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Playing Chess in Public:
Recreational Traditions in a Time of Crisis

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Abstract

Based upon a series of ethnographic vignettes, interviews, participant observation, and archival research, this article profiles public chess playing in Greenwich Village, New York City. I focus upon the famed public spaces for chess players like Washington Square Park and Union Square, and the atmosphere of anxiety and unrest due to the Covid-19 Pandemic and systemic racism surrounding the protests of the summer of 2020. The long artistic and revolutionary history of Greenwich Village provides an intriguing context for public chess playing and the informal economy of hustling. As the majority of the chess enthusiasts and table hosts are African American men and, given the metaphoric explanations of "chess as life," sociopolitical context is critical. In particular, political artistic displays and protests against police violence and systemic racism are no mere backdrop for chess playing, but intimately felt and entangled within the sense of place and public participation in downtown Manhattan.

As New York City, during 2020 and throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic era, faced multiple crises along with their sociopolitical responses; iconic staples of Greenwich Village life embodied by the area's chess enthusiasts persist. In order to illuminate the everyday life of chess playing in public, I focus on two players: Mr. Black in Washington Square Park and Alfred in Union Square. These ethnographic vignettes reveal downtown chess playing as an activity inseparable from its urban context –

uniquely and importantly a New Yorkers' pastime and entangled within the socioeconomic, political, and artistic landscapes that color downtown New York City.

Keywords: Public space; Chess; Systemic racism; New York City; Covid-19 Pandemic era.

Introduction

The Covid-19 Pandemic has been especially devastating for everyday life and personal health worldwide, and the effects felt in New York City, beyond just the tourism industry, have reordered the operation of public space in a densely populated US city. The longtime practice of playing chess in Greenwich Village, however, continued throughout the Pandemic, apart from the three-month shut down from March to June of 2020. There was simply no reason, according to some chess enthusiasts, to be out in the parks downtown and looking for players because people mostly respected the shelter in place and social distancing orders. Later, many players stood defiant against the odds of illness to continue their game. Not only does this speak to the resilience of New Yorkers, but it attests to the popularity of playing chess in the parks (Union Square and Washington Square Park) of downtown New York City and the fact that, even during a pandemic, this longtime traditional use of public space is a valued public pastime. This article explores the aesthetics of chess playing in downtown New York City (Greenwich Village, or "the Village"), what the practice elicits from players and passersby, and how it transforms the possibilities of social interaction in public space. In contrast to downtown public spaces like these, there are various shops and clubs with decades of history of chess playing in the area. One such shop, the Chess Forum, also persevered through the Pandemic, and continues to attract chess enthusiasts (CBS 2020). Importantly, both Washington Square and Union Square have political histories of public protest, creating contested spaces of ad hoc spontaneous public expression that forms some of the context for persistent playing.

There has been a recent increase in the popularity of chess since Netflix's show *The Queen's Gambit* (2020) (Razack 2021; Reeve 2021), among films like *Critical Thinking* (2020), and classics, *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993) and *Fresh* (1994), which featured public players in Washington Square Park. The popular game playing website "chess.com" doubled its active users during the Pandemic, regardless, but doubled its new accounts one month after *The Queen's Gambit* premiered, and sales of board games and books on chess have also spiked (Reeve 2021). The Chess Forum's sales increased, as did interest among younger customers, and especially women (Cubas 2021). Other sites like "lichess.org" doubled their number of online players as well. This increase in status and resurgence in popularity breathes new life into the old game. Despite the reputation of chess as the world's most popular board game already, this resurgence of chess vitality has offered many people a

new interest or renewed enjoyment in an old pastime. This surge in chess enthusiasts finds a conduit among the chessboards of Greenwich Village – from the Chess Forum to Washington Square Park to Union Square.

