

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Bradley L. Garrett, *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City*, London: Verso, 2013. ISBN: 9781781681299 (cloth); ISBN: 9781781681879 (ebook)

A new television advert for a generic, twenty-something, high street fashion label sees a group of young adults wandering an abandoned Tube station in London. With the hashtag #LostLondon, the aesthetic narrative of the promotional piece articulates a particular pastiche of faux-subversion, and gives the overriding and awkward impression that the exploration-cum-glorification of abandoned, hidden, and ‘lost’ urban infrastructure has become very much part of common, commercial, and branding parlance. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the generic, bland fashion models against the grimy ‘abandonment’ of the underground station creates an aesthetic devoid of any visceral subversion and instead consists of a commercialized simulacrum of urban transgression. Such a dialectic has much more than allegorical synergies with the ideologies of subversive urbanism, it represents the media’s transmogrification of it into a palatable, packagable pastiche that can be hawked at passive consumers looking for the next iteration of ‘cool’.

How has it come to this? Why is the imagery of strutting around an abandoned Tube station seen as a viable aesthetic for commercial success? My feeling is that the culture of urban exploration has a lot to do with it; the injection into public consciousness which can be attributed to (or blamed upon, depending on your point of view) Bradley Garrett¹. Garrett’s recent book *Explore Everything* details his urban exploration (sometimes called urbex, a name incidentally that further suggests it’s an identifiable and codified subculture) exploits through the rise, and subsequent fall, of the London Consolidation Crew (LCC). Through his PhD research, Garrett became one of its protagonists and the book recounts the empirical minutiae of his exploits,

¹ As well as many of his contemporaries such as Moses Gates in New York City, author of ‘a memoir of urban exploration’, *Hidden Cities* (see Gates 2013).

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littered with philosophical musings, thoughts on political ramifications, and urbanist critique. Garrett's account of his explorations, hacks, and infiltrations are rich in descriptive prose, and one cannot help but be drawn into the atmospheric, sensory realms he recounts; often augmented by the stylish yet informative photographs. Such photographic mastery is pervasive throughout the urban exploration online community, as is the often articulate intellectualism, and the inevitable speculative and attention-grabbing links that can be made with terrorist activity. All this makes urban exploration a media provider's dream, so it is of little surprise that the activity has garnered as much recent press attention as it has (see, for example, MacFarlane 2013; Power 2013). Perhaps his most (in)famous 'hack' was when he climbed the Shard when it was a construction site, gaining as it did superfluous media coverage² that wallowed in the mundane contextualisations that this event created (such as security scares, trespassing, property rights, and so on), rather than concentrating on the urban political action it was. This media storm is recounted to the opening of the final chapter (p.219-223), but the event itself is detailed up front, opening the first chapter. Drawing us in, this passage places us alongside Garrett and his accomplices, giving us an explorer's eye view of the covert evasion of security (or perhaps, not so covert given the apparent laxness of the 'security' guards), the ascent up the building, and the shenanigans undertaken atop London's pinnacle. It ends with the line "whenever I see the Shard from anywhere in the city, I can't help but smile as I'm reminded of the inescapable allure of urban exploration—the ability to make the impossible possible" (p.4, emphasis added). And here lies a microcosmic articulation of the rest of the book—the pages of *Explore Everything* bristle with narratives that describes urban exploration as a practice that captures, alludes, and excites;

² See articles in *The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, and *The Telegraph*.

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emancipates political engagement; and challenges the dominant rhetoric of what is geographically 'possible' within the contemporary Global City.

The first chapter sets the urbex scene, describing the ways in which Garrett felt his way into the community and the emotional ethnographic engagement he initiated. The collectivisation of individuals into a subcultural group such as urban exploration (or parkour, skateboarding, yarn bombing, street art, train writing, and so on) can engender tensions. Infighting, cliques, arguments over performance and definitions, accusations of 'selling out'; these are common within such subcultural groupings. Mott and Roberts have argued that "urbex is a slippery label encompassing a vast array of different activities and communities...[and thus] there is no single understanding of the political import (or lack thereof) of urbex" (2013a: 4). However, Garrett stresses that while these schisms exist on the 'metropolitan level', "there clearly *is* an urban exploration community" (p.20). The pre-eminence of a community, a structure, a Deleuzian apparatus of capture does however seem to be at odds with a rhetoric of a more performance-orientated ontology of urban exploration. Throughout the book, Garrett is keen to stress the experientiality of urban exploration. Using a number of different allegorical synonyms such as "revealing history" (p.80) and "edgework" (p.89 - a phrase brilliantly appropriated from Hunter S. Thompson, which is one of a number of highly exciting and appropriate usages of vernacular from fiction literature), Garrett prioritises the performativity of his escapes and eschews the '(sub)culture-making' side effects. This highlights the intently rhizomatic characteristics of subcultural formation (see Daskalaki and Mould 2013). As such, there is an underlying confliction within the text: at some points, the urbex community is articulated and heralded as an ossified textual and virtual being, which the LCC pushed (and broke) the limits of; and at others, exploration is devoid of context, free from ascription – pure experience.

