Letter from My Neighborhood

by James Como (January 2021)

Subway, Daniel Celentano, 1935

When I was a boy living in the James Weldon Johnson housing projects in East Harlem, going "downtown" meant going to the movies with a stop at Papaya King (then under a different name), both on Third Avenue at Eighty-Sixth Street, a major

crosstown thoroughfare. Our Aunt Annie took my older brother, Joey, and me there on the Lexington Avenue bus. I heard the neighborhood was called Yorkville, though older people referred to it as Germantown. The map tells us that its boundaries run north from 79th Street to 96th Street and west from the East River to Third Avenue. But that's cartography. In fact it may be part of the toney Upper East Side, if you're a realtor, or not, if you live on the real Upper East Side bounded by 79th Street to the north.

After a brief spell on Long Island we moved to Astoria, a neighborhood rich in color. That's where I went to elementary school and was a regular at the schoolyard of P.S.126. I worked at a candy store, played a lot of baseball (any kind), and walked up Broadway past the el (the BMT in those days; elevated lines no longer exist in Manhattan) to Mr. DeBellis's music school for my accordion lessons. Then I married and moved away, again.

I would not return to a neighborhood for nearly fifty years, to Yorkville. (By the way, that retirement was from York College, my wife, Alexandra, and I moving to York Avenue, just twenty blocks south of those old projects. This was long after my membership in York House, at Queens College. Am I not the son to make a glorious summer out of this discontented winter?) When I returned my solitary routine became an occasional weekday movie on Third Avenue, and a hot dog (or two) at the very same Papaya King from back in the day, with a stop at Taste-D-Delight: disastrous. But, in that sentence, the past tense matters: the pandemic put an end to those aspects of my Eden regained. Heartbreaking are the shuttered businesses, reassuring are newspaper stands (many with a mélange of ethnic tabloids) and produce stands (what in Harlem were pushcarts) with their hanging scales: time machines, both.

The M86 bus begins at my corner, 92nd Street and York, two blocks from the East River. It turns onto the avenue,

travels a few blocks to 86th Street, makes a right turn, and proceeds west, to the Hudson River (almost). The stop on Fifth Avenue leaves you three blocks from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, then on you go, through Central Park. On the other side of the park from the Met is the American Museum of Natural History: you could have quite a day. But *you* get off at Third Avenue, where you see the long, broad, depthless yellow store casting its spell. The King calls.

The outer walls are glass. Three doors put you at different stations along the shoulder-high counter, one step form the sidewalk. Signs plaster the walls and windows. “So you think all frankfurters taste alike?” one asks and tells you how you’re wrong: fresh product, secret recipe, delivered from New Jersey in the very early a.m. Julia Child tells us it’s “The best hot dog in New York.” Yet another breaks down the health benefits of Papaya. Roadfod.com tells us it’s one of the “top 500 things to do before it’s too late.” I put it in the top ten, like Yorkville (and this, counter-intuitively: a frank with cole slaw.)

A hundred years ago the *New York Times* described the neighborhood as having a “colorless personality.” I cannot speak to paleo-Yorkville, but today in a given week one can hear Mass in Hungarian, German, Spanish and Polish, as well as in English, not to mention Sabbath services on Saturday at three different synagogues (excluding the famous 92nd Street Y—the Young Men’s Hebrew Association, with one of the best small boxing rooms in the city—along with world-class concert performances and lectures).

French, Chinese, Italian and Peruvian restaurants rub up against Jewish delis and food trucks. My favorite laundry name is YouMe. Shoe repair shops, nail salons and barbers, dry cleaners, dressmakers, supermarkets, hardware stores, an upstairs pool hall, boutique butcheries and bakeries, and an independent book store are scattered, not only on the Avenues but on the side streets, too, usually tree-lined. Tall, new

apartment buildings dominate the skyline but not the streets. Row houses and pre-war apartment buildings do that. You know these by the fire escapes that run from the second floor to the roof. Carnegie Hill and Lenox Hill can be a workout. Maybe that's why it took us seven years to discover Price Wise Discounts. You want a $200 toaster-oven, or a disc of shaving soap for $1.29? There you will find both, though not on your own. Ali Baba's cave was not as promiscuously stocked, nor its shelves as high, nor its aisles as tightly coiled.

