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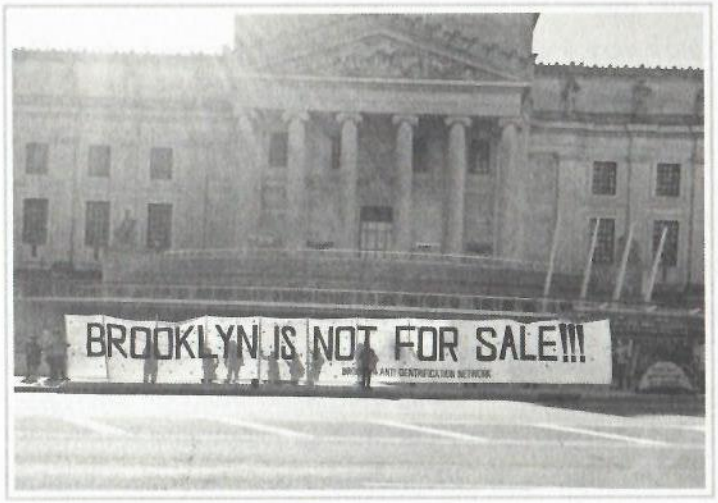
Brooklyn



Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network protest at Real Estate Summit, Brooklyn Museum. *Ann McDermott, 2015*

In the fall of 2015, an iPhone video appeared on the blog Gothamist showing a scene between a man they called "Enraged White Guy" and a pair of "Stroller Pushers" (also, apparently, white). The moment plays out on a Downtown Brooklyn street jumbled with the ever-present scaffolding of building construction. Day-Glo orange jersey barriers corral the players into a rat's maze. As the action begins, Enraged White Guy is shouting, "Back the fuck off me!" He is a jogger. He is shouting at Stroller Husband, who is dressed in khakis and a polo shirt complete with popped collar, symbol of the preppy ruling class. Stroller Wife shouts back at Enraged

White Guy until Stroller Husband tells her to move their baby out of the fray. Between them all, a black security guard, looking rather bored, tries to break it up. He is ignored. Enraged White Guy, after making a few death threats to the couple, gets to the point.

"You're new in the neighborhood!" he shouts. "I've *been* in this neighborhood. The only reason white people like you are living here is because I *settled* this fucking neighborhood for you."

This gets a laugh from the cameraman, who calls out, "Thank you, white guy!"

"Don't push your stroller into my legs," Enraged White Guy continues. "Don't push your stroller into my legs."

Stroller Wife jumps back in, calling Enraged White Guy "a sick fuck."

Provoked, he points a finger at her and shouts, "White privilege! White fucking privilege! You pushed your stroller right into me. And all I said was, 'Excuse you.' And then you said, 'Fuck you, fuck you!'"

The video cuts out soon after. It is titled "Christopher Columbus of Brooklyn." If we wanted an audiovisual of what Spike Lee called the "motherfuckin' Christopher Columbus Syndrome" that infected Brooklyn in the 2000s, here it is. The whole sordid story is packed into this quick minute and eighteen seconds, intertwined with race, class, heterosexual fertility, and the places where they blur together. There's a first-line gentrifier who casts himself as a brave settler, conjuring images of wagon trains and Manifest Destiny. There are the super-gentrifiers who came after, the yuppie couple with the Sherman tank baby stroller, the status symbol most associated with gentrified Brooklyn in the 2000s. There's the working-class man of color whose low-paid authority is not respected. And there's Downtown Brooklyn, a tangle of new construction, luxury towers on every block. The fight takes place in front of the BellTel Lofts, high-priced condos in the former New York Telephone building, just one among many symbols of Brooklyn's conversion from working to luxury class. At the nearby outdoor Fulton Mall, where poor and working

people shop, local joint Tony's Famous Pizzeria has been pushed out for Shake Shack, while black-owned businesses are gradually giving way to higher-end chains. Goodbye to the purveyors of gold teeth grills and shea butter body oils. Hello prepackaged salads and slim-fit khakis. (In the 2011 documentary *My Brooklyn,* newly arrived gentrificationists called Fulton Mall a "crappy space with B-grade stores.") For the colonists who followed the settlers, it's a glorious triumph—and a long time coming.

I live in Brooklyn. By choice." So Truman Capote began his celebrated essay on the borough in 1959. He calls Brooklyn an "uninviting community" and a "veritable veldt of tawdriness," as he yet defends it to mystified friends who ask, "But what do you *do* over there?" Manhattan types did not go to Brooklyn. It was a place for people of color and working-class ethnics, the people who weren't quite American. Of his youth in blue-collar Brownsville during the 1930s and '40s, Norman Podhoretz wrote, "I came from Brooklyn, and in Brooklyn there were no Americans. There were Jews and Negroes and Italians and Poles and Irishmen. Americans lived in New England, in the South, in the Midwest: alien people in alien places." Twentieth-century Brooklyn was not a white Anglo-Saxon borough. And it was not for aesthetes. If you were a native Brooklynite whose heart yearned for the city, you fled. The interborough migration path traveled in one direction, across the river to Manhattan.

That began to shift in the 1960s and '70s as creative people, hippies, and members of the middle class (mostly, but not all, whites) began buying and rehabbing dilapidated brownstones in neighborhoods across South Brooklyn, such as Park Slope, Cobble Hill, and Boerum Hill. There's a small but potent body of literature on the subject by the writers who were there, including Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters,* L. J. Davis's *A Meaningful Life,* and Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude.* In Davis's novel, Lowell Lake is a failed writer who

leaves Manhattan for the hinterlands across the East River. Speaking for Lowell, the narrator notes with the brio of Manifest Destiny: "Creative young people were buying houses in the Brooklyn slums, integrating all-Negro blocks, and coming firmly to grips with poverty and municipal corruption. It was the stuff of life. It was the stuff he was looking for." Lowell was afflicted with "brownstone fever," as *New York* magazine called it in a 1969 cover story, describing how "[m]ore and more people now are packing up, moving out of their aseptic uptown apartments, making new homes out of old, forlorn but solid and roomy brownstones, restoring them to pristine glory." Said one realtor, "Believe me, there's more courage in going into a brownstone than going west in a covered wagon."

Some of the early brownstoners saw themselves as colonists, in or out of touch with the underlying racism that feeds the dream of settling a "savage" country in which people of color don't count. Others viewed themselves as integrators, community builders, utopianists. Said one to *New York*, "we are preserving here a planner's dream, a natural mix of poor people and hippies and middle class. We don't want to fix things up too much, or else it will get too middle class. . . . This is one of the last natural melting pots." As Suleiman Osman, author of *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, explains, brownstoning "was a cultural revolt against 'sameness,' conformity and bureaucracy." Liberal-minded people were fleeing the stultifying suburbs of New Rochelle and the sterility of the Upper East Side, in search of "a vestige of an 'authentic community' lost in a modernizing society." This was old-fashioned gentrification, with negative and positive impacts—some displacement of the poor on the downside, the improvement of services on the up. Wherever white middle-class people go, police tag along. Crime goes down. The streets are swept clean, plowed of snow, and stocked with fresh produce. For some time, it might be possible for different classes to all enjoy, more or less, the same benefits. But equilibrium is not sustained. There is a force that presses for inequality.

