Tradition and Community in the Urban Neighborhood
Making Brooklyn Home

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Introduction

On any given day in Brooklyn, people can hear, see, or do the following: call a certain phone number and get the latest news on marriages, births, and deaths in Belize; talk with the owner of the last remaining Italian marionette theater in the United States; inspect teagers, tiplets, tumblers, and helmets for sale at a pigeon store; buy Norwegian salt lamb, Arab bread, Greek pastry, Irish oats, Chinese parsley, and German sausage at different shops within ten blocks of each other in one neighborhood; obtain aerosol spray to drive out evil spirits and soap to attract money from a botanica. On the right day of the season, you can take part in a gospel tent meeting, buy a pound of hand-made matzo, see a costumed reenactment of the stations of the cross, choose up sides for games of stickball and skelly, attend half a dozen block parties and neighborhood street festivals, eat Chinese New Year's cakes, or watch the candlelit pageant of St. Lucia.

What all these things have in common, besides being located in Brooklyn, is that they are aspects of urban folklife. "Folklife" refers to the skills, arts, beliefs, practices, stories, and lore that are shared by a group of people and transmitted or taught face-to-face in family or other group activities.

Folklife is commonly thought of as a characteristic of rural, not city, life. But folk traditions may be seen to arise and flourish anywhere that people live together, work with each other, share community space and institutions, or have a commonly shared past, whether that past is a millennium or only one generation. These conditions exist in the city as well as the country, and urban neighborhoods such as those in Brooklyn, with their shared occupational, ethnic, and recreational activities, are among the richest sources of folk tradition anywhere.

Much about folklife is bound up with the past, but folklife is just as inextricably part of the fabric of today. There are folklife traditions which survive from old-world cultures, such as the celebration of St. Patrick's Day, or those carried down to us from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, such as quilting. But there are also many other traditions which people create as responses to their existence in today's urban society, such as the game of stickball—
a form of baseball adapted to city streets. And no matter what the age of any particular folk tradition practiced today, it is important to the lives of its practitioners. Folklore in the modern world is a powerful resource people have for bringing their backgrounds, their values, and their hopes to bear upon their present lives.

Where can one see folklore in the city? It's almost everywhere: the city's buildings, its streets, even its open lots and yards—all are transformed through folk traditions by the people who have come to inhabit them. Some changes are visible: rooms are decorated, yards are embellished, windows, building facades, and sometimes streets, are adorned in
special ways, with the changing seasons or throughout the year, in a manner which conforms to the traditions of those who use them.

Other changes wrought by folklife are less obvious but just as important. They have to do with what happens to a place when people spend their lives in it. All of us come to associate where we live with family, friends, and neighbors, and with important passages in our lives like birth, marriage, and death. As a result, the place we live in takes on a special meaning. It comes to reflect our origins, and ultimately, to display the quality of our lives. It is in this way that areas come to be defined, even by outsiders, as special places within the city. Such places come to be labeled "neighborhoods."

This booklet is about folklife and neighborhood in Brooklyn. The booklet is based on the Brooklyn Rediscovery outdoor folklife exhibition entitled "New Traditions and Old: Making Brooklyn Home," with photographs by Martha Cooper and members of the Brooklyn Rediscovery staff, first installed at Brooklyn Borough Hall in September 1982. The exhibition was a product of the Brooklyn Rediscovery folklife study project, which documented folk arts and other traditions in Brooklyn's neighborhoods. As it was with the exhibition, the aims of this booklet are twofold. First, to entice readers to take a fresh look at Brooklyn people, places, or events which might be familiar, even commonplace, to them. Second, to encourage readers to see unfamiliar people, places, and events in Brooklyn as vital parts of a larger Brooklyn community.

What we present here is only a small sampling of the rich traditions to be found in the borough's neighborhoods. We intend it as a signpost pointing readers toward discovering the abundant folklife practices that people are employing today to transform Brooklyn's spaces into neighborhood places, truly making Brooklyn home.
The Urban Playground

The interplay between folklife and the urban environment can be clearly seen in traditional city games, sports, and pastimes. Their relationship is reciprocal: the city takes pulse and character from the games of groups of children ranged on the street with jump ropes, from skelly courts scratched on the pavement, while the boundaries, rules, and vocabulary of the games all reflect and adapt to the city’s physical characteristics, its manhole covers, stoops, or vacant lots. Some games and sports reach a point where activity and environment are inextricable; without the city setting, the games would lose much of their sense and meaning; some, like pigeon-flying, might not be possible at all.

Traditional city games display certain recognizable characteristics. They take up a small or flexible amount of space, usually space which can be quickly evacuated when it is claimed by other users—cars in streets, for example, or pedestrians on sidewalks. The equipment is often simple and easily obtained: a rope, a piece of chalk, a quantity of rubber bands. Sometimes children innovatively recycle discarded items to play with, as in the building of “go-cars” from old crates and shopping-cart wheels. And some games require no equipment at all, or emphasize skill over equipment. The skill is often verbal and procedural, best seen, perhaps, in girls’ double-dutch jump rope, and in handclapping games which incorporate complicated rhymes and tricky physical routines.

