eral occasions when someone commented that they were unhappy
working at the copy center or were otherwise dissatisfied, either with
Times Square Ink. or with their chances of finding a job once they
graduated.

One such time came on a night when I happened to drop by the
copy center when several of the trainees were working late. As they
were chatting casually with each other, several of the trainees began to
tell one of their number, a young man who was about to graduate from the program and begin looking for work, that he should cut his hair, which was thickly braided against his scalp in an Afro-Caribbean style. They told him that the braids looked, in their words, “too ghetto,” and that they would hurt his chances in job interviews. He tried to duck their advice, brushing it off with the casual remark, “Nobody’s going to make me cut my braids.”

As soon as he said this, the manager of the copy center appeared in the doorway of his office. The trainees and I turned to listen to him as he began a rambling monologue about “choices.” “You make your own choices,” he said, “You deal with the consequences.” I was mildly surprised. Was he approving of the trainee’s reluctance to cut his braids? I saw the other trainees watching the manager uncertainly, wondering where he was going with this. He then began to address the young man directly. “So, where do you see yourself in five years? Where do you want to be? Do you have a plan?”

The trainee fumbled for a moment, then replied, “I want to have my own trucking company.” The manager nodded avuncularly, then reeled off a list of questions. “A trucking company? All right. How are you going to get there? How are you going to raise the money? How are you going to get the experience you need?” Haltingly, the trainee began to answer, but the manager cut him off. “You have to make the right choices for yourself to get where you want to be,” he said. A week or so later, the next time I stopped in at the copy center, I saw that the trainee had cut off his braids and shaved his head clean.

As this example shows, the trainees at Times Square Ink. know that newly-recognized commodity in the public sphere.

Processes of Ordering and Distance

The above examples show how the Times Square Ink. program emphasizes that, in order to get and keep a job in the corporate world, one must learn to put distance between oneself and one’s immediate experience of the present. This distance between public and private is embodied in the form of mostly public managed personae and mostly private emotions and plans. This emphasis on the public/private split is crucial, because the picture Times Square Ink. paints of the corporate world is a harsh one. Throughout the program, trainees prepare for the verbal gamesmanship of job interviews. They learn to control the anger or frustration they might feel when treated unfairly at work by those in positions of authority. They practice the proper etiquette, speech style, and body language appropriate to the corporate environment. In effect, Times Square Ink. makes the world for which it is preparing its trainees sound culturally alien and rigidly formal.

The image of the corporate world that Times Square Ink. constructs is one of strange hierarchies and verbal games. In this world, the techniques of distancing and disciplining the self that the program teaches become crucial to surviving day-to-day working reality. How could one live in such a world, fraught with power and danger, without carefully watching one’s words in order to navigate through office society? How could one make it through a day of running a copy machine and enduring one’s superiors without constant coaching from one’s future self? “I’m not here in this office. I’m five years in the future thanking the ‘present me’ for putting in so much time here.” Obviously, this image of the working world as a cruel and inflexible machine of discipline and prejudice is somewhat exaggerated.4 In fact, graduates from Times Square Ink. often commented to me that their actual job interviews seemed much easier than the rigorous mock interviews through which they had suffered while in the program. Similarly, they described their actual working environments as feeling substantially more flexible and less formal than Times Square Ink.’s non-profit copy center.

This exaggerated quality is not accidental. The key to Times Square Ink.’s harsh construction of corporate culture is its emphasis on the imagination and simulation of order. This is what ties the program so closely to the culture of the other organizations working to redevelop the Times Square area. Times Square Ink. asks the trainees to imagine a rigidly ordered world that they must enter. This is the corporate world, or rather a simulacrum thereof. By constructing representations of the corporate world, the program then teaches them to construct selves that are rigidly ordered enough to inhabit it. During my fieldwork at Times Square Ink., I saw this process of ordering and rationalization enacted in a parallel form—in the physical environment of the
program's classroom and in its copy center. Over the course of the year I was doing research there, the Midtown Community Court management decided to move the copy center from its first location, in a donated second floor in an office building just south of Times Square at the corner of Broadway and Fortieth Street, to an unused room in the Community Court building itself. This made their operation much more efficient. Trainees with business in both the Midtown Court and the copy center during the same day no longer had to leave the building and walk through Times Square to meet their obligations.