In the twenty-first century, in a shockingly short amount of time, Brooklyn's character in the collective global consciousness changed. No more the old Dodgers and Nathan's Famous hot dogs, salty crowds of Coney Island, everyday people and ethnic diversity, dockworkers and factory workers. No more *fuggedaboutit*. No more *Do the Right Thing*. Brooklyn no more the low-rise city of high church steeples, industrial riverbank, streets full of stoops full of kids watched by grandmothers leaning on windowsills. In the twenty-first century, Brooklyn became a highly coveted international brand—as it topped the list of the most expensive places to live in America. And this shift wasn't natural. It was by design.

At the end of 2014, *Bloomberg Business* reported that Brooklyn, "where a resident would need to devote 98 percent of the median income to afford the payment on a median-priced home of $615,000, was the least-affordable" place to buy a home in the United States. One real estate broker told the *Times*, "Brooklyn has become unaffordable. For normal, middle-class people with good credit, we used to be able to say, 'We can find you something.'" But no more. Not even in working-class neighborhoods. Not even for the "normal" people.

"Brooklyn is the new Manhattan," journalists repeat. Brooklyn is cool. Manhattan is not. Brooklyn is literary. Manhattan is not. Brooklyn is creative and progressive, the place where new things are happening. Manhattan is dull, conservative, stuck in its ways. All the cool people live in Brooklyn. Young artists and queers, both white and of color, live in collectives where half a dozen housemates split the rent and fight over who ate the last gluten-free vegan cookie while negotiating the complex territories of polyamory. For my own young artist friends, the East Village is now irrelevant. They've never even visited. They make their art and live their lives exclusively in Brooklyn. This looks like good fortune—finally, a real bohemian enclave

in corporatized New York!—but locomotive hyper-gentrification is revving at their door. The kids are barely hanging on, already priced out as they price out those with less money and less cultural capital, attracting speculators and stroller pushers who push everyone deeper into the borough and beyond.

Word spreads fast thanks to the Internet. Social media, nonexistent before the 2000s, speeds up the process. In the past, a cool neighborhood filled with members of the counterculture, along with their bookstores, cafés, and street theater, might maintain its avant-garde status for decades, while bohemians and blue-collars managed to coexist, if sometimes uneasily. Today, when cool moves in, big money follows fast. It's a strategy cooked up in boardrooms and City Hall. The bohemians and lower classes are swept away, pressed to the oceanic edge of the continent. This is the story of Brooklyn in the 2000s. And it all began with Williamsburg.

WILLIAMSBURG

Only occasionally do I go to Brooklyn. I like to visit its sleepy streets and the more industrial parts that still stand, but I don't want to live there. I have nothing against the borough, but to me it has always felt like the country, too far away, too much a reminder of the place I left behind. Lately, I've been looking at its shores from my side of the East River. Directly across from the East Village is Williamsburg. Not long ago, the waterfront was nothing but low buildings, factories, and smokestacks. I used to sit by the river and gaze across at the Domino Sugar factory. It looked like a Rube Goldberg device, with its tangle of contraptions, tubes, and tanks, conveyor bridge connecting the hulking brick refinery to a tower where the Domino sign glowed yellow: SUGAR. An abundance of church steeples once pricked the horizon above the modest skyline. In the light of a fading afternoon, everything along the waterfront would be toasted brown, smutty

and low, punctured by those white steeples. But now the Domino factory is being destroyed for a major development of glittering glass towers soaring fifty-five stories into the air. The low brown buildings are vanishing fast. And the steeples, if they haven't been decapitated in the rush to convert churches into condos, are blocked from view by more glass towers, each one as sleek and dull as the last. More and more, along the waterfront, Williamsburg looks like Miami Beach.

It was the old East Village that spawned the new Williamsburg in the 1990s. A handful of artists had already found cheap rents just one stop across the river on the L train. In *The Last Bohemia,* Robert Anasi describes the depressed industrial neighborhood in 1988 as a ghost town, desolate and dusty, full of rats and shuttered storefronts. It was a blue-collar neighborhood gone to seed, though light industry still flourished. The few artists scattered about mostly went unnoticed. Then someone noticed. In a 1992 *New York* cover story, Brad Gooch published "The New Bohemia: Portrait of an Artist's Colony in Brooklyn." In all its desolation, Williamsburg had been "discovered." A cross-dressing performance artist named Medea de Vyse announced, "In the 1980s, it was the East Village. In the 1990s, it will be Williamsburg."

"By 1999," writes Anasi, the Northside of Williamsburg "was changing so fast that every trip down Bedford made my head swivel. 'When did that get here?' Or, 'When did that place close?'" The new stuff was yoga, art books, record shops. At night, cops arrived to patrol the streets they'd long neglected, harassing loiterers. Big money was on its way. In that same moment, the contemporary hipster first made the scene. And no discussion of today's Brooklyn can avoid the hipster.

Hipster is an old word, but in the book *What Was the Hipster?* Mark Greif places its contemporary rebirth in the year 1999. Unlike *bohemian* or *punk* of the past, *hipster,* according to Greif, identifies a "subculture of people who are already dominant." These are not your underdogs carving out a place to breathe free. The modern-day hip-

ster "aligns himself *both* with rebel subculture *and* with the dominant class." The hipster is thus the "rebel consumer" who rebels against nothing, the so-called artist who creates no art. The hipsters who flooded Brooklyn (and the entire Western world) in the 2000s might look like bohemians, says Greif, but they are not. They are not anti-authoritarian, like other youth subcultures through history. They drink the Kool-Aid of corporate consumer culture as they adopt a fauxhemian style. In a related essay in *New York*, Greif noted how hipsters can be found mixing with "anarchist, free, vegan, environmentalist, punk, and even anti-capitalist communities." The hipster thus infiltrates, appropriates, and commodifies these countercultures, creating elite trends and brands in collaboration with consumer culture.

