



Filming Ethnic Diversity in New York

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Reviewed: Frederick Wiseman, *In Jackson Heights*, Zipporah Films, 2015, 190 minutes

Frederick Wiseman's fortieth documentary film, In Jackson Heights (2015), returns to an urban theme explored in previous films such as Central Park (1989) and Public Housing (1997). This time he chose an entire New York City neighborhood characterized by great racial and ethnic diversity.

Frederick Wiseman's latest documentary, *In Jackson Heights*,¹ plunges us into a three-hour uninterrupted exploration of the institutions, the streets, and the concerns of the inhabitants of a multiethnic neighborhood in Queens, New York. In the first few minutes of the film, Daniel Dromm, a well-known figure in the gay-rights movement and elected member of the New York City Council, sets the tone:

"I have always said that Jackson Heights is the most diverse community in the world, literally. We have 167 different languages spoken here. We are very, very proud of that diversity."

This claim has become a slogan in Queens. Since the late 1990s, neighborhoods along the New York City Subway line 7 have been presented in the media, political speeches, and in social-science publications as the most ethnically diverse in the world. The Department of City Planning has nicknamed it "The International Express" and in 1999 the White House designated the 7 train a National Millennium Trail, for its important role in the history of immigration to the US. More than preserving the memory of an earlier time, this landmarking celebrates a history that is still in the making. The anthropologist Roger Sanjek proclaimed in his book, published in 1998, that the diversity observed along the 7 line offers us a look into "the future of us all" (Sanjek 1998). In fact, for over 10 years now, more than half of Queens's population was not born in the United States, making its neighborhoods precursors in a nation where minorities will soon form the majority (a minority majority).

The neighborhood as an institution

The neighborhood of Jackson Heights is considered to be one of the birthplaces of American multiculturalism. Built in the 1920s—with the arrival of the subway—as the first garden-city apartments in the world, it offered white Protestant families the exclusive option of country living in the city. The buildings were constructed around large central gardens, taking up a whole block of the urban grid. Over the century, affected by the economic crises of the 1930s, 1950s, then the 1970s, the neighborhood gradually grew denser and opened up respectively to Catholics (Italians, Polish, Irish), to Jews, and finally to the rest of the world—especially to Hispanic, Chinese, and South Asian (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) immigrants. It has also become a center for the

¹ See: www.zipporah.com/films/44.

LGBT community, mostly from ethnic-minority groups. African Americans are the only ones underrepresented.

Remarkably, and in contrast to movements witnessed in almost every other American city, the middle-class white population did not flee when poorer people or “darker” people moved in. Jackson Heights resisted the massive loss of the middle class to the suburbs and the resulting impoverishment and segregation. And although it’s still too soon to say, it may resist gentrification better than other areas. Today the neighborhood presents itself as a mosaic made up of successive waves of immigrant arrivals. Consequently, the streets, the stalls, the carts and the store windows of the main streets exhibit a diversity of cultures, languages, and colors rarely seen elsewhere in the city.

Unlike many of Wiseman’s films dedicated to portraying well-defined institutions (the Paris Opera Ballet, Central Park, a high school, etc.), *In Jackson Heights* deals with a neighborhood that has fuzzy boundaries and a multifaceted and changing identity. How did he capture this on film? The camera lingers on brightly colored fruits and vegetables, on taxis, the subway, awnings and posters in a succession of street scenes, followed by long sequences in community centers, places of worship, and businesses. Indoor scenes, shot by a close-up but seemingly invisible camera, show residents discussing their problems.

From one group to the next

True to his usual way of working, Wiseman never adds narration to these scenes; they speak for themselves. The film frequently returns to the meeting place of Make the Road New York, a Hispanic community organization. There, a woman shares the story of her daughter’s experience crossing the Mexico–US border. Abandoned by the coyotes and separated from her baby, she was lost in the desert for over two weeks. A worker describes how he was not paid for overtime work and was unfairly fired. Another man talks about the abuse and dangerous conditions of day laborers working in the construction industry. Transgender people complain of being harassed by the police, who prevent them from working outside a nightclub in the neighborhood.

Each group filmed by Wiseman voices their problems in various community centers. Latino groups, as mentioned above, are fighting against the discrimination they experience as immigrants and especially as workers. A secondary plot line follows a group of young activists who attempt to organize small-business owners against the incoming Business Improvement District (BID). They see it as a means to evict small Hispanic businesses and replace them with national and international chain stores like the Gap, the first to open in the neighborhood. A restaurant manager explains to the activists in Spanish that these small businesses are an important resource for the people living in the neighborhood and beyond:

“Five to seven families live off my business. If I fire six people, it would affect almost eighteen people who live in Mexico or who live here, who pay the rent. If they were fired, how would they live? By collecting cans in the street?”

A little later, a scene shows the parking lot where people who have collected cans are waiting in line to get the deposits.

Wiseman follows the activists to the office of Orlando Tobón, a travel agent who has been in business for 22 years and is also threatened by eviction. He doesn’t explain that this businessman is also a neighborhood chronicler² and charismatic figure, well-known for helping “mules,” women from Colombia used by drug cartels to smuggle cocaine into the US. He is known in particular as co-producer and actor in the film *Maria, Full of Grace* (2004), which revealed these women’s plight far beyond the neighborhood. Tobón explains:

² See Tobón 2006.