Stickball, a traditional version of baseball, displays many of these characteristics. The ball used is a “spaldeen,” a cut in half tennis ball or a whole one with all the fuzz rubbed off. The bat, as the name of the game explains, is a sawed-off broomstick; bases are improvised from a row of manhole covers and sewers. “I was a three-sewer man myself,” boasts one former player.

Skelly is another game that employs the natural divisions of the urban street and materials that are easily available. Called by different names like “skelsies” or “skellycaps,” depending on the neighborhood and even the particular block it is being played on, the game involves the shooting of markers in a circuit around a numbered court. Children draw
or cut the skelly court into the street pavement, often beside a fire hydrant so they can play unencumbered by cars. The markers are made from a variety of materials, mostly city trash, such as metal soda-bottle caps, plastic medicine tops, and glass rings sawn off the lips of soda bottles and filed smooth on the pavement. The markers are shot with the thumb or finger into the numbered squares. Any number of children can play, so a game can be made up easily from whoever happens to be on hand.

The Italian game of boccie, or bowls, usually played by adult men, is another sport which has been adapted to the urban setting. Boccie has been popularized in Brooklyn by immigrants from Italy, and now boccie courts are often included when parks are laid out in Italian-American neighborhoods. Where no such park exists, courts are often improvised. In

![Skelly. (Martha Cooper)]
one neighborhood, abandoned railroad tracks under
the El have been realigned to form the walls of a stan-
dard fifty-foot-long, ten-foot-wide court.

At the boccie court under the El, as everywhere,
the game begins when a small ball called a boccino or
pallino is thrown some distance down the court.
Then the players roll or throw larger balls, called
boccie, aiming to win by getting them as close as
possible to the pallino. The comments which accom-
pany each player's shots add to the particular at-
mosphere of any individual court. At the one under
the El, the commentary is partly in Italian, partly in
English. A shot caromed off the rail with too much
force is greeted with the observation, "Tropp
Pigeon-flyer and his flock. The flag is used to wave the birds higher. (Martha Cooper)
fence”—“Too much fence.” To make no score at all is known as “Fare la tarantella”—“To dance the tarantella.” And it is not uncommon to hear an unsuccessful player laughingly ordered from the court with “Go home and make spaghetti.”

Pigeon-flying is perhaps the quintessential urban sport. Not only has it been adapted to the urban environment, but in return, it has extended the bounds and possibilities of that environment. Any Brooklynite can attest to this who has watched the flocks of pigeons wheel against a background of clouds, sun, city skies, tenements, and skyscrapers. Pigeon-fliers employ the unused flat rooftops of Brooklyn's apartment buildings and houses; there they build their coops and care for their birds. The city skies are their sporting ground.

Pigeon-fliers or “mumblers,” as some call themselves, raise and train special breeds and varieties of pigeons with names like helmets, tiplets, and teagers. These pure-breds are not the common grey park pigeons which flyers disdainfully refer to as “street rats.” These pigeons are bred for two strong instincts, the flocking instinct, which drives them to join other birds, and the homing instinct, which draws them back to their own coops. The sport of pigeon-flying plays these two instincts against each other. Competing flyers send up stocks, some consisting of hundreds of birds, to mingle with each other in the sky. The hope of each flyer is that when the stocks have mixed and parted, a few of his opponent's birds will have been drawn by their flocking instinct to join what he feels is his own superior homing stock and return with them to his roof.

Pigeon-fliers need the city for their sport—the dense proximity of high, flat-topped buildings is essential to the game. At the same time, they need the sport to live in the city. For pigeon-fliers, the roof is a refuge. Far above the cares of the everyday world, the pigeon-flyer's spirit rises with his birds. The noise and congestion of the streets are far below, while above him his pigeons bank and shimmer in the sky. As one flyer puts it, “People ask me what I get out of pigeons. I could turn around and ask them what they get out of fishing. What they are trying to get out of the water, I am trying to pull out of the sky.”
We Live Here

An observant stranger walking through a Brooklyn neighborhood often can tell, without speaking with the residents, not only who lives there at present, but who has lived there before. In the same way that a rock face with its strata of stone gives a geologist information about the history of the site, a row of stores on a commercial street offers the languages of its signs and the types of goods sold inside as clues to the history of the neighborhood. There is also the evidence of what stores exist side by side to indicate, sometimes through the juxtaposition of different ethnic foods—or through the combination of Finnish and Puerto Rican specialties in a single deli, for example—both the area's long-established populations as well as those which have newly arrived. Public buildings like churches, synagogues, and masonic halls also change with the shifts in population, and their structures often reveal layers of religious symbols and denominations superimposed on one another—a synagogue which has become a Baptist

*Botanica* proprietor displays some of his wares. (Martha Cooper)