It was through this process of hipsterization that the New Brooklyn brand was developed and globally disseminated, filling cities with carbon copies of its high-priced coffee bars, rooftop beehives, lumbersexual chic, hyperlocal fetishism, neoprimitive interior design of the rustic and repurposed, curly mustaches and the wax to go with them, all that is twee, all that is "artisanal" and "small batch" and "bespoke." Cafés that serve nothing but breakfast cereal. Artisanally buttered toast for four dollars a slice. Places and products are now branded "Brooklyn" across the world—mostly across Europe—in London, Stockholm, Belgium, Hamburg, Amsterdam. Pity poor Paris, its own bohemian culture destroyed, gone crazy for "Brooklyn Rive Gauche." In 2015 the *Wall Street Journal* reported that, on the once-lefty Left Bank, luxury department store Le Bon Marché was showcasing all things Brooklyn, elevating the borough's hipster trends to high fashion. Paris even has an ersatz diner named after Williamsburg's Bedford Avenue, the fountainhead of hipsterism (and now one of the most expensive retail corridors in America). In stilted English, the diner's website says, "Feel like in Brooklyn!" Which means, "meet friends, feel the cheddar smell, eat with your hands inside or in the streets." Brooklyn has become a global consumer movement born from one neighborhood that was "discovered," became

trendy, and then went supernova when the city government and its developer pals swooped in with big plans.

In 2005 the City Council backed the Bloomberg administration's plan to rezone nearly two hundred blocks of Williamsburg and neighboring Greenpoint, with emphasis on the waterfront. The rezoning, wrote the *Times*, "would transform the long-crumbling waterfront into a residential neighborhood complete with 40-story luxury apartment buildings, shops and manicured recreation areas." While Jane Jacobs excoriated the plan in her letter to Bloomberg, calling it "an ugly and intractable mistake," he handed out a stack of golden tickets—twenty-five-year tax abatements to condominium developers. Like those Grow Monster capsules that explode when you drop them in water, the new Williamsburg instantly swelled.

Su Friedrich's documentary *Gut Renovation* captures this startling change in action. Friedrich moved to Williamsburg in 1989 to live affordably with other artists and queers. In 2005, right after the rezoning, Friedrich started filming. In the span of just five years, we see the neighborhood remade and its population shift. Thriving industrial businesses are evicted—machine shops, garages, bread and egg distribution warehouses—their buildings are demolished, and luxury condos go in like gangbusters. Friedrich tallies the new construction on a map, coloring each parcel with a red Magic Marker. She counts them off: "63, 64, 65 . . ." Designer dogs, baby strollers, and nannies flood the neighborhood. "90, 91, 92 . . ." Developers in dark suits march down the sidewalks. "121, 122, 123 . . ." It's only three years into the rezoning. "166, 167, 168, 169, 170 . . ." Exhausted, Friedrich finally stops at 173 new buildings in 2010. Many more were to come—and are still in the works. That's how fast a Bloomberg upzoning could utterly change a neighborhood.

In 2010, Duane Reade, a ubiquitous regional drugstore chain owned by Walgreens, opened on Bedford Avenue. Said one local to the *Times*, "It's becoming the East Village." (Let us just pause to note, with bowed heads, that young people now associate the old coun-

tercultural neighborhood with chain stores.) Other newcomers to Williamsburg welcomed the chains. One woman pushing a stroller said she was "elated." She told the paper, "Please, can you bring in Dunkin' Donuts too. I also want a Bank of America." She went on to proudly admit that she spent time writing emails to chains, begging them to open in Williamsburg. She got her wish—a Dunkin' Donuts opened on Bedford in 2013. "What the fuck," said a hipster to the *Daily News*.

By 2014, the chains went upscale with the arrival of J.Crew. They used a clever strategy to win over the "rebel consumers" who lust for everything artisanal, neoprimitive, and rustic. The store's executive creative director told *Brooklyn Magazine* how she instructed her team to "pull local artisans from the neighborhood" to help design the store. "I've lived in Brooklyn," she said. "I know people want it to feel local, they want it to feel intimate." Fighting community opposition, Starbucks turned to a similar strategy when they opened their second Williamsburg location in 2014 (their first had arrived just four months earlier). On opening day, greeters welcomed customers, telling them it was "the coolest Starbucks you're ever going to go into." DNAinfo reported that the interior was filled with "curated decor from neighborhood artists," and soon there would be "coffee seminars" and music from local bands. Activist Reverend Billy told Gothamist, "Sbux wants to persuade the hipsters that it is descended from Cabaret Voltaire, but it's only a chain store with bad coffee, with no cultural impact of any kind. Starbucks comes down out of the mountains after the cultural battle has been fought, to steal from the dead." Not all the kids were falling for the mega-chain's faux-local performance. One young resident said, "I'm pissed about it. This is not Manhattan."

But it was looking a lot like it. From 2000 to 2013, the population of the rezoned area grew much faster than the rest of the city—and it shifted dramatically. The white population increased by 44 percent while Latinos declined by 27 percent.

With the condos and the yuppies and the chains, with rents skyrocketing and working-class people and artists evicted, with cultural institutions vanished, one thing was clear: Williamsburg—the old and the new—was dead. The CHERYL artist collective held a dance party funeral. Costumes like Starbucks Barista and Scrooge McDuck were encouraged. "Of course Williamsburg is dead, it was dead three years ago," a woman in glitter face paint told the *Observer*. "It's all about Bushwick now." As the hipsters and bohemians migrated, journalists scrambled to christen one working-class neighborhood after another "The New Williamsburg." Bushwick, Greenpoint, Bed-Stuy, Crown Heights, East New York, Sunset Park. No place was out of reach.

The Williamsburg Diaspora

The hipsters and artists of Williamsburg, along with the everyday young folks who want to be around hipsters and artists, have pushed outward, straining against and breaking through the boundaries of the neighborhood. In the north, they pressed into the Italian-American enclave along Graham Avenue. During the sacred processions of Catholic saints, hipsters and yuppies stood at the sidelines and looked on with derision, brunch plans inconvenienced by the small parades. "There was one float and a horrible marching band," one onlooker scoffed to the *Times*. "It was very ironic." Unable to grasp the utter lack of irony in a Catholic procession, another bystander dropped his pants, baring his ass to the Italians. "It's something I never saw in my lifetime," said a parade coordinator. "As a man, I wanted to grab him and smash him against a wall."

Meanwhile, in the southern part of Williamsburg, the Hasidic Jewish community panicked as the people they called the *Artisten* invaded their cloistered streets. In 2004, at a Hasidic protest against a new luxury condo, a community member handed out flyers printed

with a prayer begging God to "please remove from upon us the plague of the artists, so that we shall not drown in evil waters, and so that they shall not come to our residence to ruin it. Please place in the hearts of the homeowners that they should not build." War broke out between the two groups in 2009 after the city installed bike lanes, bringing a river of immodestly dressed *Artisten* breezing through.

The neighborhood's borders could not hold the expansion of new pioneers and they burst forth, pressing into Bushwick to the east and Greenpoint to the north. With its vast industrial spaces ideal for studios, Bushwick had sheltered a small artist community since the 1990s. By the mid-2000s this working-class, predominantly Latino neighborhood was "discovered." In 2006, the *Times* released a report titled "Psst . . . Have You Heard About Bushwick?" It was, wrote Robert Sullivan, "the next new neighborhood or, more precisely, a neighborhood that is now in the sights of New York City real-estate agents and developers as the next new neighborhood."