Playing chess in the Village not only exemplifies recreational activity, use of public space, and a staple of downtown Manhattan life, but also the informal economy of hustling, gambling, and tutoring. Although some public players will play without a clock timer and just for fun, many play for money, gamble, or expect a tip. This variety colors the experience of public chess playing and interacts with the long history of street hustling (Licea 2017; Kadet 2022). Some players learn only to hustle and practice blitz-style chess, where the objective is to play as fast as possible (speed chess), potentially learn some tricks that can be easily overlooked under time pressure, and gainfully profit. In this sense, the players are participating in the economy of New York City street life, where vendors and street performers of all types sell, hustle, socialize, share their art with the city, and seep into the fabric of artistic expression and creative performance of everyday life in the downtown parks.

Beyond the "Big Screens"

The Queen's Gambit is not known to be an accurate portrayal of the sexism, misogyny, and other such examples of systemic oppression of women playing chess competitively during the 20th century. Chess master and popular online streaming sensation, Alexandra Botez, has noted as much – explaining that sexism not only persists today, but also that the Netflix show's title protagonist would have faced much tougher obstacles than what was represented (Insider 2020; CNBC 2021). While I have noted diversity in gender, age, ethnicity, race, and nationality over months of ethnographic fieldwork, the majority of players downtown is constituted by men, and the majority of seated table hosts within the two parks under discussion, so-called (and often inaccurately) "hustlers," is composed of middle-aged black men and locals to New York.

New Yorkers have long held the reputation for perseverance through times of crisis and tragedy. This was certainly evident during and following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Links between resilience both during the Pandemic and also following 9/11 have been explored (Zavala and Grandakovska 2021), and I'd like to highlight some artistic responses to violent catastrophe in New York. The Tribeca Film Festival, Bruce Springsteen's album *The Rising* (2002), and The Concert for New York City (in October 2001) are among the most celebrated examples. Chess fits into this story in a more ambiguous form, whether

it's a hobby, sport, profession, obsession, pastime, artform, and/or play, categorizing the world's most popular board game proves difficult. Perhaps parallel to the sentiment of so many artists, musicians, and filmmakers after 9/11, public artistic expression, game playing, and social performance are not merely well-known and healthy distractions during crises, but engaged and productive means for resistance to the pernicious ability for tragedy to consume us.

In this paper I ethnographically analyze chess playing in Washington Square Park and Union Square, relying also on archival data and data gathered elsewhere in the nearby chess clubs of Greenwich Village. Constructing and maintaining a space for formalized play creates a sense of solidarity amidst the Pandemic catastrophe. As many social habits have transformed during New York's days of Covid, the persistence of the chess playing traditions downtown provide emotional and intellectual solace and social opportunity. I explore both the "new" popularity of chess and the dynamic public contexts of playing in the Village to illuminate our understanding of how one of New York City's public compulsions has dealt with the Covid crisis and contentious spaces like Washington Square Park and Union Square. Specifically, ethnographic encounters with Mr. Black in Washington Square Park and Alfred in Union Square illuminate what these processes of normalcy and everyday iconic New York traditions mean during such extraordinary times.

Playing in Public and the Ethnographic Gaze

The social theory of games and play (Caillois 2001; Huizinga 2014; Suits 2014), the anthropology of play (Malaby 2009; Henricks 2015), alongside ethnographies of chess playing (Wendling 2002; Desjarlais 2011), offer valuable insight for understanding the everyday dynamics of the phenomenon. Here, however, I am less concerned with what constitutes play and a deeper ethnographic engagement with the practice of chess playing; in order to focus and emphasize the sociopolitical context of the use of public space in the Village and the public characters (Jacobs 1992; Duneier 1999) themselves – in this case, Mr. Black and Alfred. What ethnographic analysis illuminates, in addition to what the public performance aspect of New York chess playing clarifies, is that public chess playing is entangled within the sociopolitical fabric of everyday New York street life rather than categorically opposed to "work" (Suits 2014), essentially separated from other aspects of daily life (Huizinga 2014), and "carefully isolated from the rest of life" (Caillois 2001: 6). Once more light is shed on the variety and richness of phenomena

that constitute urban public space, ethnographers are better equipped to explain the political economy of street life (Bourgois 1996a; Duneier 1999; Liebow 2003), injustices entangled within the restructuring of spaces (Zukin 1987, 2010), systemic racial and socioeconomic marginalization (Bourgois 1996b; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009), and structural violence (Farmer 2004).

