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A Thousand and One Little Actions

Abstract: This chapter draws on the work of Dorothy E. Smith in order to consider the ways in which everyday life can be understood as a concept, or space, which is itself profoundly implicated in the production and reproduction of social inequalities. With that lesson in mind, it turns to consider the work of W.E.B. Du Bois who, it is argued, provides a pioneering recognition of the importance of studying everyday life sociologically. Moreover, of course, Du Bois also demonstrates the centrality of the everyday to the making and remaking of ‘race’.

Keywords: bell hooks; Dorothy E. Smith; Everyday life; Racism; W.E.B. Du Bois

One. In a short ‘intermezzo’ section in the second volume of their *Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau and Luce Girard discuss what they describe as ‘ghosts in the city’. By this they indicate those tumble-down places and buildings, the ruins and the remains, which ‘burst forth from within the modernist, massive, homogenous city like slips of the tongue from an unknown, perhaps unconscious, language’ (de Certeau, Girard and Mayol 1998: 133). These ‘untamed’ places, they argue, have an unsettling quality, opening up ‘a certain depth within the present’ (135), throwing off kilter the grand narratives of urban redevelopment or civic heritage. At the same time, though, people make play of these spaces; they are the subject of the everyday practices by which streets and neighbourhoods become meaningful as people use or weave stories around them, making themselves ‘at home’: ‘the subtle and multiple practice of a vast ensemble of things that are manipulated and personalized, reused and [which] turn the city into an immense memory where many poetics proliferate’ (141).

This is, at first glance, a very hopeful way of reading the city. Yet thinking especially of Glasgow, the city in which I live, I find myself uneasy. The ghosts of Glasgow’s urban space – the derelict but ornate mausoleums of the city’s central graveyard; the crumbling civic buildings; the abandoned railway tunnels; the overgrown former wharves along the Clyde – are all, certainly, places which people ‘practice’, places which are put to various kinds of unregulated popular use. In many instances they are the scene of long-standing struggles over the right to community control. Yet these places are also, very largely, the remnants of an imperial past: the graves are the graves of Glasgow’s mercantile elite; the buildings and tunnels, the products of that period of dramatic urban growth which was fuelled by Glasgow’s position at the heart of the economic nexus of British imperial power. The ghosts in Glasgow’s cityscape are the ghosts of empire. Moreover, they are ghosts which have been eluded because of their very familiarity. It is the everyday-ness of the city’s imperial past, the way in which imperial wealth and self-identity are written into the city’s fabric, its streets, buildings, statues and parks, which has made that past so hard to reckon with. Thus it is true, in one sense, that the everyday uses of these ghostly places cuts across the narratives of regeneration to which the city has been subject – sounding an uncanny note in the ‘city of glass’, as Girard and de Certeau have it. Yet is also true, in another sense, that the everyday familiarity generated by these practices can serve to domesticate those ghosts, to postpone once