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The second and third chapters recount the explorations and forays into ruins and places of dereliction, and the continual and cataclysmic conjuncture between an ephemeral imagined past, an experienced corporeal present, and an economised homogeneous future. Indeed as is noted, “urban explorers are interested in quarrying spontaneous finds though embodied experiences in derelict and abandoned places to create time fusions” (p.64). Much of the theoretical postulating in these chapters is developed more succinctly elsewhere (see Garrett 2011), which allows for a far more poetic engagement. The enmeshing of dystopic imaginaries, cultural hegemonic guilt, and a desire for “unregulated experiences” (p.64) of the past weaves a telling narrative that foregrounds a purer sense of exploration than does the more transgressionary and politically-charged infiltration practices that are more in line with a populist view of urban exploration. Garrett expertly articulates a yearning for the past, but one that is couched in a respect for the ghosts of place.

It is chapters four, five and six where perhaps the more ‘controversial’ aspects of urban exploration are showcased, with some fantastical narratives of infiltrations, hacks, and daring encounters that engender a heroism that, on a visceral momentary level, can only be admired. There are of course many well-documented issues that arise from these pages. For one, there is the overtly masculinist nature of urban exploration, a point argued vehemently by Mott and Roberts (2013a; 2013b). Their assertion is that urbex has a “tendency to marginalize Othered bodies” (Mott and Roberts 2013a: 14), and a kind of masculinism is rife throughout *Explore Everything*. Many pages of the book are laden with a masculine embodiment that at times spills over into gendered monopolies. One particular passage, in which Garrett describes an exploration with Gates, tells of a voyeuristic encounter with “the entire backside of the twelve-storey hotel” (p.104), in which they could see “a couple fighting with dramatic hand gestures, a women undressing and admiring herself in the mirror, a guy

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watching TV eating snacks off his naked stomach, a pair of women stripping for each other” (p.105). The overt masculinist gaze (Nash 1996) that is characterised by this passage encapsulates the ideology which is the subject of Mott and Roberts’ (2013a) critique. The recent debate on *Antipode*’s website (see Garrett and Hawkins 2013; Mott and Roberts 2013b) speaks to a more sophisticated reading of urban exploration and its body-subject idiosyncrasies. Suffice to say, certain narratives within *Explore Everything* bristle with a heroic, sometimes even comic-book, masculinity (see the photographs of explorers in quite ‘unnatural’ positions, such as those on p.5, 100 and 189).

The final chapter elucidates further the ways in which urban exploration saturated media outlets (for a time at least). Garrett details the trials by media he underwent, and highlights the problems this raised within and throughout the urban exploration community. The vitriolic comments received because of the media frenzy were sadly testament to the schisms and divisions ‘within’ the urbex community, but also speak to the rupture Garrett’s exploits detonated. From an empirical perspective, this chapter envisions the political economy that can balloon from the hacking that the LCC undertook. I would hazard to guess that there is no other series of events that so concisely exemplify how a visceral, experiential, and embodied performance of urban situations can create a chain reaction that results in the mobilisation of national (and in some cases international) apparatuses. There is a sense, though, that a tension between being *in* the community and *creating* it is evident:

“Through the LCC’s ever-shifting bodywork built on a foundation of fracturing motivational multiplicity, changing photography practice, and increasing meld moments, we ourselves became the ghosts of time we were originally chasing” (p.241).

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There is therefore something of an ontological implosion, where the urban exploration community has fractured; eviscerated into disparate realms of continued subversion, yes, but also softer emancipatory city politics, capitalistic accumulation, and/or urban developmentalism; as Garrett notes “the attempt to quash alternative narratives... includes both suppression and absorption” (p.242), and, I would add, everything in between. Such a foreboding conclusion to the book cannot help but to leave the reader with a genuine sense of nostalgia – not for a group of twenty-something, white, middle class males who undertook some of the most daring exploration London has ever witnessed, nor for urban places that have had their stories etched for them by explorers; but for an urban subversion that has been subsumed, accrued into the apparatus of capture that is contemporary urbanism. Such nostalgia, though, is short-lived, as to seek the next fissure, to exploit the system, become a tactic within the strategy of the city (to use de Certeauian language), to push at the boundaries of what is deemed politically, socially, economically, and personally ‘acceptable’, to be active urban citizens, is what *Explore Everything* compels us to do.

When reading this wonderfully crafted text, it is apparent early on that *Explore Everything* is a vehicle for the spectacular. It contains exhilarating passages that decry the enforced striation of contemporary urbanism. It is a call to arms to not accept the city as spectacle, but to overcome the existing logic of the capitalist city and actively re-appropriate space. In so doing, however, it has fed into the machinery of the spectacle; it has popularised (perhaps even condemned) urban exploration to be ideologically and aesthetically infiltrated by capitalistic tendencies – to be used to advertise high street fashion outlets. This of course is an inevitable outcome of the kind of research within this book. It celebrates the citizenry, pens it to history, and moves on.

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Purcell (2013) eloquently warns against an urban environment in which oligarchical and hegemonic forces subdue the masses into passivity. Discussing Calvino's (1997) *Invisible Cities*, he argues that, in a city of inferno, we need to recognise the not-inferno, nurture and encourage it, as it constitutes a path to a more socially just, radically democratic urban society. *Explore Everything* and the broader issues of urban exploration - however riddled with social exclusionary narratives, philosophical quandaries, and theoretical difficulties - has to be admired and championed (and of course critically engaged with) because it recognises the not-inferno. It shows, albeit through spectacular story-telling with more than a hint of macho heroism, that the city should be engaged with, not passively consumed. And for that, this book and what it articulates deserves a great deal of respect.

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