Even more pronounced was the transformation of the Times Square Ink. classroom in the basement of the Community Court building. When I first visited the program, this was a shabby and undefined room. Its walls were decked with a palimpsest of taped-up pieces of paper, including inspirational sayings, a poster explaining the dress code, essays and artwork left by previous groups of trainees, and so forth. Books were stacked up in all corners, as well as reams of paper, boxes of envelopes, and other materials for the mailroom next door, where Community Court arraignees worked off their community service assignments mailing fliers for local non-profit organizations. The clutter of people carrying out their sentences in the mailroom would filter into the trainees' classwork, and vice-versa—a constant reminder of the lack of clear spatial separation between the mailroom and the Times Square Ink. classroom.

On successive visits throughout the year, I watched as the classroom and the mailroom came to occupy ever-more separate spaces. The classroom received a fresh coat of white paint, and the papers that were taken down from the walls during the painting never went back up. This made the room feel both sparser and more organized. Further, Community Court employees put up a wall with a locking door between the classroom and the adjacent mailroom. They also installed a separate heating and air-conditioning unit to give the newly defined classroom its own ventilation system. In short, the Times Square Ink. classroom and copy center underwent something like the same process of cleaning, tidying, and reordering that the program applies to its trainees.

Similarly, when faced with visits from important outside entities, the entire Times Square Ink. program went into a frenzy of preparation and activity. These whirlwind cleanups mirrored the kinds of anticipatory defensive procedures that the program teaches as part of getting ready for job interviews. On the two days I was present before a dignitary came to visit—one day it was then-Attorney General Janet Reno, the other some officials from a business school that was considering giving Times Square Ink. a substantial grant—I found the place in a tizzy. Before the Attorney General's visit, the trainees had all been sent to the copy center, so I gave the instructor a hand; I helped with neaten-

ing up the papers on the walls, rearranging the clutter, cleaning the blackboard, and so forth (this was before the classroom's minimalist makeover).

A few months later, when the potential grantors were on their way, I sat and watched the instructor rehearse the trainees in the classroom over and over on how they would introduce themselves to their visitors. When she had to leave the room for a few minutes, they continued to drill each other. Occasionally, one of the trainees would use speech patterns that they had been taught to avoid. Specifically, he would nervously pepper his sentences with “knowitimsayin” or “nahmean.” Another of the trainees corrected him whenever he did so. In a dead-on impersonation of their instructor's meticulously "correct" speech, she would primly shoot back, “Watch how you’re speaking!” While the instructor was out of the room, the trainees also hotly debated among themselves the issue of whether to remove the condom one had stapled to a piece of autobiographical artwork on display on the wall. Throughout these drills and discussions, they hectored one of their fellows who sat quietly, refusing to talk at all, let alone to practice what he might say if one of the visitors were to ask him a question. They leaned on him mercilessly. “You’ve got to say something, man! What are you going to say when they get here? Come on, don’t mess this up for us!”

With all of this rushing around to clean up the classroom and rehearsing student presentations, Times Square Ink. was, in effect, striving to communicate to its powerful visitors its own ability to put on a certain kind of performance—a class- and race-inflected performance of neutral functionality, deference, and agreeability. This was, of course, the very performance the trainees were being taught to put on during job interviews (and like their interviews, the trainees later recounted to me how perfunctory these visits were, each lasting only a few minutes). This mode of performance, as much as anything, is what Times Square Ink. was designed to teach. The fact that they enacted it so intensely before these visits only points to how absolutely central this mode of performance is to the program's version of corporate culture. According to the program, these various games of strategically producing a deferential self constitute the essence of work in such environments.

