

BETWEEN SIMULATION AND INHABITATION:

Money, Technology and People

Performativity:

Re-Making Place through Occupation

Lisa C. Henry Benham

University of Utah

Crown Heights, Brooklyn is created and recreated in the speeches and gestures of its occupants. It is one of the most graphic examples of the negotiation of identity and place. This is magnified by the fact that the overall picture of Crown Heights is black and white. The residents are, for the most part, Blacks and Whites. The gestures and clothing are Black and White. "Identity is declared visibly. Everybody seemed to know who they are and how they are seen."¹ The architecture of Crown Heights, is composed of three and four story buildings. Some aligned directly on the sidewalk, some set back from this edge. Corner shops punctuate the residential scale of the neighborhood. The area between the public space of the street and the private interiors of the houses is occupied by steps, paved terraces, cast iron fences and an occasional box of earth, an urban garden. Crown Heights is also occupied by two distinct communities: Hasidic Jews and Blacks. The moment to moment identity of this place is constantly changing as the Jews and blacks move through the shared public space.

*One sees motion, and one hears multiple symphonies. The Black people didn't all come from one place, and neither do the Hasidim. One looks closely and one sees that not every hat is the same kind of black hat and not every yarmulke is the same kind of yarmulke, Multiple languages are being spoken. The Lubavitchers ... were from the Middle East, England, Australia, South Africa. The young Black men ... have accents which are a mixture of bold Brooklynese with rap hand gestures, and Caribbean lilts. Motion. Action. People from everywhere.*³

A focus on re-making place through occupation is a provocative idea. Architecture and the city will be described by its processes rather than just its physical form.⁴ A process oriented study has the potential to engage issues of identity within the making and re-making of place. Performative theory is an important tool in understanding this process and the relationship between identity and the spaces within which identity is performed. Performative theory defines the process of subject formation and, I will argue, place-making as one in which "the enacting of identities [or spaces] in fact brings those identities



Fig. 1. Images of Crown Heights, Brooklyn.²

[spaces] into being, rather than expressing some predetermined essence."⁵ The gestures of occupation are always already the gestures of identity performance. This view of space-making allows us to access relationships between identity and experience of place as we study an occupants actions and re-actions to that place.

This paper is the beginning of larger project to discover how we can acknowledge identity within a rigorous process of analysis and design. I will focus on making a link between performative theories of identity and the analysis of space through a discussion of performative theory, the manifestations of this theory in the work of Anna Deavere Smith, and, finally, the implications of the process of making through occupation. The objective is not only to provide a working methodology with which to analyze and critique architecture, but also to sustain a possible ground for its production. Architects, "Rather than seeking to define places, might seek to develop opportunities and means for creatively engaging the cultural, social, as well as physical space of [identity]."⁶

Judith Butler's discussion of performativity defines identity as "The repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance."⁷ The process of repetition can both consolidate and subvert the force of this regulatory frame. Identity is, therefore, a process of becoming. This theory suggests that we could

"deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender [identity] into its constitutive acts"⁸ and locate these acts within a particular spatial context. It is important to understand that these acts are not voluntary choices "rather they are the product of constitutive constraints that create identities, creative performances elicited under duress."⁹

Performativity also allows for the discussion of the occupation and re-creation of space by marginalized identities without reverting to essentialism. "Identities such as race are unmoored from their seemingly biological foundations, becoming instead an unstable and decentered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle."¹⁰ Our focus shifts from the identity itself to the formulative frame which defines the identity; and the tactics, habits, and repetition within the body, and within the space the body describes that deviate from this frame.

We can reveal a relationship between particular social identities and their re-making of space by focusing on the repetition of these "constitutive acts" within habits and tactics of daily occupation. The reliance on repetition implies that the process of becoming, for both place and identity, is continuously occurring over time through shifting patterns of occupation. The result is that there can never be a fixed, or stable definition of place. "Repetition ... makes possible the occurrence of a dynamic and open structure,"¹¹ Therefore, the analysis and critique of architecture must be repeated and reevaluated as the city is incrementally constructed and re-constructed in the design and performance of buildings and public spaces. This study should compare the constitutive constraints of spatial organization with the elements of repetition, appropriation and improvisation, which deviate from this organization.

Anna Deavere Smith's use of the theater in *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* is an embodied example of performativity and its application to both gender, race, and place. Smith deliberately engages performative theory in a search for both individual and community identity. Her process focuses on language, particularly the speech act, as the place of identity. She records and studies the speech of several individuals involved with a conflict or event that has taken place within their community. In *Fires in the Mirror* Smith's interviews focus on a riot, which lasted for four days in August, 1991. "The conflict reflected long standing tensions within Crown Heights between Lubavitchers and Blacks, as well as the pain, oppression, and discrimination these groups have historically experienced outside their own communities."¹² For two years following the riot, the conflict continued to be waged in the public space of courtrooms and the media. Smith's interviews with residents and others took place in the context of this very polarized debate.