Exchanging the news at the neighborhood candy store. (J. Sheldon Posen)
The neon sign on this Jewish delicatessen announces in Hebrew letters that the foods sold inside are *Glat Kosher*, that is, prepared in strict adherence to Jewish dietary laws. (I. Sheldon Posen)

These stores and churches are evidence of the processes by which people culturally and physically shape a neighborhood according to their particular needs to make it home. In Brooklyn, social, fraternal, or service clubs offer a circle of friendship and association to persons of like national origin, language, or belief. Older occupations such as shoemaking continue to thrive, while such modern skills as tire-fixing have become more visible along borough thoroughfares. *Botanicas*, shops selling traditional medical and religious items in Hispanic and Haitian communities, have taken their place now beside that homegrown Brooklyn institution, the neighborhood candy store/soda fountain. And, as in the past, many shops of all types serve important social functions that go beyond merely offering goods for sale, as neighborhood residents, meeting there to make purchases, stay on to chat and exchange news about family, friends, and community.

Vendor at an outdoor Hispanic market displays taro, yucca, and other island foods. (Martha Cooper)
Food is a major and obvious influence in visibly shaping a neighborhood and giving it identity. Every neighborhood has bakeries, butcher shops, supermarkets, and snack shops, but what is offered in each varies with the local population. Fish stores will have octopus and squid in a Greek or Italian neighborhood, carp in a Chinese or Jewish neighborhood, and dried salt cod in a Caribbean neighborhood. The storefront snack shops might be selling roti, souvlaki, pizza, falafel, or shwarma, depending on the neighborhood. Some foods sold in a neighborhood are not necessarily indigenous to the local population, and their availability indicates the degree to which the people of the neighborhood have adapted to city life and neighbors: thus kosher pizza and Chinese-style food in Orthodox Jewish Borough Park.

There are also foods processed within Brooklyn that are designed especially to meet the needs of local communities, such as the Norwegian salt lamb sold in Bay Ridge, or the kvas, a fermented barley drink favored by Russians, that is sold in Brighton Beach groceries. Local businesses, in addition to supplying these customary provisions, also manufacture the ritual foods essential to community celebrations.

Every neighborhood boasts bakeries which cater to the tastes of its residents. Here, a final dusting of powdered sugar is applied to deep fried chruscik pastries at the Polish White Eagle Bakery in Greenpoint; and a Scandinavian kranzkaage (ring cake) is given the finishing touches at Lund’s in Bay Ridge. (chruscik: I. Sheldon Posen; kranzkaage: Martha Cooper)
No Jewish community can do without a supply of matzo, the unleavened bread which is eaten throughout the eight-day holiday of Passover. Replicating the bread which the biblical Israelites baked for their hasty flight from Egypt, modern matzo is carefully made in eighteen-minute cycles to ensure that it will not ferment and rise. Brooklyn’s Hassidic and Orthodox Jewish communities have established special matzo bakeries which make matzo entirely by hand, baking them in old-fashioned, wood-burning ovens under the strict supervision of a trusted community mazhgiekh (ritual specialist) or rabbi. The hand-made matzo turned out by the Brooklyn bakeries is different from the mass-produced type in both appearance and taste: round rather than square, wafer-thin, and inclined to be wavy instead of perfectly flat. Many people find the hand-made matzo much tastier than their mass-produced counterparts. Because of the ritual and gastronomic quality of Brooklyn matzo, there is demand for it from Jewish communities throughout the country.
Ritual Journeys

Many community traditions in the city cause people to tread ceremonial pathways through the public thoroughfares of their neighborhoods. Just before midnight on Orthodox Easter Sunday morning, Greek Orthodox congregations across Brooklyn gather in the streets in front of their churches. Each person carries an unlighted red candle. At midnight, the priests emerge from the churches carrying lighted candles and make the announcement, Christos anestil! Each congregation repeats the joyful phrase, and the front ranks move forward to light their candles from those of the priests. Each person with a lighted candle then turns to light the candle of a person behind him, and so on until the warm points of light have spread over the entire gathering. Then the members of the congregations disperse to their homes, carrying their lighted candles before them. Meeting them on the sidewalk, one sees them simply as candlelit groups, separate and disconnected. But if one were to see them on the dark Brooklyn streets from above, one would see a pattern of lights, emanating like spokes from the hubs of the churches and radiating out through the neighborhoods. This pattern, rendered in candlelight, shows almost like a map how the bonds of community, belief, and practice define neighborhoods and link them together.

The church procession of St. Lucia and her attendants begins the Swedish-American yuletide season on December 13. With her crown of candles and lingonberry leaves, St. Lucia represents the renewal of light to the world at the darkest time of the year. The St. Lucia pageant has become a way for the Swedish-American community to draw together and celebrate their common identity as well as the holiday season. (Martha Cooper)
Since 1829, the Brooklyn Sunday School Union has held its Anniversary Day Parade, bringing children from churches in every neighborhood of the borough to join in procession before their families and friends and “witness” or attest publicly to their religious faith. (David Ment)

Not all ritual journeys in Brooklyn are on foot or outlined in light, but all render visible important aspects of community in the city. Weddings, funerals, religious parades, and circuits around houses of worship reveal the underlying rhythms of individual and group life. The routes of ethnic processions, ritual pageants, and of people making holiday visits to exchange greetings and gifts, trace out the networks of community. And these journeys offer a public dramatization of important events, symbols, passages, and cycles of personal and group life which brings a sense of intimate, shared space into public streets and buildings.