Open Questions and Complications

The Times Square Ink. program focuses intensely on teaching its trainees how to craft their public personae so that they can get and keep a job—to successfully navigate the redeveloped public sphere of Times Square and New York City. The trainees learn to hide things about themselves, and at the same time, they learn to be curious about themselves in terms of wondering what it is they must hide. Just as they learn to craft affable personae for work, the program also demands that
the trainees delve deeply into their feelings, memories, and wishes. But in order to learn to hide their personal and interior selves, they must make these aspects of their lives totally public. They talk about their family lives, personal histories, sexualities, styles of dress and speech, involvements with crime or drugs, fears and uncertainties, extravagant hopes, anger, and boredom. At Times Square Ink., the trainees publicize everything about themselves that they will later repress in the world of work.

The program gives a view of the working world as an elaborately structured performance, a game of strategies and deceptions straight out of the work of Erving Goffman. According to this model, you are your secrets, and your success in the world depends on the performance of self you evolve out of your knowledge of what you think you have to hide. The program’s instructors refer to a set of standardized conventions that supposedly govern everyone’s performances of self in the public sphere. This is exemplified in the instructor’s observation, “We all know the rules, but sometimes we choose not to follow them.” Trainees struggle through the challenging and frustrating work the program offers as a preparation for the challenges and frustrations of their hoped-for future jobs. As they do so, they learn to look critically on their lives before the program—to see themselves as having failed to be properly curious about what it was they should have kept private.

And it is precisely in this highly productive, self-critical curiosity the program works to engender that Times Square Ink. both does and does not address the difficulties with which its trainees have to cope. As I mentioned above, nearly all the trainees I met while studying the program were Black or Latino. One could look at Times Square Ink.’s emphasis on controlling the boundaries between public and private selves as teaching its trainees to navigate pervasive White racism in the workplace. It does so by showing them ways they can try to downplay or otherwise modify any of their own signs of racial or ethnic difference. Trainees learn both to imagine and to performatively accommodate the aesthetic desires of (presumably White) corporate managers, and thus to portray themselves as good potential workers.

Times Square Ink. attempts to contain the seeming impossibility of this assignment (after all, who can really control the fantasies others produce about them?) by explicitly telling its trainees that they are not learning a racialized set of tactics to deal with discrimination and fear. Instead, the program presents this training as the rescue of the trainee’s so-called “real self” from the mess of personal history that lies too close to the surface of their public persona. The program insists that the students locate their narratives of success or failure within themselves, centered on their individual ability, or lack thereof, and that they keep their selves properly disciplined into separate public and private spheres. However, the trainees are put in the position of never know-
This brings me to the second factor that complicates the public/private puzzle with which Times Square Ink. confronts its trainees. While all involved with the redevelopment of Times Square, including the Times Square Ink. trainees, are engaged in imagining what those to whom they cater want from them, nobody ever seems to actually sit in the seat of power. It is clear that Times Square Ink. seeks to shape the trainees to accommodate what it imagines are the class, racial, and ethnic prejudices held by the bureaucrats who will decide whether to put them and keep them in a job. It is also clear that the program works to instill in its trainees the particular reflexive self-critique that will help them to read and respond to these prejudices by evaluating themselves as performers on a public/private stage. What is less clear is the ambiguous nature of the prejudices to which they learn to adapt.

Conclusion

For the past hundred years, Times Square has served as a site where New York City’s marginal citizens have found a place to hide in plain sight in the area’s overall crowded anonymity and spectacular license. It has also served as the site where city administrators, real estate developers, moral reformers, and others have imagined the social benefits and financial profits to be reaped by excluding these marginal citizens from this, their refuge and their place in the spotlight. Times Square Ink. recapitulates this conflict over the constitution of public space and public life in New York City, a conflict that resonates with similar processes taking place in other cities across the United States and elsewhere. The Times Square Ink. program seeks to give a few of these “undesirables” the sociocultural tools to make a place for themselves in the area’s new corporate economy and sanitized street culture. Just as the people involved in the redevelopment have targeted the spaces of Times Square as having been infected with “blight” and in need of complete redefinition, Times Square Ink. asks its trainees to look back on their former lives as having been “blighted” and in need of increased respectability.