“We have no political representation. Our elected officials, Latinos that we fought to get into office, are shaming us... Our senator was arrested for stealing money, taxpayers’ money. [...] Our city council member, Julissa Ferreras, we never see her!”

Indeed, Danny Dromm, mentioned earlier, is the only elected official seen in the movie. But he represents the neighboring district, not the one affected by the BID project. His constituents, mostly white, are mainly concerned with issues relevant to the elderly, such as neighborhood safety. A scene that takes place in his office shows his staff frustrated with phone calls from people worried about a homeless shelter that is about to open in the area. Also in his district is the Jewish Center, a meeting place for seniors, including LGBT groups who contribute to its renewed vitality. In the film, they are the only group where race and ethnicity don’t seem to matter as much. This diversity within the LGBT community makes the annual Gay Pride in Jackson Heights an occasion for elected officials and activists to reaffirm the values of tolerance and diversity so dear to the neighborhood.

Indeed, the film does not show tensions between the different groups who live in the same neighborhood but rarely seem to notice each other. Wiseman skillfully juxtaposes shots of the Jackson Heights Beautification Group’s orchestra (a community organization that aims to enhance the neighborhood and is responsible for the historic landmarking of the garden-city buildings) with shots of a quartet of women mariachis in full regalia; a conversation between elderly white women at a cafe worried about preserving local historic landmarks, with more emotional scenes of Latinos struggling against discrimination; the call for more security in public space during an outdoor community-board meeting with Colombian fans being arrested for rowdiness after their team won a game in the soccer World Cup.

Conflicts between ethnic groups and social classes play out on an aesthetic front, in the film as well as in local politics. For example, the community board has a say in matters such as store awnings and parking regulations. This issue directly affects the South Asian business community in Jackson Heights. 74th Street is an important ethnic commercial center. Many families go there by car on weekends to do their shopping and enjoy an atmosphere that reminds them of their home country. But there isn’t enough parking and the police don’t hesitate to ticket double-parked cars, hurting local businesses. The film lingers on the colorful window displays and awnings, only hinting at the muted tensions with the more neutral aesthetics of white homeowners in the neighborhood.

In the movie, immigrants from South Asia and North Africa strive to make it into society and become “hyphenated Americans” (Pakistani-American, for example), still holding onto their cultures and religions. The camera finds them at a mosque, a Hindu temple, an Islamic school, a dance school, and a taxi-driver school. The hilarious lesson for aspiring taxi drivers, a common job for newly arrived immigrants, simultaneously shows their diverse backgrounds and their desire to find a job and begin their climb up the social ladder. A multilingual instructor explains the geography of New York to about 20 men of different ages. The word “neighborhood,” he explains is essential to passing the test:

“Temba, darling, how do you say neighborhood in Nepali language? [Addressing someone else] How do you say neighborhood in Tibetan? How do you say neighborhood in Bengali language, Mr. Kashim? In Urdu? In French we say *voisinage*, in Arabic we say...”

Culture unites these diverse students, which we see when the instructor explains the cardinal directions. He starts by explaining that north is up, toward the nose. South is down, toward the shoes. Then, he continues:

“Most people, I would say 99% people in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Africa eating with the right hand... So eating, eating, eating will be east... Mr. Temba, in Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, no toilet paper, my friend... cleaning the back area, poo-poo wash with this hand is west.”

Halfway between city and community

Even though the different ethnic groups rarely seem to interact, the groups we see gathered in community centers or places of worship are in fact remarkably diverse, coming from many different countries and cultures. These gatherings, bringing together people from countries who are sometimes enemies (for example, India and Pakistan), roughly fit the US census categories: Hispanic, Caucasian, South Asian, and so forth. They show a form of inclusion in the host county. In our work on the riders who take the elevated 7 train that crosses the neighborhood and provides part of the film's soundtrack, William Kornblum³ and I show that these broad categories also correspond to those used in the street and on the subway to label people according to manageable and familiar groups. For example, Spanish speakers are often labelled as "Mexicans," people from the Middle East or South Asia are referred to as "Hindus," and East Asians as "Chinese" (Tonnelat and Kornblum 2017). To use Sanjek's (2000) expression once again, the street as well as politics are "color-full before color blind." These diverse gatherings (according to the census labels) are the first mix before immigrants blend into the even richer diversity of the entire city. This mixing begins on the neighborhood sidewalk, and then travels into the city by subway, as the movie's final allegorical scene shows by fading into the urban horizon of the Manhattan skyline lit up by the 4th of July fireworks above the 7 train tracks.

With *In Jackson Heights*, Wiseman took an entire neighborhood rich in ethnic diversity as his subject. He gained in breadth what he lost in depth. The result is a portrait halfway between a monograph of a community and a sketch of a big city. It is also a powerful reminder of the capacity of cities to accommodate diversity on a global scale.

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³ William Kornblum, an urban sociologist who lives in Jackson Heights, served as an adviser to Frederick Wiseman for the film.