Luxury developers came clamoring—bringing the brutal frontier myth with them. In 2014, the Colony arrived. A residential development marketed toward young professionals, Colony 1209 advertised itself using Manifest Destiny as its unabashed theme. "Let's Homestead, Bushwick-style," read the website, calling the neighborhood "Brooklyn's new frontier." *Colonization* was once a dirty word. No more. The website continued: "Here you'll find a group of like-minded settlers, mixing the customs of their original homeland with those of one of NYC's most historic neighborhoods to create art, community, and a new lifestyle." And don't worry, the website promised, "we already surveyed the territory for you," evoking images of scouting parties sent ahead of wagon trains to hunt for hostile natives. The Colony was publicly subsidized, too, with a fifteen-year abatement expected to save the developers about $8 million in taxes. More than one hundred protesters gathered outside the building to call for an end to the 421a tax abatement program. The Colony's developer responded by changing the building's controversial name to its address, 1209 DeKalb, and scrapping the Manifest Destiny rhetoric. Nothing else changed. Except the rents. They went up.

North of Williamsburg, Greenpoint received its share of wandering pilgrims. An industrial center and home to Polish immigrants as early as the 1800s, by the dawn of the twenty-first century Greenpoint remained a predominantly Polish and Latino blue-collar neighborhood. Hyper-gentrification is changing that.

In 2009 I took a few walks through Greenpoint to observe a neighborhood in flux. On Manhattan Avenue, Polish and Latino culture prevailed. There were greasy spoon diners and an abundance of Polish restaurants, the fragrance of kielbasa wafting to the street. Ninety-nine-cent stores spilled their wares to the sidewalk, racks and racks of floral housecoats for grandmothers to wear while frying pierogi or empanadas in their linoleum-covered kitchens. There was—and thankfully still is—the gorgeous Peter Pan Donut Shop with its curving counter filled not yet with hipsters, but crotchety Poles seated on swivel stools, nursing their coffees and sugar-glazed. Among a handful of low-budget chain businesses, there were several small local stores, including Irving Feller's furrier shop, opened in 1916, its dusty window full of animal pelts and strings of Christmas garland. At the 3 Decker coffee shop, the owners, a Greek couple, bickered back and forth, shouting, "*And* the horse you rode in on!" The feeling on Manhattan Avenue was very different from the streets of gentrified New York. Few people talked or texted on smartphones. No one bumped into me. People said "excuse me" and held the door. When I sneezed, strangers said, "Bless you." Then I walked one block toward the waterfront, to Franklin Street.

Running parallel to Manhattan Avenue, Franklin Street was another world inhabited by a different breed. Though its sidewalks were far less crowded, within minutes of stepping onto Franklin, people bumped into me. They didn't say "excuse me" or acknowledge my

existence. They didn't move to the right like the people on Manhattan Avenue did. The people just one block west didn't know how to walk in New York. Who were they? Why were they here? The street was filled with upscale boutiques, bars, craft beer stores, outdoor cafés, and specialty coffee places where woolly bearded men gazed fixedly into the glow of laptops. Back on Manhattan Avenue I had overheard a woman say to her daughter, "When I was a girl, I wasn't spoiled. My mother disciplined me." On Franklin Street I overheard a woman say to her friend, "Oh my God, *try* the iced tea. It's blood orange and *pear*. Amazing. *Especially* when you've got a *huge* hangover."

In the spring of 2012, Lena Dunham set her hit series *Girls* in Greenpoint. There was talk of tourist buses. Three months later, the *Times* declared Greenpoint the new Williamsburg. Old factories were converted to condos with million-dollar penthouses, young members of the "digerati" flaunted their tattoos, and oh, the smell of patchouli! "Vinyl siding doesn't represent Greenpoint's cachet any longer," the article read, referring to the neighborhood's style of working-class houses; "virtual doormen, rooftop farms, artisanal gin and brick-faced condominiums do." Still, Greenpoint hasn't exploded like Williamsburg. The settlers who could not endure Greenpoint's crummy public transportation, nor its status as a toxic spill zone, with a reeking wastewater treatment plant (affectionately referred to locally as the "Shit Tits" for its digester eggs' resemblance to breasts), hitched their wagons and lit out for other neighborhoods along the Williamsburg border.

In the midst of all this overspreading, the Levi's jeans company plastered the city with an ad campaign starring Brooklyn poet Walt Whitman. "Go Forth," was the slogan, a phrase implicitly followed by "and multiply." Was Levi's capitalizing on the Manifest Destiny takeover of Brooklyn? In one commercial, played on movie screens across town, dozens of denim-clad hipster types cavort while

an artfully scratchy, antiqued recording plays Whitman's "Pioneers, O Pioneers!"

> We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt
> of danger,
> We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us
> depend,
> Pioneers! O pioneers!

It is no coincidence that the artisanal culture of the new Brooklyn so much resembles Olde-Timey America, with its rustic everything, its mason jar picklings, its classes on how to sharpen a felling axe, its heavy-duty denim aprons (for your leisure-time blacksmithing), and its beards. Good Lord, its superabundance of nineteenth-century beards. For the record, I like a good beard, but I'm not going to deny that something's being signified. In their copious facial hair, the new men of Brooklyn look like colonists. They could be homesteading the Great Plains. And for the ladies, there are actual bonnets, that "pioneer accessory" with the "fabulously fresh-off-the-*Mayflower* vibe," according to *Paper* when it announced the hot new trend of 2015. What deep cellular strain of nostalgia is this? Onward, wagons, ho!

The Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, known as Bed-Stuy, has long been synonymous with danger, its slogan: "Bed-Stuy Do or Die." (A trendy restaurant called "Do or Dine" opened in 2011 and became briefly famous for its foie gras doughnuts before closing in 2015.) Abutting the southernmost margin of Williamsburg, Bed-Stuy was known as early as the 1930s as "Little Harlem." A cradle of African-American culture, site of race riots in the 1960s and high crime through the '80s, celebrated in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, Bed-Stuy has been a solidly black neighborhood with roots going back to the 1830s, when freedman James Weeks established the commu-

nity of Weeksville as a haven for African Americans fleeing slavery and racism. In 2001, Bed-Stuy was 75 percent black, with middle-class African Americans as its first gentrifiers. In 2007, the Bloomberg administration rezoned two hundred blocks of Bed-Stuy. During that decade, the black population dropped to 60 percent as the number of white residents increased dramatically. The *Times* reported: "From 2000 to 2010, the white population soared 633 percent—the biggest percentage increase of any major racial or ethnic group in any New York City neighborhood." In 2012, Bloomberg rezoned another 140 blocks. One year later, Bed-Stuy sold its first million-dollar apartment. Said the *Post*, "There goes the neighborhood."

