

TURF WARS

Discourse, Diversity, and
the Politics of Place

Gabriella Gahlia Modan

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For the members of the Kenesaw Phoenix Cooperative, for illustrating that it's possible to build community across faultlines.

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And in memory of my grandfather, Stanley Morton Hollins, who always found a way to point out that amidst the frustrations of everyday life exist humor, art, and dignity.

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Fake People Welcome Mr. Bush

Less forgiving souls than ourselves might take some pleasure in the wretched Washington weather that greeted President Bush upon his return yesterday. After all, he has spent the past month celebrating the values of the Heartland, in not so implicit contrast with our own. . . . Those values, he repeated this week, include “family and faith,” “neighborliness,” “the willingness of people to help each other in need.” Which means that we Washingtonians stand for – what, exactly? Just thinking about it could make us mad.

But it hasn’t – not at all. We don’t hold it against Mr. Bush when his fellow Republican, former Senate majority leader Trent Lott, says that Mr. Bush left Washington to connect with “real Americans.” And when the president says, “Even though we’ve changed addresses, Texas will always be home” – when he makes that same trite point so many times it gets downright tiresome – well, we could take offense. But, as we mentioned, we won’t.

So it gave us no pleasure yesterday when the president and the first lady returned from their dry rattlesnake air to muggy, smoggy Washington. We’re happy that their “batteries are charged,” as Mr. Bush said they were, and we’ll continue trying to get our values up to Heartland standards. In the meantime, all we really want to say, Mr. President, is: Welcome home. Or whatever you want to call this place.

PART I

THE ETHNOGRAPHY

CHAPTER 1

SKETCHING THE LANDSCAPE

Prelude

Summer has come early to Mt. Pleasant. It's Saturday morning, and I go out to run some errands. Although it's only the middle of May, the heat has everyone acting like it's July. I walk into the street around the cherry picker next to my building, where two men from the Parks Department are leaning out from the basket, putting wax on the statue of the first Methodist priest on horseback, to protect him and his horse from the tarnishing rays of the sun. Below them the mulberry trees are in bloom, and the heavy berries fall to the sidewalk, blackening the red bricks with their sticky juice and squashed pulp. The teenage bucket drummers have drifted up from Dupont Circle, their go-go rhythms bouncing off the cement, forming a background beat to the merengue from the street-side table where Frank the cassette tape vendor is selling his wares. Groups of young men are hanging out with their friends in front of the groceries and apartment buildings. Everyone is out with their literature. I'm told about a protest rally against recent INS¹ raids in Maryland; about worker exploitation under Clinton's neoliberal government; about a cheap monthly dental plan; that Jesus loves me. Everyone is out, and everyone's in a good mood. Even the tiny old woman who sits on a bench in Pigeon Park, fond of yelling at passersby for jaywalking, is in a good mood. Today she merely tells me to be careful crossing the street, and calls me "dearie." The flower man is also cheerful and smiling; he gives my neighbor Grace a good price for the bunch of red and yellow gladiolas she wants to buy.

There's a big crowd in the bakery – punk rockers in their low-slung thriftstore corduroys getting up to buy donuts for their group house breakfast, security guards in slightly rumpled uniforms on their way home after the night shift, fathers talking on cell phones as their kids pull at their shirt hems, begging them for gingerbread cookies. Young couples are talking to each other in varieties of Amharic, English, Haitian Creole, Spanish. The woman in front of me orders two conchas (Salvadoran sweet rolls), a loaf of rye bread, and, giving in to her kids' whining, three cupcakes.

At the back counter, bakery clerks are bringing cakes to customers. One man picks up a two-tiered cake, frosted in a white basketweave design on the sides, with pink roses on the top. Along the cake sides and down the columns between the two tiers, minute pink roses and thin white lines form a trellis pattern, like a climbing rose bush. Written in red gel script on the top tier of the cake, is “Feliz Quinceañera Jacqui” (“Happy Sweet 15th Jacqui”).

Beside the man paying for this cake is a woman inspecting a large rectangular sheet cake, also decorated in white frosting. One of the bottom corners sports a frosting-painted scene of a woman and two children playing a circle game, while the other corner is decorated with the scene of a lake and mountains. Across the top of the cake is a skyline of the DC monuments, and in the middle, in the same script as the quinceañera cake but this time in brown frosting, is written, “Welcome to the Evvans family reunion.”