Who knows if the black population is preponderantly African-American, as opposed to African-Caribbean or African-African? Yorkville has them all. Building staffs seem to have a plurality of Balkan folk (but the mix is non-exclusive). There are WASPS (I know because I see their Lutheran, Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches), but I'd have to ask around to find them. Panhandlers (regulars) and one very earnest and not-bad guitar-playing singer eke out a living, but the homeless do not populate sidewalks or building entrances.

The second language heard most often is Spanish. Puerto Ricans, Ecuadorians, Peruvians, Colombians, and Mexicans—almost all laboring as steadfastly as any people I've ever seen—are uniformly, not merely friendly but downright amiable. The Ecuadorian couple who run the food truck on 89th Street are an example: unfailingly good-humored and appreciative of our patronage. They are the salt of the earth: not uniquely, certainly, but palpably, unvaryingly. As a child I had heard much Spanish spoken—much more than Italian or Russo-Polish—and came to love it, became fluent. Now, when Spanish-speakers hear me speak idiomatically they show their delight: this guy, obviously a *gringo* (mildly deprecatory), shouldn't speak this well, and on top of that he has manners.

A Welsh friend, after visiting New York, opined that it isn't big and scary; rather, it is a collection of distinctive and manageable villages. That idea, and the fact

that *this* neighborhood feels like home (a personal circle being closed), prompted this "letter from." Others have described Amsterdam, Madrid, Lima and the like. Last year they would have been from Granada, Vienna, and Bucharest. Alas, the ChiComs (*delenda est*) dashed those hopes, but not this silver lining. After all, here I'm surrounded by a thousand small details the kinds of which, when I'm abroad, often attract me. Along the way I thought to ponder the concept of 'neighborhood', much taken for granted these days, or misleadingly expanded (like its cousin 'community').

Yorkville has more in common with its near neighbor (East) Harlem than with the Upper West Side, a mere bus ride away through Central Park (a very nice place to visit). And there lies a point: tribes tend to congregate. A "neighbourhood is generally defined spatially as a specific geographic area and functionally as a set of social networks. Neighbourhoods, then, are the spatial units in which face-to-face social interactions occur—the personal settings and situations where residents seek to realise common values, socialise youth, and maintain effective social control."

That's from the Aspen Institute in 2006. From Lewis Mumford in 1954 is this dour notion: "Neighbourhoods, in some annoying, inchoate fashion, exist wherever human beings congregate, in permanent family dwellings; and many of the functions of the city tend to be distributed naturally—that is, without any theoretical preoccupation or political direction—into neighbourhoods." (I'm guessing it's that "lack of political direction" that annoyed Mumford.)

The Aspen definition is stronger, I think, because of its mention of recurring face-to face encounters. Recognition matters, familiarity more so. But familiarity is not necessary to conversation. Clerks in stores, people on buses (less so on the subway), often in elevators, though strangers to each other, are not necessarily averse to chatting. We do not welcome the spontaneous *salon* but do the mini-conversation, as

an act of acknowledgement—more than a mere gesture but less than a therapy session. Part of that willingness, I believe, comes from a sense of safety, lubricated by common courtesy and patience: a curt encounter will likely soften up if one is direct, attentive.

Esteban, who delivers for the local C Town supermarket, returns our thoughtfulness, never obsequiously, always sincerely. He does not expect but always appreciates the special holiday tip, as well as the occasional gift. He unfailingly wishes us well. Nora, a Cuban dressmaker who works from home, always gets it right, patiently and with a finishing touch that, these days, is rare. Recently we visited a framing store. No one was evident, but towards the back I saw a man kneeling on a rug. I whispered that he was at prayer, and we waited. When he was done he took care of business and, before we left, thanked us for having waited, silently. Then there's the lovely Marissa, who manages the local deli-minimart. I've never met anyone sharper, anywhere. She remembers what we buy, so that if we order by phone there is no confusion; the math that she does in her head is dazzling (and I'm no slouch at that); she knows the store and its products backwards. During the early stages of the lock-down she kept us nutrified. I've told her that soon she will own her own chain of markets.