On a walk through Bed-Stuy today, you'll pass luxury condos wedged between run-down houses, empty lots being prepped for luxury construction, and plywood fences plastered with posters that ask, "Leaving New York?" They offer a number to call to sell your lease to newcomers. Signs for realtors' open houses lead you into renovated brownstones, through pristine rooms, up glossy staircases to roof decks outfitted with banquettes and views of a neighborhood in the throes. New espresso shops sell five-dollar cups of coffee mixed with grass-fed butter and coconut oil, an oleaginous brew that's barely drinkable. New bars offer "Brooklyn kombucha" on tap. And at least one café specializes in baking "small-batch" kolache, a Czech pastry that's highly popular in the midwestern American prairie. Go inside each place and you will find young, upper-class, mostly white people staring into Apple screens, comfortable in their digital pods. That isolationism is a bone of contention.

"Normally you come to a neighborhood, you try to get to know the community," said one African-American Bed-Stuy resident to Neil deMause in *The Brooklyn Wars*. But the white newcomers, said another, "don't want to mix, they don't want to mingle." This is a frequent complaint.

In *The Edge Becomes the Center: An Oral History of Gentrification in the Twenty-First Century*, D. W. Gibson talked with some of the people

and players in today's Bed-Stuy. Shatia Strother, an African-American woman and longtime resident, told how Bed-Stuy always had pockets of wealthy people, "Just not in such large numbers and not in this take-over mentality." Many of the new people, she explained, see Bed-Stuy as a "pit stop" to whatever's next in life. They "come here like we have a little more money, we're driving rents up, we're not going to be involved, we're going to walk down the street with our headphones. We're just here to find the cool bars and restaurants, and we're not really engaged in the larger community." Strother tells them, "Look people in the eye . . . and acknowledge that I'm existing." This isn't true of all the newcomers, of course. Plenty do mix, mingle, and acknowledge, fostering a diverse and integrated experience of the city. Unfortunately, the neighborly folks seem to be outnumbered—and outgunned by more powerful forces.

In his book, Gibson also talked with a young Hasidic real estate developer who brazenly outlined the racial mathematics at work today in changing Brooklyn. Ephraim (a pseudonym) explained how he removes rent-regulated African-American tenants, getting them out of their buildings with lowball buyouts. "The average price for a black person here in Bed-Stuy," he said, "is $30,000." After taxes, that might be just enough to take with you as you leave the city for a more affordable town, maybe down south or upstate, but it will get you nowhere in New York. This is a form of displacement, a one-way ticket out of the city for the poor and working-class African-American population, a tactic for turning neighborhoods over to the upper class and the white. As Ephraim said of blacks in Bed-Stuy, "Everyone wants them to leave, not because we don't like them, it's just they're messing up—they bring everything down." In a low voice, he added, "If there's a black tenant in the house—in every building we have, I put in white tenants. They want to know if black people are going to be living there." If they see one black person in the building, the new white tenants "get all riled up, they call me: 'We're not paying that much money to have black people live in the building.'"

To the south of Bed-Stuy is Crown Heights. Originally one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Brooklyn, by the 1920s it became host to a mix of new immigrants—Jewish, Italian, and Caribbean. After World War II, with redlining, suburbanization, and white flight, it became a predominantly African-American neighborhood, gaining infamy in 1991 for race riots between its black and Hasidic Jewish populations. The 2000s brought an influx of middle-class and affluent whites. "According to census data," reported the *Times* in 2015, "the black population shrank to 70 percent from 79 percent from 2000 to 2010, and the white population almost doubled to 16 percent." Cops showed up to control the streets, hassling black shop owners. New businesses opened, selling organic food and expensive coffee. Landlords harassed longtime tenants, pushing them out. Rents went up by as much as 36 percent. Poor and working-class people of color were forced to move deeper into Brooklyn, or to crowd in with families to help pay the escalating rent. Many had no choice but to leave the city, moving to the South their grandparents had left, or going back to the Caribbean. Commercial rents doubled and then tripled. Longtime small businesses shuttered. In just the two years between 2011 and 2013, dozens of shiny new restaurants arrived in their place.

In 2011, the *Wall Street Journal* announced: "Crown Heights Rediscovered." In 2012, the *Times* called it a "rebirth," with Franklin Avenue as "the epicenter of a renaissance, the next subway stop on Brooklyn's gentrification express." Amanda Burden praised the changes created by the Bloomberg administration's rezonings and other measures. In a 2012 *Times* profile on her work as city planner, Burden said, "We are making so many more areas of the city livable. Now, young people are moving to neighborhoods like Crown Heights that 10 years ago wouldn't have been part of the lexicon." Livable for whom? Which young people? Whose lexicon?

In 2014, Franklin Avenue got a Starbucks. One developer explained it to the *Times:* "People who pay top dollar want to have the new Brooklyn retail experience." Goldman Sachs, dedicating itself to "making catalytic investments in neighborhoods across New York," started dumping tens of millions into Crown Heights in an attempt to create the next Williamsburg. So don't say it's natural. Don't call it market forces. Today, walking down Franklin, you'll find the landscape of hyper-gentrification in rapid process. Next to older wig shops and bodegas, new cafés and brunch spots boast crowds of young newcomers clustered outside, waiting by chalkboard signs that advertise CUTE DRINKS and CHOCOLATE, QUICHE, NEW FRIENDS . . . GENTLE, WARM, & COURTEOUS. A sign in a new restaurant window orders passersby to EAT DRINK SMILE. Selling what sounds a lot like the midwestern phenomenon of "Minnesota Nice" (often described as passive-aggressive), the new businesses want the new residents to believe that the new Crown Heights is a nice and gentle place, loaded with smiles and cuteness. Once again, when did New Yorkers need smiles and cuteness? And what if you don't feel like smiling? What if you don't have much to smile about? (In *White Like Me,* people of color tell Tim Wise, "Minnesota Nice is *killing* us.")

In 2015, Common opened in the neighborhood. Occupying the entire building at 1162 Pacific Street, it is located directly across from the Bedford-Atlantic Armory, a homeless shelter for men since 1982. Described as "flexible shared housing," Common is a "curated" living space in which eighteen people pay $1,950 each per month for a single room and the supposed pleasures of living with a crowd. Potluck dinners, coffee deliveries, and free toilet paper are provided in the old-timey glow of Edison bulbs, the ubiquitous design element of twenty-first-century gentrification. With doors programmed to open with a swipe and a tap from your thousand-dollar Apple Watch, Common is not for the common people. It's a designer SRO. When Common's founder first saw 1162 Pacific Street, he thought it had "the potential to incubate a strong, tight-knit community of members" with its exposed brick walls, rear garden, and roof deck. Plus, "it was totally vacant, just emerging from a full renovation." But how did the building become vacant?