As part of the celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, parishioners in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn take part in processions through the streets of their neighborhood, accompanying a statue of the Virgin Mary. (Martha Cooper)
Rooms and Objects
That Speak

Rooms mirror the lives of the people who live in them. They reflect the values, the family history, and the religious beliefs of their occupants. In a place like Brooklyn, where entire communities were built at the same time from the same mold, many rooms are exactly alike. Yet each has been transformed in some significant way by the people who live in them through their choice of furnishings, the accumulation of family mementos, or the display of gifts. Each room tells its own personal and cultural story through the objects it contains.

Mrs. Nancy Webb’s home in Park Slope has been restored to reflect the era in which it was built, the late 1850s. When they moved in, the Webbs treated the house as if it had a biography, which, through Mrs. Webb’s careful research and restoration, they have been able to unfold. As she says:

When the owner died, we bought this house and became the fifth owners in 150 years. We were interested in antiques and architecture and the house had virtually all its original features intact—fireplaces, woodwork, and all. That started six or seven long years of study and restoration, but we’ve loved it.

Mrs. Webb’s research is not limited to restoration. Her bookshelves also contain reminiscences written by a former owner, the wife of a Confederate officer who moved to Brooklyn after the Civil War. The book contains descriptions of parties held in the

A Parlor Recalls
Brooklyn History

“‘My mother-in-law has always been interested in early American crafts. The bellows are actually stencilled, but she painted the gold leaf. It’s a little bit of folk art, isn’t it? Folk art of the 1970s done to an 1850s design.’ (Martha Cooper)

“‘We’d been interested in collecting prints of Brooklyn. Some years ago, before they got totally out-of-sight, we’d bought several, like this one of the Brooklyn Bridge. My husband’s family never threw anything away, which has been delightful—the clock and statues of the hunter and fisherman all come from their home.’ (Martha Cooper)
which she and her husband return to visit each summer. Arranged around the room are objects that store memories of the home they left, like a cup which her great-grandfather, a seaman, brought back from Russia, or a china butter server, which she says was used on her family’s dinner table in Norway only for special guests. The room also displays pieces of rosemalen, a Norwegian folk art which involves painting floral designs on wood. Each object, which has a ceremonial use in Norway, is adapted for a practical use in Brooklyn—like the box, received as a courting gift by Mrs. Tollefson’s mother, which now holds letters and writing materials.

Mrs. Tollefson is also a folk artist. She has made her own bunad (national costume) and all the embroideries and table coverings in the room according to traditional Norwegian patterns. Through her needlework, touches of the Norwegian life she and her husband left behind are continuously being recreated to fill the Tollefson home.

For Mrs. Angelike Manolakis, a Greek-American resident of Brooklyn, her eikonostasio, or household shrine, is both a place to pray and a condensed biography, the story of her life told through religious objects. From the first icon she bought fifty-eight years ago as an immigrant worker to the one given to

“I started making dolls with a little one, and it came out not too bad. Now I make one a year, sometimes three, for the raffle at the Norwegian Seamen’s Church bazaar.” (Martha Cooper)

A Household Shrine
Records Personal History

“A light in front of the eikonostasio is important. Christ said, ‘I am the light.’ My light is from oil. Every night I clean it, put in oil and a bit of water, and I light the wick. Here, in America, most Greeks use electricity. With oil there is a little bit work, a little bit sacrifice; with electricity they only put and forget.” (Martha Cooper)
"You know, I have glaucoma. That saint—her name is Paraskevi—she is for the eyes. Every morning and every night I take her, hold her in front of my face, and make with her the sign of the cross on my eyes. She is my companion—and my eyes." (I. Sheldon Posen)

"This crucifix rested on my husband's coffin during his funeral service. It was given to me by the funeral parlor after he was buried. It's Russian Orthodox, not Greek—you can tell by the cross piece at the bottom. You don't have to have a crucifix hanging above the eikonostasio—before this crucifix, I had nothing there." (I. Sheldon Posen)

her recently by an American-born grandchild who had visited Greece, these religious objects testify to the passage of her life.