Some New York City-based chess clubs date back to the 19th century, and public playing dates back at least to the 1940s, but Washington Square Park and similar public venues famously gathered momentum during the 1960s when the world famous and controversial Bobby Fischer played downtown. It was the 1960s, during tumultuous years of sociopolitical unrest, artistic expressions of the counterculture movement, racial tensions, geopolitical anxieties and Cold War friction between the United States and former Soviet Union, and civil rights protest, that public chess playing increased in popularity and solidified itself as an iconic New York tradition. These descriptive qualities just highlighted regarding the sixties could (eerily and uncomfortably) describe the 2020s, begging us to question whether it's only the local public traditions that remain for decades. Simultaneously, as popularity for chess playing in public increased during the sixties, the Village folk scene and counterculture maintained a grasp on artistic performances and social or political gatherings downtown. These phenomena have only continued as has the frequency of international chess masters playing in Washington Square Park among other venues. In fact, child chess prodigy Joshua Waitzkin (memorialized in the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer* [1993]) not only frequently played the area but was tutored by several table hosts and chess enthusiasts still active today.

Methods and Site Selections

Ethnography, the systemic analysis of people's everyday lives, is the ideal qualitative methodology for exploring the dynamics of public chess playing in New York City. My archival and field research among the chess community was mostly carried out from March until July of 2022, and the sites were chosen for dynamic sociopolitical importance and artistic energy. Pursuing this through participant observation and informal or semi-structured interviews is key for achieving this, especially when dealing with research participants who may feel vulnerable and have faced various types of marginalization. Participant observation allows for a particular type of flexibility that also gives research participants the space to be co-authors of the scenarios and discussion that become the object of research. Akin to some other theoretical (Bachelard 1969;

Lefebvre 1974; Harvey 1996; Smith 2010) and ethnographic explorations (Stewart 1996; Duneier 1999; Low 2000; Bourgois 2003; Liebow 2003) of urban (or otherwise) spaces; I am particularly interested in power dynamics, socio-political (in)justice, critical questions on politics and ethics within their historical contexts, and the situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) that are attuned to critically describing the intimacies of everyday life without losing sight of the structural importance of history and power. Thinking alongside Stewart (2007), I'm interested in the meaningful impact of the ordinary during extraordinary times – what the common, banal, and seemingly trivial activities like playing a board game may actually tell us about embodied aesthetics, affect, and the interwoven critical politics of navigating urban space.

Narrowing down the focus on public chess playing and the famous enthusiasts, I have limited the ethnography to Washington Square Park and Union Square, bypassing the famed three-minute hustling in Harlem, the more formal membership clubs in the area, the informal pick-up games and chess shops, the less frequented playing in Tompkins Square Park, and the newly appointed and so-called "hustling free" zone in Bryant Park. Focusing on Greenwich Village also allows examination of the vibrant public scene, constant sociopolitical protests, eclectic uses of space, and histories of counterculture and artistic pioneering. Considering the charged sociopolitical atmosphere in downtown New York, the localities of these parks illustrate longtime contentious political spaces (Low 2005, 2011, 2017; Low and Zúñiga 2003; de Freytas-Tamura 2021) and critically important settings for any recreational, artistic, and otherwise public-facing activity like challenging, engaging, and educating the public through playing chess. While there are many public characters and chess enthusiasts worthy of ethnographic attention; I focus on one from each park: Mr. Black in Washington Square Park and Alfred in Union Square.