On a dark winter morning in 2006, an arsonist poured accelerant over the floor of the stairwell and lit a match. The twenty-six residents all lost their homes. The founders and residents of Common had nothing to do with the fire; they came along years later, after the place was gutted and buffed, and likely had no idea about its tragic history. But this is part of gentrification, too. The domestic tragedies of the near past go unknown by the newcomers who benefit from them. The *Daily News* reported that this "hardscrabble stretch" of Pacific Street was the site of "nine intentionally set fires . . . in the last 15 months." People in the neighborhood blamed the arsons on "greed because the area lies near major redevelopment projects." The *Times* reported that arson investigators discovered the building had been "part of a complicated mortgage fraud scheme." People went to jail. I don't know what happened to the residents of 1162, only that their building showed up empty, renovated, and priced at $4 million. Where did those twenty-six people go? Maybe some of them are now sleeping in the homeless shelter across the street, a site targeted by the Bloomberg-era Economic Development Corporation for a $14 million redevelopment. Proposals included an ice-skating rink and a rock-climbing facility. Those plans have since been put on the back burner, but as the neighborhood changes, as more new people move in, how long will it be before they start complaining about the shelter and clamoring for more amenities?

Beyond the Diaspora

Gowanus is not "Williamsburg adjacent," as the brokers like to put it, but it has still attracted artists—and developers. Farther south and west than the Williamsburg diaspora territories, it is an industrial, working-class neighborhood that sits between Park Slope and Carroll Gardens. An oily oasis of urban wilderness in the middle of bourgeois brownstone Brooklyn, it straddles the Gowanus Canal, which has been

mainlining pollution since the middle of the nineteenth century. One of the most toxic waterways in the United States, the canal is full of shit. Literally. The surface bobs with human feces, brown blobs drifting through rainbowed oil slicks. Gonorrhea, among other unsavory ingredients, has been found in this water. During heavy rains, the canal floods the neighborhood. In 2007, a young minke whale wandered in from the harbor, spent a day cruising the canal, and promptly died. New Yorkers nicknamed the poor creature "Sludgie." In 2015, environmental activist Christopher Swain swam the canal. He prepped for his stunt with hepatitis and tetanus shots, wrapped his body in waterproof suits, and plugged his orifices with wax. He told reporters, "It's just like swimming through a dirty diaper." I stood at the edge of the canal and watched him do a slow breaststroke through the cloudy green water. Each time he rose and fell, the water lapped against his mouth. I yelled out, "What does it taste like?" He yelled back, "Tastes like metal, detergent, and gas!" The woman kayaking beside him for safety added, "Tastes like poop." After his swim, Swain doused himself with bleach. You do not fuck around with the Gowanus.

Working-class and poor people have long lived in this unwanted place. Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican, even a community of Native North Americans, hundreds of Canadian Mohawks who immigrated in the 1920s to work the city's high-steel construction. Artists have been attracted to the area since the 1970s, when they found large, inexpensive studio space and established collectives. The artists have enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with the local metalworking shops, lumber yards, glass suppliers, stonecutters, and others from whom they buy materials. In a building known as the Batcave, a nineteenth-century power station abandoned by the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company, teen runaways, anarchists, punks, and graffiti writers formed a squatter community amid the squalor. In the 2000s they encircled the top of the building with a message for commuters to see from the elevated F train: OPEN YOUR EYES! NO MORE CORPORATE BULLSHIT! FUK WALL ST.

Then the luxury developers descended. They keep putting up glitzy condos, even while the sinks, toilets, and shower drains of Gowanus periodically belch forth a foamy brown goo. Around 2005, the billionaire "King of Diamonds" Lev Leviev and real estate magnate Shaya Boymelgreen bought the Batcave with plans to turn it into "Gowanus Village," a complex of luxury apartments and townhouses. The NYPD raided the place and tossed out the squatters. It will now become Powerhouse Workshop, a gritty-glitzy center for the arts.

In 2009, the Bloomberg administration gave a sweetheart deal to the Toll Brothers, creators of the suburban McMansion. Toll asked the city for a "spot rezoning" to turn a three-acre chunk of Gowanus into a tract for a large luxury residential building. The city obliged. When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency designated the area as a Superfund hazardous waste cleanup site and Toll backed out, the Lightstone Group took over and built a residential mega-complex with amenities like yoga and wine tasting, plus a waterfront "esplanade park" complete with boat launch and "water access point." In the dreamy renderings of what's to come, the canal is wreathed in green vegetation. Smiling people walk verdant paths and ply blue waters in kayaks. Lightstone calls it "a pioneer among parks."

In 2015, more than 250 artists and small businesses were evicted when a team of developers bought up a portfolio of buildings. Protesters stood in the streets and chalked the sides of the buildings with #KEEPGOWANUSCREATIVE and #STOPARTISTEVICTIONS. Not everyone agreed. In an op-ed, editors at the *Daily News* gave notice to those who might protect the neighborhood and its inhabitants from the luxury onslaught: "We respectfully send this message to the enemies of Gowanus gentrification: You've already lost. Stroll the streets and you will find . . . signs of—gasp!—gentrified life." They're right. Landlords have toppled the Eagle Clothes and Kentile Floors signs, the spectacular neon icons of the neighborhood's industrial heritage. Trendy eateries have moved in. And there's Whole Foods,

that hyper-gentrification machine, 56,000 square feet of price-inflated, self-congratulatory grocery shopping. And it didn't show up by accident—the state's Brownfield Cleanup Program gave Whole Foods $12.9 million in taxpayer-funded credits to build on contaminated land it would also clean up.

The mega-chain tries very hard to *feel* local, catering to the post-Williamsburg set with sections hawking "Brooklyn Flavor," bike repair services, and a shop selling vinyl, both records and objects made from recycled records by "a Brooklyn-based design and lifestyle brand." There's even a nineteenth-centuryish, mustachioed artisanal knife sharpener, dressed in a heavy-duty denim smock to cobble together handmade knives from reclaimed materials. Outside, beyond the extra-large parking lot, Whole Foods has landscaped their bank of the canal with a footpath and gardens. You can sit on a bench and watch the scrapyard across the way, waiting for dead dogs to go floating by. Couples meander, hand in hand, breathing in the stink of raw sewage. On one of the garden walls is a piece of graffiti that must have been commissioned by the supermarket. With its hunter-green color matching the branded shade of the Whole Foods logo banners just above, the rustically rough, spray-painted message admonishes passersby to EAT MORE OF YOUR VEGETABLES. Cartoonist Adrian Tomine lampooned the scene on a *New Yorker* cover, showing a couple seated on a bench, the bearded man sipping red wine, the woman eating a cracker and cheese, both ignoring their baby as it crawls into the canal. Tomine said, "It's strange to see the recent proliferation of health-conscious and environmentally conscious restaurants and grocery stores, right next to the piles of scrap and rubble. I guess it proves that there's no part of the city that can't be revitalized, recontextualized, or ruined—depending on your point of view." Pushing the envelope, in 2017, global retailer Anthropologie debuted a "breezy cotton tunic" they call the Gowanus dress. It sells for $188.