Fig. 2. Confrontation between Blacks and Hasidic Jews in Crown Heights, Brooklyn

Smith performs the speech act of the individuals she has interviewed, using their own words. She describes her process: "Part of me is becoming them through repetition ... I become the "them" that they present to the world. For all of us, the performance of ourselves has very much to do with the self of ourselves. That's what we're articulating in language and in flesh."¹³ By deliberately engaging a process of repetition, Smith discovers the constituent acts which come together to reveal identity. The rhythm of speech allows her to capture the gestures of the body and the space of the body in her performance. Smith maps the structure of gender and racial identities, in a particular context, through the process of selecting rhythm and imagery from the interviews with several members of that identity. This mapping is grounded in the body, its gestures and habits of being, revealing patterns, rhythms, tactics, clothing, and presentation, which define community identity and cohesion. "A world of shared meanings builds up, couched in the language of small semi-private and semipublic territories."¹⁴ Smith's deliberate act of becoming serves to reveal and question the constitutive formulations of identity and reveals the "creative performances elicited under duress," which deviate from these formulations.

As Smith constructs her performance of particular identities, she begins to reveal the different experience of these identities within the public space of both discourse and the city. Although *Fires in the Mirror* is one of a series of similar projects, it is the first project which attempts to present the literal space of the encounter with individuals as reflective of the individual's identity. This shift in Smith's process is significant in several ways: First it reveals the link between identity and the space within which it is performed. In her introduc-



Fig. 3. Smith as several Identities.

tion to the movie, Smith states, "It's about race. It's about power. [long pause] It's about turf."¹⁵ Race and power are embodied here by place. By performing race in Crown Heights individuals claim turf, re-creating the public space. Both black and Jewish people feel the overwhelming presence of the other. Both feel that the other has the strongest hold on this turf. The blacks see the Jewish population transforming the space of crown heights through the special privileges they are given: street closings and police escorts. For example Dr. Heron Sam, a black reverend observes, "they spilled out onto the streets, and the busses had to stop, ... because [they] had to escort, the rebbe from his house over there, to the synagogue."¹⁶ The structure and activity of the space is dramatically altered, by the sudden massive, and police supported, presence of a visibly Jewish population. The Jewish people, on the other hand, see the pervasive presence of the blacks in the street and sitting on stoops as an equally dramatic transformation of the space. The line between inside and outside is blurred in the black community, creating tension and hostility at a smaller scale. Rabbi Joseph Spielman describes the neighborhood by describing this black presence, "Many people were on the sidewalk, talking, playing, drinking, beer or whatever -, being that type of neighborhood."¹⁷

Second, the spatial context of the speech highlights the different experience of public space by the different identities. Cornel West alludes to this difference in his forward to the book. "We attempt to conduct the exchange in a public space equally appealing to both Blacks and Jews - yet fail to recognize that Jews seem to be more eager to inhabit this public space than Blacks."¹⁸ Although it is clear in the pattern of fragments that compose the book and the movie that both groups feel some discomfort in the public space; the particular reluctance of Black people to enter this space is illustrated by Smith's interview with George C. Wolf. Wolf speaks about how he was treated in a private black school where he was "extraordinary," and how he was treated in the shared public space of the city where

he was "insignificant."

*I was extraordinary as long as I was Black
But I am - not - going to place myself (Pause)
in relationship to your whiteness*

...

*My Blackness dose not resis - ex - re -
exist in relationship to your whiteness.¹⁹*

This feeling of insignificance is further illustrated by a clear gap between those who are accustomed to being heard and those who are accustomed to being disregarded. Smith reveals this in the posture and setting of the individuals she performs. In the movie she shifts back and forth among three characters describing the context and setting of the accident, which set off the riot. It is very clear who expects to be heard and who expects to be discounted as "insignificant." The first account is given by Rabbi Joseph Spielman, who sits calmly at the head of a conference table. He speaks with authority, almost without gesture, as if there is no question no room for doubt. He draws his authority from the formal setting and his confidence in his place. The second account is given by Reverend Dr. Heron Sam in his office. He sits behind his desk and although his gestures are more pronounced than the rabbi, he is still clearly presenting himself as a community leader. He also draws his authority from the setting. Although they contradict each other, both accounts are presented as simple statements of fact.