Mr. Black in Washington Square Park

Sociopolitical injustices reflected within institutionalized racism and systemic oppression are intimately known and openly discussed by the Washington Square Park chess players like "Mr. Black." Most of the players I met in Washington Square Park and Union Square use nicknames, and Mr. Black was no exception. Mr. Black was not only insistent that I refer to him as "Mr. Black," but he requested marketing: "shout out, Mr. Black!" After some games and alerting him to my research on chess players downtown, he set time aside for me and agreed to "chop it up [chat]." His insightful comments provide an

ethnographic vignette of what public chess playing in New York City means for some men and chess enthusiasts. Mr. Black outlined a map for New York City's public chess playing, and explained that the players in Union Square are now better than in Washington Square Park, and that the chess scene has moved over there. He pointed out excellent players with decades of public chess experience that I should play like Poe and Paul who now play in Union Square. Perhaps the most impressive players for Mr. Black, however, played a 3-minute blitz in Harlem.

Mr. Black said that he learned how to play chess and frequently practiced where he lived in the Amsterdam public housing area on the Upper West Side, noting that it's not far from John Jay College of Criminal Justice (where I had been teaching). But, as he would later emphasize, it was through playing in the downtown parks that he really learned chess strategy. He also taught people in the Amsterdam Houses how to play, and many underestimated him because of the game's location. He taught his son how to play and is particularly proud of him. Mr. Black's son became a strong young player, competed, and won trophies until he decided to focus on other things. His son won at least one of the games as a result of knowing the pawn *en passant* move, which his father taught him, when the opponent did not. His son's chess trophy next to a basketball trophy, is a testament to the importance of being of sound mind and body, as Mr. Black explained. Using the game of chess as a vehicle to impart life lessons is also something Mr. Black learned from experience. He claims that chess taught him about life – it's not just about a hustle for him. Chess playing taught Mr. Black that decisions in life have immediate consequences – like those in chess – and that he hadn't thought about consequences or strategies in quite the same way before playing.

As we discussed the history of chess and its modern development in Southern Europe, Mr. Black wondered, "Why does white have to move first? Think about that…" Racial politics are consistently and easily brought into the foreground, and normally represent a ubiquitous undercurrent embedded within these public downtown spaces. Our conversation developed into one of current events, relevant problems within the urban social sphere and the public arena. Mr. Black demonstrated concerns with the systemic and structural nature to racial politics, injustice, and inequality. He also shared his views on the exploitative and elitist threads within capitalism. As his comments serve to highlight systemic oppression and inequality, they build a contrast with his portrait on consequences – one that recalls the dialectic between personal agency and structural problems. He explains that it's easy for many individuals to get caught up in partying, being young, and end up

with something to regret; but there are also socioeconomic factors, as he illustrates, that reflect systemic failures and, what I would call, structural violence.

The Blitz

As we spoke of chess strategies and types of players, Mr. Black mentioned, "the clock is like the streets." He was using "streets" not only as a metonym for urban (particularly New York City) street culture and public life, but also as characteristic of blitz strategies in competitive chess normally played for money. The clock represents aggressive and fast-paced moves. There is no time to think and consider, develop one's position, or any of the usual markings of lengthier tournament play during 3-5 minute per-player blitz style chess. Mr. Black equated this fast-paced blitz with how he understands street culture, reinforcing the importance of chess playing as a meaningful and personal activity, where playing styles are intimately felt and the game transcends the bounds of the chessboard. The reactive nature of the clock, thinking on one's feet, under pressure, and with immediately realized consequences developed into a larger conversation with Mr. Black about previously incarcerated people he has known. The pawn push, for example, is a technique that Mr. Black attributed to learning chess in prison and is known as a good blitz technique because it is easily underestimated. He learned the pawn push directly from friends who were incarcerated and sometimes finds that it confuses opponents who expect to develop more major pieces. All of this occurs amidst an atmosphere of frequent public protests and reminders that productive strategies are not limited to the chess board.

