

Assignment 02: Ethnography Field Notes & Memo
Brunch Memo

Marian April Glebes
31 October 2022

CPLN508 | Urban Research Methods
Akira Drake Rodriguez, Professor

Submission On Paper Includes:
Ethnography Memo | Positionality Statement

Submission Digitally Includes:
Field Notes | Photographic Documentation

The story of the Jones Falls River Valley is not entirely charming, but the history and development of the area is inextricable from the history and identity of Baltimore. The neighborhood of the Jones Falls - including Hampden where the Golden West Café is situated - invented redlining, racialized zoning, buried a natural resource, and built a highway on top of a river. Social systems were infected with the racist hostilities of the Klu Klux Klan. It was also on the Jones Falls River that the pillars of the capital were created, and munitions were manufactured for bombs in both world wars. The Golden West Café has served brunch here for over two decades. An area of natural beauty but fraught with hundreds of years of conflicting complex human histories, the Jones Falls and Hampden in 2022 is still a site of prospective manufacture - a factory for nostalgia and urbanist redevelopment fantasies.

The neighborhoods of Hampden and Woodberry, which straddle the Jones Falls River Valley, hemorrhaged industrial investment for decades. Robert C. Chidester writes extensively about these fraught decades of disinvestment, joblessness, and poverty during the 1960's and 70's in the Jones Falls River Valley's history in his 2009 *An Archaeology of Hampden-Woodberry*, but he notes that the community made efforts at revitalization:

"These efforts took two primary forms: community organization and business revitalization. In both cases, community residents once again utilized material strategies (both physical and economic) to reshape the community, to define what was important and valuable, and to contest the parameters of local citizenship." (pp. 214-215).¹

Community organization and business revitalization attempts culminated in the creation of social and commercial economic development organizations including the Hampden-Woodberry

¹ Chidester, Robert. (2009). *Class, Community, and Materiality in a Blue-Collar Baltimore Neighborhood: An Archaeology of Hampden-Woodberry*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan].

Community Council in 1971 to address commercial revitalization of the Hampden Main Streets, and the Jones Falls Valley Revitalization Committee (JFVRC) in 1978, which focused on bringing industrial jobs back to Hampden-Woodberry. The efforts of these organizations, even with City and State support at the time, could not hold back the tide of a rapidly deindustrializing economy coupled with white flight. Chidester details how, as decline continued throughout the 1980's, local commercial revitalization strategies enacted by largely middle-class activists failed to significantly impact the toll of capitalism.² The loss of the secure, industrial-based jobs of a largely lower-educated, unskilled working-class populace could not be offset by a commercial, recreation, and tourism-based economy. The combined economic decline and social stagnation merged to produce a particular festering antipathy toward "others" in an area where working-class was synonymous for white; Chidester argues that this xenophobia resulted from deindustrialization-induced scarcity, which caused white residents to closely guard their perceived advantages.³

The 1980's and 90's introduced the first wave of cultural gentrification to the Jones Falls River Valley, exemplified by redevelopment projects like that of the Mill Center in which for-profit developers capitalized on arts and cultural production and City and State subsidies to transform a 120+ year-old 100,000 sq ft vacant mill and surrounding outbuildings into a small scale cultural and manufacturing location, with 75% occupancy by local artisans, crafters, studio artists, and even a craft sweater business⁴. Initially redeveloped by Streuver Brothers, Eccles, and Rouse in the mid-1980's, the Mill Center still operates as a premier arts and cultural center in Baltimore today. Rapid revitalization via local cultural operators spread to other previously industrial mills along the

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

corridor, and commercial activity boomed along Hampden's main street, rebranded in the local vernacular as "The Avenue" by the Hampden-Woodberry Community Council. The booming 1990's paved the way for the next two decades of economic gentrification that would overtake the Jones Falls River Valley. The Avenue is where The Golden West Café is situated today.

Hampden merchants and restaurateurs are caught in a battle between idealization and reality. Were the early Hampden Merchants Association members on the forefront of a utopian imagination, balancing appropriate commercial, residential, and industrial needs with an idealized publicization of a major natural asset, inspired by an Olmsteden view of a City-Beautiful, or were they beholden to what would in later decades be revealed as neoliberalist practices that attempted to shift an entire City's economy by prioritizing service industries, entertainment, and tourism? Can their visions give the city the bike paths, the economic development, the artist enclaves, the jobs, the equity, the perfect balance of density and parking, a chicken in every pot? Could local commercial revitalization efforts mitigate past harms by creating more brunch locations? Probably not. What, therefore, can The Golden West Café's brunch experience add to the discourse surrounding the ongoing reliance of neoliberalist practice and gentrification's effects on Hampden in 2022? Perhaps green chili sauce and mimosas are a both the cause of and solution to, Hampden's cultural and economic development challenges. Perhaps brunch is a tasty way of giving the people who can afford it what they want.