Mrs. Manolakis is a widow who lives alone, and her icons are companions who share her life and memories. She says about a small image of Christ:

He is my favorite—my darling. I take him shopping with me, I talk to him, because none of the others look at me like him—see? He looks! Every morning after I cense the eikonostasio, I take him with me, put him on the kitchen table, and I have my coffee with him. I say "Good morning, how are you?"—I have company, you see.
Personal history and memories are stored not only in traditional handmade objects themselves, but in the process of making them. In Brooklyn, the tradition of Afro-American quilting brings southern and rural traditions into homes in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Many of the neighborhood’s quilters learned their art while they were children in the Carolinas or Georgia, when their mothers gathered to quilt in each other’s houses. Now, years later, these children are grandmothers and sew communal quilts in senior citizens’ centers around Bedford-Stuyvesant. As Mrs. Virginia Hall stitches at the Harriet Tubman Center, she likes to tell some of the old rhyming riddles she heard around the quilting frame as a child:

Four legs up
Four legs down
Soft in the middle
And hard all around.
Answer: an old-fashioned bed
Mrs. Arlene Love at the Concord Baptist Church Nursing Home describes how her grandmother first developed the pattern for a star quilt that she and her friends are working on:

My mother taught me, and my mother's mother taught her. Grandmother lived in a little log house that at times was all broken down, so they could see the stars through the roof. Grandmother got the idea of making the star quilt when she saw the stars so beautiful one night.

Quilt-making recaptures a southern childhood for these quilters. In addition, quilters like Mrs. Nellie Pittman continue the southern tradition of selling quilts at neighborhood block parties, in some ways the urban equivalent of the town fair.

The accumulation of momentos in a living room or household shrine, and the creation of hand-made objects such as quilts, represent ways in which people invest the objects which surround them with the qualities of their lives. In turn, these rooms and objects speak about the lives of their arrangers and creators. In such ways do people anchor the urban environment to the details of their lives, personalizing and making meaningful the places in which they live.
Stored Worlds

Just as practical or decorative objects for the home become repositories for living history, the past may also be recreated and conjured in miniature by folk artists who invent and preserve it in models and scaled-down representations. Almost all people have worlds they have left behind them in time or space—whether they are ancestral homelands, rural villages that have since been urbanized, or simply the world of childhood—lost forever, except perhaps in memory, or in the creations of folk artists. The poignancy and beauty of miniature artifacts is that in their life-like wholeness, they give us a sense of a world grasped in the hand and yet lost.

The medieval world of chivalry and romance, with its knights and ladies, kings and giants, dragons and battles, is stored in a small dim workshop near Coney Island. There, Mike “Papa” Manteo keeps, by his own estimate, some 200 nearly life-size marionettes, patterned after the main characters in a Sicilian folk theater tradition that goes back at least 150 years in Italy, and five generations in the Manteo family. The marionettes, which weigh from 40 to 125 pounds each, are carved from oak or cherry. Their hands and faces are carefully painted, and their bodies are filled out with old mattress stuffing and dressed with loving care. The armor of the knights is improvised from scrap metal—a shield formed from...
a pizza pan, a breast plate hammered from an old toaster. They are manipulated by means of iron rods by the Manteo troupe, working out of sight on a wooden bridge above the stage.

The Manteo Marionette Theater stores several worlds that are part of Italian and Italian-American history. First, the story which the company tells is based on the fifteenth-century epic poem Orlando Furioso, the tale of Childe Roland in his quest for love and honor in the time of Charlemagne. Since it was Charlemagne who brought Christianity to Sicily, the marionettes recount not only the beginning of Sicilian Christianity, but also the establishment of the values upon which Sicilian life is based. The marionettes also recall for viewers the world of honor and chivalry, qualities which are still important in Sicilian life. In addition, their performances recapture memories of life in Manhattan’s Little Italy during the 1920s, when Mike’s father, Agrippino, established his marionette theater on Mulberry Street. Finally, the marionette performance is a display of an Italian-American ideal of family solidarity and continuity: the Manteo family is training yet another generation to continue the marionette theater tradition.

All of these levels of legend, history, and personal memory are brought together into one experience for Italian-American audiences during performances of the Manteo marionettes.

Pablo Falcon, a retired carpenter from Puerto Rico, creates handmade toys from scraps of wood and discarded objects. His toys show Puerto Rican children raised in Brooklyn the kinds of Christmas presents their parents used to receive on the island, when people had little money, but had the time and skill to make beautiful objects from leftover materials. The toys are miniatures of old-time farm machines and tools, and teach urban children about a world now gone. They are composed of mass-produced objects—shampoo containers, soda bottles, tuna fish cans. Mr. Falcon has managed to create art which bridges two worlds—rural, agricultural Puerto Rico and urban, industrial North America.
While Pablo Falcon fabricates objects from his history, Afro-American artist Zenobia Bailey creates a world which is based upon her imagination. Ms. Bailey recombines the throwaways of modern society—egg cartons, paper bags, cardboard fruit trays, plastic bottles, and clothespins—into a whimsical universe of royal families, soldiers, and dragons. Although the form of the figures was inspired by her childhood memories of watching Chinese New Years' celebrations, the images represent characters in a story Ms. Bailey has created. No attempt has been made to disguise the humble origin of the materials used to fabricate her creatures; rather, the viewer learns of unexpected possibilities of form and structure in such common items as milk containers and beer cartons. This skill at using the ordinary to create the extraordinary, of improvisation, is firmly within the tradition of Afro-American folk art.