Outside the store, two women tie their dog's leash to the post of a no-parking sign, walk in and to the back of the shop to pick up a strawberry shortcake. This cake is also frosted in white, but the frosting is whipped cream. As they inspect the message, “Happy B-day Netta,” the bakery clerk places four plastic figures around the edges of the cake. The figures have fifties hairstyles and clothing, and they are in rock 'n roll dancing poses. Between two of the figures, the clerk anchors a miniature fifties portable style record player into the frosting.

Back out on Mt. Pleasant St., Mt. Pleasant's main shopping street, the morning sun heats the late spring air. The smell of honeysuckle from the rowhouse gardens is undercut by urine fumes from the alleys, and stray tangles of hair from the Beauty and Braiding Shop waft by in the warm breeze. Dr. Roman is in front of his office pulling a gum wrapper out from the pansies in the flower box and chatting with Mrs. Lee, the owner of the dry cleaner's next door. A woman

across the street parades by in her underwear, yelling at some drunk guys on the next block, and Dr. Roman leans over to Mrs. Lee and says, “I wish I had my video camera”; sighs, and whistles through his teeth, “just another day in Mt. Pleasant.”

Later, as I walk in the heat of the afternoon back to Mt. Pleasant St. from the supermarket in the neighborhood next door, my naturally quick gait elicits catcalls. I walk more slowly, adapt my rhythm so that it fits with the pace on the street, and the catcalls fade out. Downtown the gears of international bureaucracy churn away, but here the pace of life slows as the heat rises.

Mt. Pleasant is a neighborhood alive with activity of all kinds, with a main street that makes some feel unsafe, while it makes others feel at home.

I’m walking down Mt. Pleasant St. one day with a friend visiting from out of town. She stops and touches my cheek to fix a makeup smudge, and says, “I feel like I can do anything on your street.”

I moved to Mt. Pleasant in the summer of 1992, after having lived for a year in the adjoining neighborhood of Adams Morgan. I was drawn to Mt. Pleasant because, in the early 1990s, it was affordable, reasonably safe, shopping and public transportation were varied and convenient, I had a lot of friends who lived in the area, and I found an apartment I really liked.

My building was towards the edge of the neighborhood, sandwiched between 16th St. – a main city thoroughfare that runs between the Maryland suburbs and the White House – and Mt. Pleasant St. A small balcony off my bedroom window overlooked this street, and here I spent many hours sitting in the sun and reading, socializing with friends, watching the world go by, and, later on, tape-recording the sounds of city life and my neighbors’ treatises – some spontaneous and others prodded by interview questions – about the state of US society as evidenced by the goings-on on Mt. Pleasant St.

One evening on this balcony, I sat watching some teenagers kidding around with each other outside the variety store across the street and some drunk guys arguing at the bus stop underneath my window. On this particular day it struck me that the interactions on this street and, more generally, in the neighborhood, told an important story about the way that people define, negotiate, and redefine the places they live as particular kinds of communities populated by particular kinds of people.

In the late 1990s, as gentrification² in Mt. Pleasant and the city at-large picked up with relentless speed, these negotiations over claims to neighborhood identity and neighborhood space began to have serious material implications for what kind of place Mt. Pleasant was to become. Would it stay a mixed-income, multi-ethnic neighborhood? Would it retain its community-minded interactive spirit? Would its cosmopolitanism up its hipness quotient and its real estate prices to the point of no return?

What I want to capture in these pages is the importance of the way that people shape the terrains they live in as they talk with their friends and neighbors in public and private settings. Through discourse, community members struggle over what kind of place Mt. Pleasant is, what constitutes a real Mt. Pleasant person, and who gets to decide these issues. What I hope to show here is why this matters.

Turf Wars

This is a book about the politics of place. It examines how community members in Mt. Pleasant create and contest visions of their neighborhood through discourses of identity, both sociogeographic and personal. By discourse I mean ways of talking, writing, and signing; patterns of recurring themes, linguistic forms, and modes of conversational interaction. As the sociolinguist Deborah Schiffrin³ describes it, discourse is a set of utterances that are part of a linguistic and social context. This means that any given utterance both gains its meaning from other utterances and from the social context, and it also shapes the meaning of other utterances and of the social context.

The upcoming chapters will analyze email messages on the neighborhood listserv, casual conversations, a grant proposal for public toilets, a performance piece about living in the neighborhood, and ethnographic interviews to see how Latinos, African Americans, Whites, Vietnamese, and community members of various other ethnic⁴ and national backgrounds use language to negotiate conflicting ethnic and gender perspectives, class alignments, and hopes and fears for their neighborhood. Discourses about what kind of place Mt. Pleasant is or should be, and about who counts or doesn't count as an authentic Mt. Pleasant person, circulate through a wide variety