October 22nd 2022 was an unseasonably beautiful day in Hampden on the Jones Falls River Valley. The Avenue bustles. Parked cars line every available spot along the curb, and The Golden West Cafe is a hub of activity. I – as a researcher, a previous employee, and the target demographic for the restaurant and Hampden – am both delighted and embarrassed to be such a stereotype and fit in so well with the crowd. I had made a reservation at The Golden West Café in

advance, to my surprise. It had been the policy of the restaurant to never take reservations for brunch previously. Brunch was a survival of the fittest environment, with a line out the door and a come as you are if who you are can wait ethos. The pandemic has changed much. Upon entry, the restaurant was perhaps 2/3 full with approximately 70 total seats, 18 seats of which were open at the time we were seated⁵. My husband and I are led to a table in the corner.

Two black women dine together. They're in their mid 20s to early 30s. A family table of white folks - also in their late 20s with small children - includes three women, two men, and multiple youth under the age of five. An elderly gentleman in a tweed jacket accompanied by a young woman enters. Another family with small children under the ages of eight years old run through any available open space between the tables. A middle-aged couple appears and is seated. Anyone who isn't a child immediately starts looking at their phones. The menu is only available via QR code.

Folks are wearing tennis shoes, sweatshirts, grunge-esque plaid, blousy floral-patterned dresses. Some women are blonde with makeup. There's a colored leather jacket worn with jeans. Clean shaven men wear beanies. Skinny jeans clad both men and women. Visible brands include Under Armor, Vans, Converse. Unbranded ankle boots with low heels are donned by the feet of the women also wearing makeup. There are puffy jackets, jean jackets, hoodies, and no jackets at all. A man wears a puffy coat with a bolero and stubby facial hair. A young couple sporting a Johns Hopkins University student ID on the exterior of a wallet walks in and is seated next to us. Perhaps they are Indian or Pakistani? They are dressed more professionally than most of the other clientele, but the gentleman is wearing flip flops over socks. They are young - maybe in their mid 20s.

⁵ See Appendix 1: Golden West Floor Plan Drawing

Everyone is mostly young (mid20ish to mid 30ish), except for those that aren't. There is a little bit of all of the everyones present in the dining room.

The restaurant staff is consistently masked. Children continue to run throughout the open aisles between the bathrooms and the tables. Sometimes they are followed by an adult. There is a very small child dressed like a teal stegosaurus. The stegosaurus stays at his seat, but roars.

The host stand is staffed by a singular individual. A wait stand is occasioned by multiple front of house staff. It is surprising that the host stand is never overwhelmed. The host (Reese) has time to look at his phone, clean tables, remove plates, and perform a multitude of duties other than solely checking in guests. This researcher equates brunch with chaos; the atmosphere here is calm.

We arrive at 11:20am and are seated by 11:27 AM for our 11:30am reservation. We are immediately served waters. We order a spicy bloody Mary and a mimosa. Our waitress visits us and consents to participate in the research study. Her name is Olivia. She is 25 and came to Baltimore to be a student at Towson. She says it's a great time to be here. Having just started in June, she's often had heart-to-hearts with the general management at the restaurant on behalf of how the staff is feeling. "It's lovely to be here," she says. "I have more friends here than I ever imagine I will make as a student at Towson University." Olivia wears Crocs over socks with cut off and rolled jeans, a mustard short-sleeved shirt, wire-rimmed glasses, and her dusty reddish-blond hair is tied back in a low ponytail. She smiles through her mask. Olivia is patient and kind. She says she has been a server before.

Golden West at noonish isn't the chaotic busy mess that I remember from working there. Tables are wiped and marked with tiny signs that say "sanitized" - said tables wait for future customers to be seated. The restaurant continues to fill with families, patrons young and old, parties large and small, Queer, multiethnic, all just rumbled enough to belong as the misfits of a hungry, trendy but

established brunch place. A young twenty-something couple enters with a set of infant twins dressed in matching gingham Halloween outfits. They are immediately seated and provided highchairs for the little ones. The children cry, and the staff turns the music up.

The playlist is made by a staff member Brandon who speaks to me later on about the music. He is tall, skinny, black hair shortcut, and wearing black tailored jeans and a Plaid well-fitting shirt. He apparently is friends with some of my friends: Dana - his now fiancé - and Adam Savage who used to throw shows at the Golden West back in my day. He DJ's under the name Brandon Carlow but sometimes under DJ Swayze when he plays at the Ottobar or on occasion for fancy one offs. The mix that is on the stereo today he describes as made of "songs that my girlfriend likes." When he knows it's going to be played at the restaurant, he takes off "anything that might be oppressive or bizarre". My husband describes the mix as "designed to appeal to the nostalgia of Gen X."

Brandon elaborates that they're no longer slammed by ASCAP or other music fee-for-service quasi-regulatory agencies since they stopped doing shows about five years ago. I feel old that I can't understand and believe that they stopped doing shows five years ago. The shows were what made me, and what made Golden West, and what made the neighborhood. We existed because we were more than a restaurant. We survived because we slung more than huevos rancheros at brunch.

We order our food and at 12:07 PM - approximately 15 minutes later - our food arrives. Fred is eating a breakfast quesadilla with steak (jerk knows I'm paying for my homework assignment). I get one of the cheaper things on the menu: a dinner quesadilla no specials added includes black beans, green chili sauce, garlic fries. His Bloody Mary is spicy and surprisingly actually too spicy for him. My mimosa comes in a champagne flute which means it's small and not to my satisfaction. I do not complain. When I worked here, mimosas came in pint glasses. We order a different round of drinks.