Atlantic Yards is currently the biggest development project in Brooklyn and probably the most controversial. Announced in 2003,

plans for the project originally entailed the takeover of twenty-two acres near Downtown Brooklyn for sixteen high-rise residential towers, glossy retail, and the Barclays Center, a sports arena for the Brooklyn Nets, the basketball team then owned by the development's mega-developer, Bruce Ratner. The footprint on which it all would rise included a rail yard, a number of businesses, and several people's homes. Governor George Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg supported the use of eminent domain to seize the properties. The Empire State Development Corporation agreed to designate the area as blight, a requirement for eminent domain. Ratner would get the land to build on, along with a bonus of more than $1 billion in public money, subsidies from the city, state, and its taxpayers. Brooklynites fought the plan for years—and lost.

I went out to the footprint in 2007. It was quiet. Many residents had already been bought out and silenced with gag orders. The area had once been full of people. The *Village Voice* reported that community activist Patti Hagan took a door-to-door census before the emptying and found "463 residents who either rented or owned, plus 400 people in a homeless shelter, and many small businesses, employing a total of 225 people." One of those residents was the ninety-four-year-old artist Louise Bourgeois, whose studio was at 475 Dean Street, a former garment factory that had housed artists since the 1980s. At the time of my visit, maybe a few dozen holdouts remained, like Daniel Goldstein, leader of the opposition; along with people who'd been there for decades and didn't want to give up their homes, some of which had been in their families for generations; and those with nowhere to go, like eighty-seven-year-old Victoria Harmon, in a wheelchair after a stroke. She told the *Voice*, "What do you think? I want to go out at this age? Where? I don't know nobody. Here I know everybody."

As I walked through the desolate footprint I passed buildings slated for demolition, including the hundred-year-old Ward's Bakery, its lovely architectural details hidden behind plywood. Murals

painted on cinder-block walls and roll-down gates showed a grasping hand and the words: "Ratner—Hands Off Our Homes." At Freddy's Bar & Backroom, once a hangout for Dodgers fans, the walls were plastered in antidevelopment posters and graffiti. One message, addressed to Ratner, Bloomberg, and Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, read: "Fuck you you fucking fucks," followed by no less than eight exclamation points and a smiley face. Freddy's would soon be forced to move, its building demolished.

By 2010, the state government had grown tired of fighting the holdouts. They gave a thirty-day eviction notice to twenty-two families and businesses. One resident, fifty-seven-year-old Maria Gonzalez, told the *Daily News*, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't find an apartment." She'd been living on Pacific Street for thirty-seven years, while the borough around her had become unaffordable. By 2015, the number of holdouts had dwindled considerably. There was Jerry Campbell, hanging on to a house he'd inherited from his grandfather, and Aaron Piller, son of a Holocaust survivor, still running his father's wholesale wool business. When his father died in 2013, Piller told the *Times*, "I don't want to trivialize what happened by comparing this to the Holocaust, but in the end, he felt like here was the government again, coming to take everything from him." As for Campbell, in 2015 the state of New York seized his house, changed the locks, and posted a security guard at the door. The house was then condemned and demolished, along with two flowering trees. "This was my grandfather's home," Campbell told the *Daily News* in 2016. "This was his legacy and now it is gone."

Meanwhile, the Barclays Center opened to great fanfare and Atlantic Yards tried to shed its controversial history by changing its name to Pacific Park. Commercial rents skyrocketed across the neighborhood, forcing local businesses to shutter. WNYC radio noted that many Brooklynites call Barclays an "'ugly rusting spaceship' that's invaded the neighborhood and abducted mom-and-pop shops in its wake." The Pintchik family, local landlords with a large

parcel of properties, contributed to the upscale place-making. Jess Pintchik told WNYC: "We're going for Park Slope meets Meatpacking, a well-cultivated and curated group of tenants, and we really want to help change the neighborhood." Already, many people don't remember what came before. As Bloomberg once said of the mega-project, "Nobody's gonna remember how long it took, they're only gonna look and see that it was done." He was right. Today, few people talk about the land grab and evictions. They talk about basketball games and rock concerts. "The forgetting began before the arena opened," wrote Norman Oder on his blog, Atlantic Yards Report, but "[t]he controversy, the deception, and the obfuscation continue."

What will be the last "last frontier" for Brooklyn's settlers? As of this writing, it is East New York, Sunset Park, and even, at the outermost edge, Bay Ridge. Once again, it won't be natural.

A 2015 editorial in *Crain's* titled "Gentrify East New York" urged the city government to attract wealthy residents to this "forlorn area at the far end of Brooklyn that has missed out on the borough's renaissance." Mayor de Blasio unveiled plans to rezone the neighborhood as part of a $41 billion city-wide plan to create more "affordable" housing (a fiercely debated concept), along with much more market-rate housing. Just five months after the mayor's announcement, prices on East New York real estate nearly tripled.

At the other end of Brooklyn, Sunset Park is being rejiggered. Developed by Atlanta's Jamestown Properties, Industry City has taken over a sixteen-building collection of industrial warehouses to incubate tech start-ups, "maker spaces," and artisanal-food flea markets. According to the website City Limits, Jamestown is going after "a city rezoning to allow for a hotel and other new uses, plus $115 million in taxpayer money for expanded parking, upgraded roads, and a new water taxi service to serve day-tripping shoppers." The displacement has begun. Nearby landlords are harassing tenants, trying to push them out. Small local businesses are being forced out by hiked rents. And the artists, whose presence was leveraged to attract higher-income newcomers, are getting priced out of their studios. Meanwhile, in 2017, Industry City's Extraction Lab debuted an $18 cup of coffee, the most expensive in America.

Beyond Sunset Park is Bay Ridge, way out there, where John Travolta once strutted through the streets in *Saturday Night Fever*. I hear they've already got a wine bar and an art gallery. Outside a local dive, a sign's been posted: "Hipsters are what happens when you tell every child that they are special." Sounds like Bay Ridge is bracing itself. And I haven't even mentioned DUMBO or Red Hook or Ditmas (you can't cover it all) or . . . Coney Island. For that one, we're going to need another chapter.

ing grief. I reassure myself that everything's okay. This place is still surviving. You can still get a corn dog and a plate of fried clams. The Cyclone still gives people whiplash and the Wonder Wheel turns eternally on its sea-foam green spokes. The crowd is diverse, multicultural, working class. But there is something missing. Coney has lost its edge. Everything feels more controlled. Less alive.