Vincenzo Ancona also uses unusual materials to recreate a world. As a boy in the seaport of Castellammare, Sicily, Mr. Ancona once wove supple withes of cane and willow to make household baskets and cestini—large freight hampers used to transport fruit and produce to market on donkeys. Now retired in Brooklyn, Mr. Ancona has returned to his boyhood craft but has given it a new twist: instead of
twigs, he uses multi-colored telephone wire, and, in addition to small baskets, he has taken to weaving figures. Some depict the rural activities he remembers from his youth, and others recreate more fanciful, even mythic, characters which his keen eye and poetic imagination suggest to him.
Distant Worlds

Making Brooklyn home can mean bringing distant worlds to life in one’s own neighborhood. Every year, Brooklyn’s streets, homes, and yards become almost like a stage on which events from other places and past times, some real, some imaginary, are recreated. These worlds, so distant from the everyday life of the community, temporarily take over the neighborhood and people’s lives within it. The resulting transformations—in routine, in atmosphere, in the very structures of the neighborhood—bring a heightened awareness to Brooklyn residents of the ties they and their communities have with the past and to other parts of the world.

Neighborhood-transforming celebrations which take place annually in Brooklyn include the Jewish holiday of Sukkoth, dancing the giglio for the Italian-American Feast of St. Paulinus, and the West Indian-American Day Carnival. Each of these festivals differs fundamentally from the others in the kind of world it brings to life and how it does so. Sukkoth evokes biblical times in the building of small huts; the giglio reenacts a fifteen-hundred-year-old saint’s legend on a monumental scale; and Carnival calls forth the Caribbean through a magnificent costumed procession. All three celebrations are firmly rooted in the bonds of community. None could take place without some measure of neighborhood participation; all contribute to the strengthening of neighborhood relationships and community identity.

Sukkoth is a mid-autumn Jewish festival that celebrates the harvest. Its symbols, sukkoth, are temporary, four-sided shelters with greenery-covered roofs open to the sky. When the Israelites of the Bible arrived in the Promised Land, they were commanded to dwell in sukkoth for seven days every fall to commemorate the temporary shelters they had lived in while wandering forty years in the desert. There are one-half million Jews in Brooklyn, and they come from many countries and continents—Eastern Europe, Syria, Israel, Yemen, and the European and Asiatic parts of the Soviet Union. In Brooklyn’s Jewish neighborhoods—Flatbush, Brighton Beach, Borough Park, Williamsburg, and Crown
Sukkoth are built in a variety of materials: rough-hewn boards, plywood sheeting, canvas stretched over pipe frames, even brick and mortar. The important thing is that they be temporary structures and open at the top, their only protection a light covering of greenery. Some sukkoth may be seen covered with sheets of plastic or “flip-top” roofs. These keep out the elements when the shelter is empty; they are removed or opened when anyone is inside. (Martha Cooper)

Heights—sukkoth of all sizes, shapes, and materials can be seen during the festival in backyards and front yards, on balconies, stoops, porches, and rooftops—anywhere they can be constructed under the open sky.

While the walls of the sukkoth are usually undecorated wood or canvas, the interiors are often decorated with homemade or store-bought paper-cuts, colorful tinsel streamers, seasonal fruits, jars of oil and honey, and pictures of Jewish sages. Observant Jews try to conduct as much of their lives as possible in their family sukkoth during the seven-day festival, eating all their meals, receiving visitors, praying, and even sleeping there. It is believed that seven Biblical ushpizin, or guests—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David—visit every ritual shelter, one guest each day of the festival, and special prayers are recited to welcome them.

The festival of Sukkoth carries many meanings for the Jewish community. Sukkoth celebrates the bounty of the harvest and expresses hopes for a prosperous year. In addition, it provides an opportunity for Jews to reenact symbolically the wandering of the Children of Israel in the biblical and more recent past, and to contrast that instability with their more settled Brooklyn lives. The rituals of Sukkoth also compress Jewish history, so that family and friends, sitting down together in Brooklyn in their biblical shelters, can entertain ancient guests and for a few days relive one of the central motifs of Jewish existence.
In 1955 Calypso singer Lord Invader wrote “Yankee Subway,” a song of comic but heartfelt frustration at getting lost in the Brooklyn subway. In 1981 the Calypsonian “Swallow” recorded the most popular song of the fall season, “Subway Jam,” describing an ever-expanding party held by West Indians down in the New York subway system. In the first song, the subway is a strange, disorienting experience. In the second, it is familiar enough to be taken over for a city-wide celebration. The difference has been brought about by twenty-six years of immigration and settlement by West Indians to and in New York City, mostly in Brooklyn. The borough now boasts the largest population of Caribbean peoples outside the Caribbean itself.