Minute by minute, the rest of the restaurant that had for a moment remained unoccupied fills quickly between 12:21 PM and 12:57 PM. Everyone walking in the door continues to look like everyone possible - all demographics, all colors, all shapes, all sizes. The clientele is united in their just-enough cleanliness. They're just cool enough, or very cool, if cool is that which takes inspiration from an LL Bean catalog or from the mid 1990's grunge aesthetic. There are a lot of flip-flops for October.

The Golden West now has branded coffee mugs that are enormous so I can see easily how many folks are drinking coffee from not only nearby but from across the room. I attempt to ask if they still use Zeke's Hippy Blend as the house coffee, but I am just chuckled at by the food runner. Unlike what Golden West was famous for in my day, the service is excellent. The restaurant is never overcrowded. A few folks who come in the door - despite there being empty tables available - are directed to the bar to wait and then expediently (within less than 10 minutes) seated in the restaurant. The outlier in this overall seamlessly complacent Saturday brunch experience is perhaps the two top immediately next to us: the Johns Hopkins student table couple. They appear to not be having a good time and switch their order from eating in to take out. Their food is delivered in a bag. They leave, their check openly visible on the table. They only tip \$2. Shame on them for not compensating the staff for their service and their time.

As an observer, I attempted to simply watch and take notes while instructing my husband (who is trained as an architect) to just sketch the floor plan and keep track of the design of the restaurant. However, this visit brought up a lot of baggage for me as a prior employee. It was hard to not want to talk to the staff for more detail. I was able to have extremely brief under 5 minute long conversations with our waitress, Olivia, Brandon, the other waiter who also made the playlist, and Reese the host. They answered simple questions, and no extensive interviewing took place.

The Golden West Cafe is not really a place that I associate with protocol. However, in 2022, in a post-pandemic era under new ownership, and 20 years since I've worked there, the Golden West has become and is a place of protocol. It is a place that feeds the ever evolving and ever hungry beast of neighbourhood development and is perhaps the last standing example of an artist-run cultural business that unwittingly began the gentrification process in Hampden. The Golden West is now a restaurant that more or less functions as any other restaurant, despite its roots and continued ownership by the counterculture. Today, Golden West is a well-oiled machine, getting people in the door, serving them food, and getting them out the door as quickly as possible to maximize profit, customer experience, and the restaurant's reputation. In this way, Golden West reflects the changes that have happened in the neighborhood in the past 20 years. Hampden went from a neighborhood in transition that was associated with gritty character, arts and the counterculture, or the working-class underbelly of Baltimore, to being a destination for up-and-coming generations and tourists. In this neighborhood change, a restaurant that upheld the ethos and spirit of previous decades would not have survived. Folks who come to brunch who are able to come to brunch want their brunch experience to be seamless generous and easy. People no longer come to Hampden to be snubbed, to be ignored, or to experience grit. The Golden West has maintained because it has adapted and changed to the needs, wants, and contexts of a changing city and of a changing consumer demographic. As a restaurant, as a cultural hub, and as a destination, this institution in Hampden provides an experience that is not only pleasurable but also one that exists by pushing a social and economic status quo cloaked in the texture and aesthetics of the counterculture. As it is today, The Golden West is a leading example of not only economic survival but also social and cultural survival amidst changing times. The Golden West survives and thrives by serving up a menu of social, cultural, and culinary symbolisms that cater to the gentry.

The restaurant, therefore, is not only contributing to gentrification in the neighborhood, but also is sustained by the area's evolution towards an ever-wealthier local population and bourgeois tourism.

The protocol's focus on quantifying table wait-time and food delivery time made it very difficult to observe the overall atmosphere and experience of the restaurant. Detailing or tracking customer service as specified in the protocol also proved to be a wild card. While this researcher experienced incredibly welcoming and generous customer service, the table next to us left early and disappointed because they were clearly not having a good time. However, it was very evident that the wait staff was as attentive as they could be to all the tables in this researcher's view.

I am not aware of any ethical issues that arose during my field survey experience. I made it very clear to all parties and acquired consent from anyone I spoke to during the research visit. While I did not make it known to them at the time of the interviews that I would compensate them for their participation, I did pay a small amount cash to anyone I spoke to who offered their opinions and gave consent to participate in the project as an acknowledgement of their time, including tipping our server more than the average 20%.

The protocol as proposed failed to capture or highlight the decor of the restaurant itself which in the context of Golden West is still very much integral to the restaurant's identity. The décor might be the last remaining visible element that continues to contribute to its identity other than its menu and its inclusionary spirit. Golden West is decorated in 2022 with remnants of the prior owner's murals, moose heads, and some of the original furniture which had all been scavenged and hand-crafted throughout the years. The eclectic vibe mirrors the eclectic clientele. A landmark brunch location at the geographic and metaphorical heart of the Avenue in Hampden, the Golden West continues to serve up healthy portions of nostalgia to the beat of main street community and economic development drummers.