The final version is given by an anonymous young man who was present at the accident. The setting is very different. It is a local community recreation room which is tattered and messy. The space dose not belong to the young man, he gains no strength from it. The young man acts out each stage of his story dominating the space with his gestures and movements. He draws attention away from the background instead of drawing strength and authority from it. His movements range from sitting to falling to standing, arms constantly in motion. He confronts the audience and backs away incredulous. This performance is screaming to be heard, yet of the three accounts it is most easily dismissed largely because of the gestures which try to overcome the feeling of insignificance felt by the individual and the poverty of the setting.

Smith's constant shifting between the three individuals forces the audience to confront our own tendencies to ascribe authority to individuals based on setting and appearance. By allowing each character a voice, Smith expands the narrow framework of the Black-Jewish conflict, taking us into the speech of individuals who are not accustomed to being heard.²⁰ But she also forces us to confront our own tendencies to dismiss certain voices due to their context as well as the influence context has on different styles of performance and speech.



Fig. 4. Smith as three men describing the car accident which led to the riot.

Finally, by allowing the speech acts of individuals to determine the setting of Smith's performance, we see how space is constructed by the posture and movements of the speakers, as well as the role space plays in constructing the regulatory frame of identity. Smith acknowledges the fact that "The act of speech is a physical act. It is powerful enough that it can create."²¹ The speech and gestures of particular identities actually create the setting in which she presents them. For example, Smith describes "Bad Boy" as an individual who "looked me straight in the eye with very kind eyes ... like the kindest person talking to [a child]."²² Her interview with this man actually took place in a recreation room, however, Smith's performance of this young man is presented in a dark alley, complete with flashing lights and a siren in the distance. The Young man is describing the difference between a bad boy and an athlete, two of the structuring frames for black youth.

*A bad boy,
somebody who's groomed in badness,
or did badness
before,
stabbed the man.
Because I used to be a atha-lete
And I used to be a bad boy,
...
And when I became a bad boy
...
I'm groomin' myself in things that is bad.²³*

The darkness of what he is saying and the tone he uses creates the space of the threatening alley. That space in turn acts to re-create the identity. The shift of setting allowed the speech of the bad boy to be critical of the identity formation, by placing it in the regulatory frame which constructs blackness. The alley brings with it images of gangs, drugs, crime, and menace. The flashing red lights reinforce the image of delinquent inner-city black youth. However, the boy's kindness and desire to make Smith understand are aspects of his improvisation, which subverts this frame, effectively destabilizing and re-



Fig. 5. Smith as Bad Boy in alley.

creating his identity. This young man's speech act is more significant within the regulatory frame of the alley than it would be in the space of the recreation room.

Smith's use of theatre – props, lighting, setting, and costume – is a reference to the regulatory frame of identity within which individuals become. Her process focuses on choosing moments when an individual deviates from familiar expression to struggle for articulation. "Identity, in fact, lives in the unique way a person departs from the English language ... to create something that is individual."²⁴ By siting these deviations within a recognizable frame, underprivileged black youth or Jewish housewife, she exposes both the individual identity and the performance of gender, race, or both.

Smith's use of theater also hints at the role played by the physical context within the city. Michel de Certeau allows us to build on this idea by using the speech act as an analogy for walking in the city. His discussion of spatial practices in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, allows us to see the occupation of space as a fundamentally creative act, a re-making akin to both speech and identity performance.

Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwining paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these "real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city" They are not localized; it is rather that they specialize.²⁵

Just as Smith is interested in unique uses of the English Language as creative acts of speaking or the re-creation of a particular identity, de Certeau is interested in the way individuals depart from the language of the urban system to create space. "The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language."²⁶ de Certeau creates a three part structural comparison between walking and the speech act.²⁷ First, the walker appropriates the space in which the "speech" occurs. The urban system organizes a set of possibilities. The occupant of this system recognizes patterns, making opportunities "exist as well as emerge" through improvisation and appropriation within the spatial language. Second, the walker spatially acts



Fig. 6. Images of riots in Crown Heights, 1991.

out the place. The emergence of a particular set of possibilities is acted out physically just as speech emerges as a verbal "acting-out." Finally, The walker creates relationships among different positions. "In walking, a permanent home position is created as an ever-shifting series of discrete locations from which to understand the city."²⁸ This relationship can be seen as a structured narrative in search of place. Relationships are also created as a series of weaving paths between different constituencies or a dialogue between successive walkers, a physical suggestion of complicated interrelations and divisions between identities.²⁹

An important aspect of de Certeau's observations is the recognition of each "walker" as a substantive individual, not the universal and anonymous subject generally given as the subject of architectural practice. There is always a mass of "singularities." Each walker has a qualitative character which contributes to their style of improvisation and appropriation. "Style specifies "a linguistic structure that manifests on the symbolic level ... an individual's fundamental way of being in the world."³⁰ These individuals and individual styles create a certain amount interference which prevents a static reading of the urban system. The urban system, created by architects, therefore, constitutes a norm or "proper meaning" to which the shifting language or noise of the walker is compared. Architecture thus takes the same position as the theatrical setting in Smith's work. It becomes the rigid frame against which walking as improvisation exposes both the individual identity and the performance of place.