It is fitting that “Subway Jam” should express a feeling of rootedness: it was written for the great annual celebration of Brooklyn West Indian community spirit, the West Indian-American Day Carnival. Every Labor Day since 1969, more than one million people have jammed Eastern Parkway to “play mas.” “Mas,” short for masquerade, is a vast Caribbean carnival in which residents from the adjoining West Indian neighborhood and visitors from all over the West Indies and Canada “jump up” (dance) along the Parkway to the rhythms of island music, hear the steel bands play, and view magnificent costumed processions. From Utica Avenue to the Brooklyn Museum, rows of vendors sell roti and curry, while the smoke of barbecue rises amid the cool jars of sorrel, mauby, and other West Indian drinks. In sight, sound, and fragrance, Brooklyn becomes part of the Caribbean through mas.

Mas also creates its own world, different from any other. It reverses orderly, workaday constraints, and celebrates spontaneity and release. It peoples its topsy-turvy world with full-size, even larger-than-life characters which combine myth, history, and fantasy in a logic all their own.

Carnival originated in ancient Mediterranean culture and was later continued in Catholic countries as the last celebration before the austere period of Lent in late winter. Europeans brought the custom to the Caribbean, where, combining with the religious celebrations of African former slaves, it became the

Hundreds of Carnival revelers “play mas” with an organized costume group or “band” whose leader decides on a theme and manufactures appropriate costumes with an army of helpers. The wirebender fashions the delicate but tensile frames on which wire mesh, gossamer-like cloth, and spangled paper are affixed. A costume must not only be beautiful, but must move well. Sewing machines, pliers, and glue bottles are standard equipment for the costume makers. They work in storefronts and back rooms, cellars and bedrooms, living rooms and lobbies. Two or three days before Carnival, band members come to claim and try on their costumes. (Martha Cooper)
People make their own costumes, too. Some are traditional, like sailors and political caricatures, and devils whose frolics symbolize the irreverent spirit of Carnival. Others are whatever the celebrant felt like “playing” that morning—like a crochety old man. (Martha Cooper)

A musician at his bank of pans playing on Eastern Parkway. (Martha Cooper)

Carnival celebrations sponsored by the West Indian-American Day Carnival Association are under way for the entire Labor Day weekend at the Brooklyn Museum. On Saturday afternoon, the costume bands show their children’s costumes in the “Kiddle Carnival”; nightly contests feature “king” and “queen” costumes drawn from all the bands. But Labor Day crowns all, as costume revellers “jump up” along Eastern Parkway to the music of steel bands and recorded “soca” music—a mixture of soul and calypso styles. (Martha Cooper)

basis of New World carnivals. Brooklyn mas keeps Carnival tradition by breaking with it: instead of being held in winter time, as other carnivals are in more southern climes—such as New Orleans’s Mardi Gras—it is celebrated fittingly on Labor Day, the last fling of the summer.

“Sweet pan” music—the gentle, rhythmic, exhilarating sound of steel drum orchestras—wafts through Carnival with supple delicacy. The steel pan was originally invented and developed after World War II by Trinidadians using discarded American navy oil drums. Pans, like humans, come in four voices—treble, alto, tenor, and bass.

The West Indian steel drum or pan is the only musical instrument which allows the player to strike many notes on a single surface. Ansel Joseph, pan tuner (maker) for the band “Moods,” says, “Pan is the perfect instrument: it is made only of itself.”
High above Williamsburg's rooftops every July rises a gracefully tapering, gaily painted spire, sixty-five feet tall, called a giglio (pronounced jil-yo). The giglio is the focus of a fifteen-hundred-year-old feast honoring St. Paulinus, the southern Italian saint whose statue surmounts the huge tower. In 485 A.D., Paulinus rescued the people of the village of Nola from exile and slavery to raiding pagan pirates. With the freed prisoners and a friendly Turkish sultan, Paulinus returned to Nola in a pirate galleon and was
welcomed by the joyous townspeople carrying lilies—gigli in Italian. Ever since, during the Feast of St. Paulinus, the descendants of the grateful Nolani have reenacted the miracle on a massive scale. On their shoulders, they carry two monumental structures, representations of the boat and the giglio, through their community. Street bands which ride upon the structures provide musical accompaniment.

The feast was brought to Brooklyn around the turn of the century by Nolani immigrants and is continued today by their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The celebration involves neighborhood participants of every age. On three Sundays during the feast, the fifth-century world of Paulinus is evoked in the streets around the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Two hundred and fifty men of the parish carry the giglio and boat on their shoulders in a series of “lifts” while the street bands on the structures play. So rhythmic are the lifters’ movements in time to the music that they are said to “dance” the giglio and boat on their shoulders.
The afternoon's dancing is highly organized. Each successive lift is led by one of the three capos (chiefs), their apprentices, or the honoraries—former capos who continue active participation in the feast. The lieutenants convey the capos' orders to the four corner squads of lifters under their command. The singer/m.c. announces the lifts and entertains the crowd with the giglio song along with assorted Italian and American selections. As the bands play and young boys rope off a clear path through the crowd, the two enormous structures are lifted, moved, and turned. The capos gesture with their canes, their symbol of authority, as they lead the boat and the giglio through the streets. Their commands to the lifters to set the structure down are in Neapolitan dialect: Uaglio! ("Boys!") Aizate 'i spall'! ("Raise your shoulders!") Gungi-gung'! ("Watch out!") Aggett'! ("Throw!"). On the second Sunday of the feast, both of the great structures are danced toward one another until they meet, reenacting the miracle and return of St. Paulinus to the village of Nola.