The respectable, self-disciplined, publicly appropriate life is described and enacted within Times Square Ink., over and against the presumed blight that led the trainees into its purview. The program teaches the trainees to put themselves in the shoes of someone with a great deal of social power—to accommodate themselves to the judgments they imagine particular, powerful “others” are ready to make of them. Just who those others are, and the source of their power, is left a mystery, another open question, along with the question of whether any amount of conformity and self-appraisal will ever be enough for these marginal citizens to fully occupy the center of the New Times Square. Looking closely at Times Square Ink. and institutions like it forces us to recognize the close political and cultural relationships be-
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Notes

1. I carried out a year of ethnographic fieldwork in various sites in Times Square from Fall 1997 through Summer 1998, as part of a larger project on the redevelopment of Times Square. This essay is drawn from this larger project that looks at the Times Square redevelopment as a case-study of the clash between discourses of order and consumerist discourses of license in public life in the United States. My fieldwork at Times Square Ink. consisted of several months of observing classes, interviewing trainees and instructors, and joining groups of trainees on field trips to job sites or to other job-training programs. Later, I worked as a volunteer at the program, coming in once per week for a few hours to help the trainees draft their résumés on the instructors’ computer (see note 8).

2. Here I follow the example set by Mike Davis in City of Quartz. Davis tracks between literature, architecture, labor history, zoning battles, and a host of other arenas to critique Los Angeles as a space of political and economic domination. Davis’s attempts to track the ways in which oppression is inscribed into the LA everyday takes him, in an ethnographic moment, on a tour of a new urban prison, the highly designed façade of which disguises the building as an upscale hotel or office block. Even the prison’s interior resembles, in Davis’s words, “less a detention than a convention center for federal felons” (257). There, an inmate whispers in Davis’s ear, asking him, “Can you imagine the mindfuck of being locked up in a Holiday Inn?” (257). My goal in this article, and in my work on the whole of the redevelopment of Times Square, is to take Davis’s informant up on this invitation.

3. The Midtown Community Court has since spun off a separate policy consulting organization, the Center for Court Innovation (CCI). The CCI now runs the Court, as well as similar courts and mediation centers in Harlem and in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Crown Heights and Red Hook. The CCI also consults with related institutions nationally and worldwide and generally serves to publicize the community court concept. More information about the CCI and the Midtown Community Court is available at the CCI website, <http://www.communitycourts.org>.

4. Times Square Ink.’s focus on the imagined harshness of the corporate world resonates with Weinberg’s ethnography of drug treatment centers in the United States. Specifically, Weinberg notes the ways that the residents of these treatment centers, in talking about their former or current drug use and criminal activity, “posits a space ‘out there’ marked by its degradation, dirtiness, solitude, and savagery which commonly tempts those who must live there to also behave amorally, licentiously, and/or savagely” (606). Times Square Ink. posits the job world as similarly “out there,” but also as filled with potential rewards for trainees.

5. Here I borrow the ways that writers for hip-hop magazines transcribe African American vernacular ways of pronouncing “You know what I’m saying” or “You know what I mean” as casual verbal interjections in everyday conversation.

6. If my experience and that of my friends who work in such environments is any guide, Times Square Ink.’s version of corporate culture is quite accurate, in this aspect at least.

7. In fact, this has become the focus of substantial debate in neconservative circles: the mismatch between the demands for bottom-rung labor, especially in the service sector, demanded by the corporations that New York City, and the perceived lack of sociocultural and business skills possessed by the city’s unemployed labor pool (see, for example, MacDonald).

8. This became uncomfortably clear to me when I began to work at Times Square Ink. as a volunteer, helping trainees to edit their résumés. I found myself in conflict with several of the trainees with whom I was working over what the content of their résumés should be. At the time, I simply felt exasperated with these people, who, I thought, didn’t understand the basic conventions of a good corporate résumé. Later, upon reflection, I began to wonder whether I had simply stepped into the shoes of the developers, of whom I was so critical, by trying to impose my own sense of form on someone else’s résumé, and also by seeing our conflicts as simply a matter of their not following self-evident rules of form. I still have very little idea of how to resolve this complicated question in a satisfactory way, which makes me think that it must, in fact, be a very important question for understanding the redevelopment of Times Square as a whole.

Works Cited


Donald, J. _Imagining the Modern City._ Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.