Union Square and Alfred

Like many of the local chess enthusiasts exclaim, political protest in Union Square is the norm and not the exception – it is an expected gathering place to mark social change and take part in urgent political dialogue. The square already has symbolic representations of conflict and memorials to revolutionary political figures, as it takes its name from the "Union" that defeated the seceded Confederate states and a large statue of Abraham Lincoln, among other historic figures. In Union Square many activists can be seen canvassing and promoting various causes, and any given day brings book vendors, musicians, artisans, and artists selling their goods. The market days, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday are especially vibrant throughout the year. Unlike the stone tables and fixed benches in Washington Square, the dozen or so tables here are makeshift and removable.

I spent nearly two hours with Alfred who politely motioned for a handshake, an introduction, and then invited me to play at ten dollars per game, in addition to some proposed and pricey tutoring. This was a unique introduction as most players call out from their seats or wave from around their respective areas; but Alfred was serious about eliciting my attention and – after noticing me as the incoming onlooker for one chess match – walked over to invite me for some games. This, considering Alfred's entrepreneurial strategies and invitations for tutoring (including house calls, for convenience), was different than engaging with Mr. Black, whose games were less expensive and against whom I've been more likely to win. When most players have commented on comparing the different public venues for chess, they assert that the better players and more serious games have moved to Union Square, complaining also about Washington Square becoming too "wild."

An affable man in his late sixties, Alfred has been living in New York for 35 years and is originally from Florida. Alfred learned to play at age five, motivated by the fact that he couldn't yet beat his older brother. The sibling rivalry motivated him to improve his game, and he overtook his brother in skill by age seven. Alfred explains, "chess is life," and elaborates that the game is a representation of everyday choices, consequences, and strategic negotiation of an adversarial reality. He pointed out the fact that the chess pieces are modeled after medieval themes, monarchy, and military strength. When he spoke of chess as life, Alfred illustrated this by grabbing a pawn, walking it down the entire board step-by-step, and explaining that if the piece makes all the right moves then that pawn can become anything, a queen, bishop, knight, or rook. This lesson is, optimistically, as I had pointed out to him, alluding to the possibilities in life available to someone who makes all the right moves. Alfred's account emphasizes the great possibility that life can offer; and when I asked whether this was optimistic or perhaps pessimistic, given the context of a medieval battlefield of strategic conquest; he assured me that it wasn't really either – more just *realistic*. Alfred's game has within it struggle, conflict, success, and the possibility to transform oneself – as the pawn does – to be something greater.

The topic of music arose, as Alfred had been a musician. He agreed that chess was also like jazz, given that there are rules; there is a structure; but also, that there is room for great improvisation, variety, and interpretation. Jazz is another iconic artform for New York City that is normally on full display. Especially during the Pandemic when music venues shut, performers improvised by taking their bands to the streets

and the parks downtown. While busking, these performers provide aural atmosphere for public spaces that sound just like an iconic portrait of New York City. Hustling, or participating in the informal economy of chess tutelage as Alfred does, draws more parallels for the comparison between jazz and chess. As we discuss, simply moving pieces on a board or making noise with instruments would not respectively equate to playing chess or playing jazz. As far as the improvisation is concerned, which remains a famous element of jazz, the seemingly infinite possibilities for moves during a chess match, as Alfred explains, allow for further similarities in discipline, practice, and improvisation.

Space of Leisure and Space of Protest: Some Concluding Thoughts

The production of space integral to systems of power, authority, and capital is well documented, and compellingly argues for foregrounding issues of sociopolitical and economic (in)justice when discussing space and place (Lefebvre 1974; Harvey 1996; Smith and Low 2006; Smith 2010; Low 2011). While some scholars attend to the aesthetic embodiment of space (Bachelard 1969), the experience and sense of place (Feld and Basso 1996), others work towards interrogating the power dynamics entangled within the politics of everyday life (de Certeau 1984) and the politics of public spaces (Low 2000; Smith and Low 2006). Such focus is greatly magnified within a city, particularly one like New York City, and especially in downtown places like Washington Square Park and Union Square. I remain interested in the intimacies associated with play amongst a vibrant assemblage of sociopolitical protest, the cultural poetics (Stewart 1996) afforded by serious and skillful game play, the embodiment of daily practices (Bourdieu 1977) as they help inform our urban identities, and not only how we may make sense of public chess playing but how public play helps us to make sense of ourselves.