Dancing the giglio is not only an act of religious devotion for members of the community; it represents bonds of personal respect and affection brought about by years of working and living together in the neighborhood. This community feeling is visibly expressed at the end of each lifting day by the warm embraces and joyous celebration of all the participants. (Martha Cooper)
Generations

Because they must be prepared for taking part in and transmitting their culture as adults, children have a special role in the folklife of their communities. It is they who act as catalysts of tradition, and the process of their learning from each other and from adults is an important way in which the community as a whole appreciates, celebrates, and reflects upon its heritage of traditions.

In Brooklyn the participation of children in the folklife activities of their communities is rich and varied:

*Children have their own traditions.* These include street games, jump rope rhymes, counting-out rhymes, hand-clapping games, and special slang which they are constantly inventing or learning from other children and passing on to still others. Many of the outdoor street traditions children practice today, including particular games, have remained stable over time, and were enjoyed by their parents, and perhaps even by their grandparents, before them. Children’s play traditions are in many ways something of a universal phenomenon. They have the unique capacity to link moments in time across generations, as parents, watching their children play, juxtapose their own memories with the experience of their children.

*Children witness or are taught community traditions.* Children are present during traditional activities and “take in” songs, stories, dances, tastes, smells, procedures, and ways of behaving. Adults also consciously stop to show their children how to do things, or make sure they perform certain tasks—
lighting votive candles, playing a drum, or learning to hold a pigeon. Some Brooklyn communities support special schools or troupes in which their children and young people can be given formal training in community performance traditions. Donnie Golden’s School of Irish Dance, The Polish American Dance Company of Greenpoint, and the Clann Eireann Pipe Band are all organizations which help keep traditions active by teaching young people to perform them and also by giving them traditional goals to aspire to.

There are roles in traditions especially for children which no one else can play. In the Swedish St. Lucia processions on December 13th, very young children play the part of tomte, or elves. For the Jewish holiday of Purim, children have come to be responsible for much of the celebration’s tradition of order playfully reversed: they dress up in costumes depicting biblical heroes, adults, or, often, characters from popular culture, for their holiday visiting rounds. Thus tradition builds in ways for children to learn at a young age their integral place in the community and their importance in the continuity of the tradition itself.

Adults organize miniature versions of traditional practices for their children. In the children’s carnival organized as part of Brooklyn’s West Indian-American Day Carnival, children are costumed as elaborately as the adults. They too are judged on their dress and costume manipulation, and awarded prizes on the stage at the Brooklyn Museum. Similarly, the children of Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish
dance their own miniaturized versions of the *giglio* and the boat during the Feast of St. Paulinus. Under the supervision of the adults, the children's *capos* wield their canes and give commands to their young fellow lifters, and at the end of the dancing they celebrate just like the adults. In all these activities, children are mastering skills—and experiencing the pleasure of doing so—that will encourage them to continue the tradition.

*Children provide one end of the generational scale in traditional activities.* Many traditions require the participation of persons of all ages together in order that a celebration or other activity may be complete. The presence of the group in all its generations gives the place, the food, and the whole activity an essential density, depth, and sense of continuity for all participants. Because many folklife practices occur on an annual basis or mark an important stage in a person's lifetime, those activities can store and recapture personal, family, or ethnic history for an individual, accruing meaning as the individual grows from childhood through adulthood to old age.
The diversity and vitality of children's folklife activities in Brooklyn testify to the health of traditional folklife, not only in this borough, but in cities in general. Folklife activities permeate the urban landscape and impart a good deal of the complex flavor that is unique to urban life. These urban folk traditions are not simply a matter of bygones or cultural heirlooms handed down from one generation to the next. Traditions may be gifts of the past, but they also shape the present, and in doing so, counsel the future. The objects, events, rituals, foods, celebrations, performances, places, ceremonies, language, arts, and feasts described in this booklet are not only part of Brooklyn's cultural heritage looking back in time. They are part of a force that gives shape, rigor, and continuity to family and community life in Brooklyn—and every city—today.

As part of the early spring holiday called Qing Ming, Chinese families visit the cemetery to pay respects to their ancestors. There, they clean their deceased relatives' grave sites, burn incense, make ritual offerings of food and symbolic money, light candles, share holiday snacks, and set off firecrackers. (I. Sheldon Posen)

Family and friends provide refreshments for neighborhood onlookers during the Brooklyn Sunday School Parade. (I. Sheldon Posen)