Ramiro is a waiter and phone-answerer at the Three-Decker Diner, where their motto is "you don't have to take out a loan to pay for a good breakfast." He recognizes Alexandra's voice when we call for a delivery and, always soft-spoken, is willing to chat in person if he's not too busy. (A Mexican from a remote village, he was the child who walked several miles for household water.) By the way, this diner is no Greasy Spoon, its pork chops absolutely top shelf. And it lives up to its motto. On our first visit seven years ago, the meatloaf dinner was under nine dollars, a glass of Chilean white not only top shelf but a mere three dollars. Remember,

this is 2013 Manhattan.

This being a metropolis, nocturnal noise can get messy: private garbage trucks carouse at night. And politics sometimes intrudes. When Trump won a chap in my building—a crippled Viet Nam vet—tried to get signatures on a petition demanding that electors be unfaithful. Here in New York? I asked. Of course not, he answered, in those deplorable red states. He confirmed a long-held view of mine: "liberal activist" is a redundancy, "conservative activist" an oxymoron. Almost. One neighbor, an investment banker by way of Wharton, disbelieved in physicians, thought tipping was unnecessary, and believed Trump's victory had delayed an impending Ragnarok. He was a poll-watcher.

The construction, scaffolding, noise, and very occasional unfriendliness are part of the landscape. One develops a kinship with neighbors who, you know, navigate the same streets, often with their dogs and babies, sometimes on the way either to Central Park or to the East River and Carl Schurz Park, where some people garden small plots of land set aside for just that. (No one visits Gracie Mansion, the home of the single most imbecilic mayor in the 3000-year history of large urban settlements.)

Can loyalty be local? I'm not sure, unless 'belonging' is an aspect of 'loyalty'. I'm certainly loyal to New York City; I've missed it when I've lived abroad. And after so many decades away I do have a sense of belonging: there's that circle closing. But loyalty? The answer comes down to particular neighbors, and precisely here must I depart from the Letter From genre, because when traveling abroad we have none. Here in Yorkville I've never had better. Moreover, close neighbor or not, friendliness, if not friendship, prevails.

New York neighborhoods are certainly not homogeneous. Large foreign cities have their neighborhoods, certainly, but none as varied as New York's, except maybe London's. Berlin's,

for example, are semi-homogenous, Madrid's nearly so. As for Lima, one experiences three large swaths: wealthy, tired middle-class, and the rising-poor (and vibrant: the new Peruvian middle class is not white). And then there is Paris, the most walkable of cities. It, too, is heterogeneous: what the city lacks in dramatic skyline it makes up for in street-level beguilement (excepting its Parisians: a roll of the dice).

So much of the appeal of a neighborhood depends on the disposition of its people towards interaction, a function of their sense of self. The ordinary person has nothing to lose by chatting with a server at a restaurant, whereas someone who may be insecure, valuing the status of one waited upon, mentally runs the risk of losing self-esteem. Some people will make a friendly verbal gesture to a clerk, others won't. Some people can talk to anyone without talking down, others cannot. Now, the former may not be the better neighbor, but I do insist that they make for a better neighborhood. A friend has lived in many Manhattan neighborhoods, her favorites being Greenwich Village and the real Upper East Side, respectively hip and chic. She denies she's a snob, calling herself an 'elitist'; she's not fond of Yorkville, neither hip nor chic.

Neighborhoods teach us, blessedly, that big is not necessarily better. They are bite-size chunks of colletd humnity. Is there such a thing as a rural neighborhood? Or a suburban one? Does Dubuque have neighborhoods? Moreover neighborhoods evolve, and also devolve. And there are neighborhoods within neighborhoods, growing as one grows into adulthood; then, maybe, small again as one's mobility declines. Finally, there are neighborhoods of map and others of mind, and still others of memory. The memory of yours certainly stays with you, and for some it helps form an identity, whereas for others it was and remains mere wallpaper. So the map matters least, I think; the memories most. In the event, I'm sure Mumford is wrong. Neighborhoods

are not annoying, and if they begin as geographical accidents, people turn them into vital, authentic organisms. People.

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