



An Ethnography of Urban Exploration: Unpacking Heterotopic Social Space

Bradley Garrett

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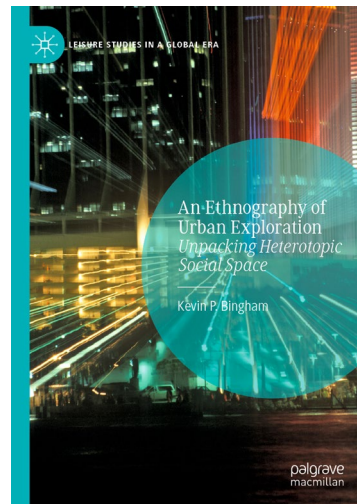


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An Ethnography of Urban Exploration: Unpacking Heterotopic Social Space

Kevin P. Bingham. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. xiii and 280 pp., 6 figures, references, index. \$109.99 hardcover (ISBN 978-3-030-56250-2); \$79.99 softcover (ISBN 978-3-030-56253-3).

Reviewed by Bradley Garrett , School of Geography, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland.



Many contemporary ethnographies make the mistake of conflating qualitative data gathering with shared experience. The latter, which is dependent on social and cultural immersion, is a requisite to a study being considered ethnographic. Kevin P. Bingham clearly understands this distinction, telling the reader early on in *An Ethnography of Urban Exploration* that he has lived his life “as an urban explorer first and that of a researcher second” (p. 61). The result is an ethnography worthy of the word, based on embedded research that will stand the test of time.

The book is centered around seven years of Bingham’s life with the Wild Boyz, a group of urban explorers that traverse the northern regions of England in search of (mostly) derelict locations. Their goal is to trespass into them in search of “the craic” (Irish slang for a good time, roughly). Although similar stories have been written by others, including myself (Fraser 2012; Garrett 2013; Kindynis 2016), Bingham seeks to explore the topic from a slightly different angle by focusing less on the material qualities of the locations being explored, the photography of those places, or the sociopolitical implications of the practice, instead emphasizing the relationships cultivated between the explorers themselves. The central argument of the book is that the process of exploration creates heterotopias (following Foucault 1986): times and spaces of juxtaposing palimpsests where

ontological difference is shaped and reshaped. Key to Bingham’s argument is that the heterotopia is not rooted in places; it is formed through social experience. It is a powerful argument, executed with verve.

Although the book, on the whole, impresses, educates, and entertains, there are three crucial shortcomings, each of which I work through in turn. First, the book makes the tragic (and I mean that in the classical sense) mistake of trying to evince its novelty by discrediting previous work on the topic. This is unnecessary, given the strength of the research itself, but also forgivable, given that the material was gathered from doctoral research.

The lingering shadow of a heavy-handed supervisor looking for more “critical reflection” in the literature review simply should have been exorcised—or at least tempered—prior to publication. This is not to say that some censure of previous work was not warranted, but the outcomes of Bingham’s research function better as a building block than a wrecking ball.

Second, it would seem that in writing a book for a series on leisure studies, it was necessary to claim that urban explorers are “consumers in disguise,” to therefore suggest that the practice is primarily a form of leisure or entertainment, and that any weighty implications stemming from “the craic” are unintentional anomalies. I would hasten to point out that hundreds of urban explorers around the world have been persecuted, incarcerated, and have lost their lives pursuing the practice. Many of those who have died in pursuit of “UrbEx” social media stardom deserve a Darwin Award. It is also the case, though, that spaces that have been rediscovered and exposed to public scrutiny by urban explorers have been turned into heritage sites (see the London Mail Rail), have been reappropriated as monuments to political resistance (see the painting of the Soviet star in Moscow by

Ukrainian explorer Mustang Wanted), and have been redeveloped by international financiers with their finger on the pulse of cultural novelty (see, e.g., the Sydney Harbour BridgeClimb Experience). Despite the social, political, and economic outcomes of their work bringing off-limits architecture into the public consciousness, often at little professional or financial gain, explorers themselves have faced decades in prison for their practices, exemplified most recently in the ongoing incarceration and multistate legal battle facing Black U.S. Army veteran DrifterShoots, who has publicly stated that involvement in the practice helped him cope with severe posttraumatic stress disorder stemming from his military service in Special Forces. These examples point to a practice that stakes a claim beyond leisure. Although forces of capital colonized many of these locations after the fact, what most explorers seek in the moment is indeed “the craic,” whether it be found in creeping through derelict buildings, running deadly metros, or slogging through sewage with cameras in hand.

My final point of contention with the book is that it often feels like a ping-pong match between Bingham’s social and professional desires. Bingham relays conversations with and between project participants in a lewd vernacular using culturally specific language that is never elucidated (hence, the need for my own explanation of the the craic earlier), and then quickly pivots into theoretical smorgasbords about ephemeral temporality, liquid modernity, consumer capitalism, the society of the spectacle, and the like. Both tracts are engaging, but it is unclear who the audience is for this book (speaking of Baudrillard, or Debord for that matter). Although the contemporary academic censorship machine will undoubtedly condemn giving the blatantly racist, homophobic, and misogynistic Wild Boyz a platform, the Boyz themselves would surely find wading through the dense theory offputting. This leaves a remaining audience of a handful of researchers who have worked on urban exploration, who both understand the argot and the broad-sweeping theoretical framework. Unfortunately, most members of this small audience are critiqued rather heavy-handedly throughout the book.

Despite these misgivings, some of which I would not harbor without having spent a decade of my own life in this community in search of the same ontological reorientation,

Bingham has provided us with the most comprehensive overview of urban exploration literature to date. It is a theoretically astute scholarly contribution, and an exciting read that offers insight into a rather secretive and conflicted subculture that few scholars have had the patience to sit with. In short, it is a brave ethnography.

Toward the end of the book, Bingham writes, “As far I am aware, to date no other attempt at understanding heterotopia centred on urban exploration as a devotional form of leisure has been completed in such a fastidious way as this” (p. 189). I agree, but also think this self-congratulation is too modest in scope. In calling Foucault’s heterotopia to life as a social space, Bingham has put flesh on the bones of what was a shallow outline of a theory left behind in convoluted fragments. A passage, from three quarters of the way through the book, reveals the text’s crucible, where Bingham suggests that what urban explorers seek is a hidden world, where deviation allows individuals to engage in the ecstasy of performativity and warmth of community, knowing all the while that this heterotopia is an impermanent space. That is what makes urban exploration so sweet: the phenomenology of ephemeral experiences severed from routine expectations. Bringing the heterotopia into being through lived experience, as this book does, is an accomplishment that deserves to be celebrated for years to come.

ORCID

Bradley Garrett  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0414-3175>

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