de Certeau states "In reality this faceless proper meaning [of architecture] cannot be found in proper use, whether verbal or pedestrian; it is merely the fiction produced by a use."³¹ This understanding of space is parallel to the Butler's formulation of performative theory. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gen-

der; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results."³² We may, therefore, consider re-writing de Certeau's statement to clarify the relationship between space and performativity: There is no proper meaning, or place-identity, behind the expressions of place, behind its use. Place is performatively constituted by the very expressions or experiences that are said to be its results.

The parallel between de Certeau's formulation of place and Performativity is strengthened by his assertion that walking is "the effect of successive encounters and occasions that constantly"³³ reconstruct themselves and the spatial organization. The performance of place is directly enabled by a process of repetition, appropriation and the changing same. "It is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities"³⁴ in the urban system of organization. The combined movements of particular individuals shape and re-shape the space of the city. Making is never quite complete. Occupation by the individual walker is the performance of identity, and experience, as the effect of successive encounters and associations, that can allow for a more complete understanding and analysis of the relationship between identity and place making.

Reiterative analysis and the recognition of the walker within the architectural process are important in the creation of architecture with meaning and responsibility. Architect and occupant are engaged simultaneously as performer and interpreter.³⁵ Within any given process of making space, both should be considered together in the creation of a spatial language, which can be occupied and interpreted without focusing on essentializing definitions of the categories of gender and race. The implication is that by studying how people occupy space, we are essentially studying how to make space; and by incorporating a recognition of how people of different identities occupy space we can incorporate identity into this rigorous process. Part of the intent of architecture should be to allow greater perception of identity and the emergence of the new in the process of re-making by amplifying the locations of identity performance and improvisation in cultural and social as well as physical routines of contemporary urban life.³⁶

NOTES

¹Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (New York: Anchor Press, 1993), xxxiii.

This description of the presence of identity in Crown Heights is taken from Smith's description in Her introduction to the book.

²Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (PBS Video, 1993). All images were extracted from this video.

³Smith, *Fires in the Mirror*, xxxvi.

- ⁴David P. Brown, "Sonorous Urbanism: Spatial Implications of the AAMC", in *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race*, Craig E. Barton ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2001), 144.
- ⁵Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York: Routledge. 1997), 7.
- ⁶Brown, Sonorous Urbanism, 145.
- ⁷Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge. 1999), 41. For additional discussions of Performative theory see: Jill Dolan, *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance* (2001). And Geraldine Harris, *Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity* (1999).
- ⁸Ibid., 44.
- ⁹Kondo, *About Face*, 7.
- ¹⁰Ibid., 7.
- ¹¹Araya Asgedom, "The Unsounded Space", in *White Papers Black Marks: Architecture, Race, Culture*, Lesley Naa Norle Lokko ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2000), 244.
- ¹²Smith, *Fires in the Mirror*, xiii.
- ¹³Carol Martin, "Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You", in *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage*, Carol Martin ed. (New York: Routledge. 1996), 198.
- ¹⁴Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Massachusetts: MIT Press. 1999), 35.
- ¹⁵Smith, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*
- ¹⁶Smith, *Fires in the Mirror*, 75-76.
- ¹⁷Ibid., 67.
- ¹⁸Cornel West, Foreword to *Fires in the Mirror*, Anna Deavere Smith, (New York: Anchor Press. 1993), xvii.
- ¹⁹Smith, *Fires in the Mirror*, 10.
- ²⁰West, Foreword, xviii.
- ²¹Smith, *Fires in the Mirror*, xxv.
- ²²Martin, Anna Deavere Smith, 201.
- ²³Smith, *Fires in the Mirror*, 101-102.
- ²⁴Ibid., xxx.
- ²⁵Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1984), 97.
- ²⁶Ibid., 97.
- ²⁷Ibid., 97 - 99.
- ²⁸Felecia Davis, "Uncovering Places of Memory: Walking Tours of Manhattan", in *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race*, Craig E. Barton ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2001), 27.
- ²⁹Kenrick Ian Grandison, "Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America", in *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race*, Craig E. Barton ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2001), 57.
- ³⁰de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 100.
- ³¹Ibid., 100.
- ³²Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.
- ³³de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 101.
- ³⁴Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 10.
- ³⁵Lesley Naa Norle Lokko introduction to *White Papers Black Marks: Architecture, Race, Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2000), 26 - 29.
- ³⁶Brown, Sonorous Urbanism, 144 - 145.