Revolutionary and Controversial Geographies

New York City, like the nation at-large, witnessed not only a pandemic but also growing protests over police violence that resulted in various deaths, notably following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Floyd's homicide as the result of Minneapolis Police violence has since become an icon in the fight against police brutality and institutional racism, lending power and elevating platforms for activist groups like Black Lives Matter. As the legacy of remembrance and protest continued into 2021, an artistic initiative titled, Confront Art's "Seeinjustice" by Chris Carnabuci, erected three large statues in Union Square: busts representing George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the late congressman

and civil rights leader John Lewis (Cascone 2021; Young 2021). The three busts, displayed publicly as additions to New York's expressive artistic history as well as its atmosphere of revolutionary protests against injustices, memorialized the three deaths of African Americans – all of which, at some point, had suffered violence at the hands of police officers.

Given the symbolic power of these busts to elevate the importance of civil rights and carve out a space for sociopolitical voice within the public sphere, this moment of artistic celebration alongside the warning against systemic oppression was also met with counter acts of protest. George Floyd's image was selected as the location for desecration by, what many believe to be, a group of white nationalists and supremacists (Fondren 2021; Messino 2021). Images of Floyd had already been vandalized in other parts of the city by known white supremacists. When the Floyd statue was vandalized in Union Square, the act actually magnified the power of his image. Thinking alongside Michael Taussig (1999), defacing an image, likeness, or monument serves to increase its public importance – calling our attention to it, elevating its status as that which is worthy of defacing, and creating a space of controversy and conflict where the very reasons and intentions behind the Floyd bust will be discussed further. Through highlighting institutional racism and structural violence, the reason for the statues and their iconic status gains prominence and momentum despite vandalism, the reminder of what is being protested.

The Poetics of Greenwich Village: Ethical and Sociopolitical Implications

Art, activism, poetry, music, racial and socioeconomic inequality, sociopolitical justice, and geopolitics have long occupied the public spaces and everyday interactions found within the streets of Greenwich Village. As New Yorkers have been struck with another crisis, this one embodied within the Covid-19 Pandemic creating a city that must – like many other places – adapt to new forms of normal; I'm forced to also consider what hasn't changed as much as advocates of civil rights and sociopolitical justice would like. The iconic tradition of public chess playing provides some respite from the chaos that may be occurring off the board and outside the boundaries of the game itself.

Alfred and others have said that chess playing in New York City is like life in general – strategic, careful, and competitive play amidst a public sphere of sociopolitical pressures for justice, negotiations for equality and visibility, and art – saturated with senses of belonging and place. Indeed, in the downtown Village, they may be right.

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Clate Korsant is the Assistant Director of Academic Affairs and faculty within the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida. He has also taught within the anthropology departments of John Jay College of Criminal Justice (City University of New York), Bard College's Prison Initiative, and Goldsmiths, University of London. Clate completed his PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London, with a dissertation titled, *Environmentalisms in Practice: From National Policy to Grassroots Activism in Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula*. His subsequent ethnographic documentary film, *Lifting the Green Screen*, was based upon this work, and has been internationally screened and awarded. Most recently, his article, "A Freirean Ecopedagogy or an Imposition of Values? The Pluriverse and the Politics of Environmental Education," was published in *Globalizations Special Issue: Education and Socio-Environmental Justice in the Pluriverse*. Clate's active public profile includes invited talks, screenings, academic presentations across numerous conferences, and other research dissemination.