For solace, I walk down to Williams Candy, a sweet little spot that's been here for about eighty years, and buy a small paper bag of malted milk balls. I'm the only customer. Everyone else is going to IT'SUGAR. Next door, the tables at one of the last honky-tonk clam shacks are empty. Ears of corn steam unwanted in hot water while families cram into Applebee's and Wahlburgers.

In his Coney Island history book, *Amusing the Million*, John Kasson writes that the Coney of the late 1800s, the epoch when our New York came to life, "encouraged extravagance, gaiety, abandon, revelry," as well as "the grotesque." The freaks symbolized "the exaggerated and excessive character of Coney Island as a whole," as the unusual bodies "displayed themselves openly as exceptions to the rules of the conventional world." When you get down to it, that's the definition of queer. So we might say that, for a century, New York was a queer city. Exceptional. Unconventional. Where gay meets pretty. Where the strange meets the beautiful.

What surprises are left for us now? What will shake us from our everyday lives, shocking and thrilling us with the unusual, the ambiguous, the fleshy, the loose? In a city so tightly curated and constrained, we are daily deprived of wonders hardly imagined.

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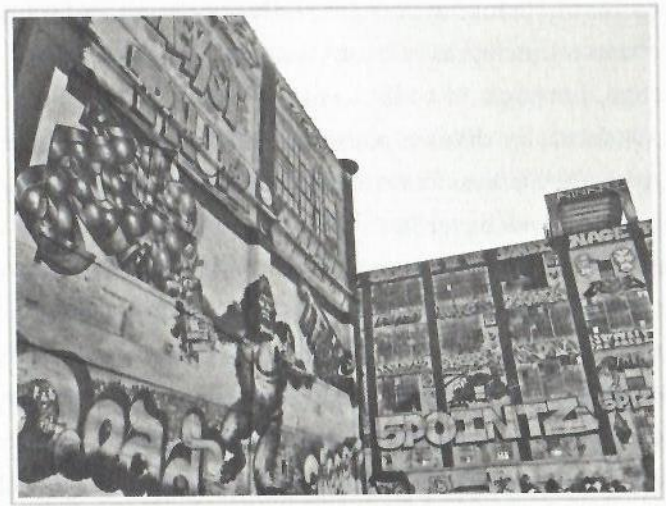
QUEENS



5 Pointz. *Jeremiah Moss, 2013*

THE FIRST TIME I SAW 5 POINTZ I WAS RIDING THE 7 TRAIN, THE Flushing local, out to Shea Stadium for a Mets game, somewhere in the early 1990s. You board at Grand Central, down in a dark and dripping tunnel where an old man plays "Besame Mucho" over and over on a Casio keyboard propped on a cardboard box. (Is he still there?) You plunge under the East River and emerge onto the elevated tracks in the sunlight of Long Island City. Queens. Borough of—what exactly? Archie Bunker. Faded ruins of the World's Fair. Airport, airport, racetrack. Far Rockaway with its bungalows and lullaby name.

I didn't see 5 Pointz coming, only that it was suddenly there, a bank of golden light, unfurled and filling the train window with its thrillingly hallucinatory vista of colors and shapes, faces, bodies, and bubbling texts. Was it even real? Known then as the Phun Phactory, the building that later became 5 Pointz was a five-story warehouse, as yellow as an unfrosted cake, splashed with graffiti from foundation to rooftop. It was one of those New York zones where the strange met the beautiful. That first time, it shocked and thrilled me, flashing kaleidoscopically before my eyes for only a moment, before the train hurtled on into the depths of unsentimental Queens.

Queens, borough of today's immigrants, is reportedly one of the most ethnically diverse places on the planet. But it has never been fashionable. Unless I'm missing something, Queens never had a golden age. It was never hot. Then, in 1980, some people tried to make it so. When *New York* magazine published a cover story heralding Long Island City, Queens, as "The Next Hot Neighborhood," the writer described an undiscovered gold mine just across the river from Midtown. A new frontier. "With its underutilized waterfront, postcard view of the Manhattan skyline, low property values, and the best transportation in the city, Long Island City just has to take off." Speculators were descending, buying up properties and mapping out a new neighborhood for the moneyed class. There would be luxury condos, floating restaurants, and glamorous art centers—though most Manhattanites had never heard of the place. Long Island City was still a living part of New York's riverside industrial landscape, a home for Pepsi-Cola, Swingline Staplers, Dentyne, and Chiclets, zoned for heavy industry in 1961 when manufacturers were forced out of lower Manhattan by the government. It was also home to several Latino and white ethnic working-class New Yorkers. Generations of Italians and Greeks lived there. People owned their homes. They hadn't fled to the suburbs. Unlike many redlined neighborhoods, Long Island City in 1980 was still healthy, industrious, far from decline.

"But it's stagnant," wrote *New York*. "And given City Hall's current bent toward gentrification—the conversion of poor, working-class areas into middle-class refuges—choice neighborhoods convenient to midtown can't be allowed to stagnate."

Among the blue-collar residents, artists lived and worked in Long Island City, priced out of Soho in the 1970s. The P.S. 1 artist's studio space opened in an abandoned elementary school in 1976 and was soon considered a catalyst for gentrification—as one artist told *New York*, "People like me are ruining my neighborhood." Throughout the 1980s, more artists moved in. Galleries opened. New restaurants served quiche. One lifelong resident told the *Times*, "it was the beginning of the end." But the end did not come just yet. Old-fashioned gentrification was not strong enough to dislodge the local community. So while speculators bought properties and sat on them, waiting for the hot new frontier to finally "happen," the working class and artists continued to live in relative harmony, undisturbed by revitalization, "stagnating," for the next two decades. In that stillness, creativity flourished.

In the early 1990s, Pat DiLillo, a disabled plumber from Woodside, Queens, founded the Phun Phactory, an arts organization aimed at getting young graffiti writers to stop tagging up the neighborhood and do work legally on industrial walls. In his search for those walls, DiLillo approached Jerry Wolkoff, a real estate developer who had started buying warehouses and other properties in Long Island City in the early 1970s. One of those properties was a defunct factory built in 1892 for the Neptune Meter Company. When DiLillo asked Wolkoff if his kids could write on the vast, butter-colored exterior, Wolkoff said yes. While the developer hoped to one day build a glass tower to rival the recently risen Citicorp building nearby, those plans were far from imminent, and the Neptune building sat nearly empty. Why not brighten it up? The Phun Phactory, the original 5 Pointz, took off. Thousands of street artists from around the city and the world wrote on it, turning it into a revolving outdoor gallery of urban aerosol art. Established as a nonprofit, the Phun Phactory offered a safe space

for youth at risk, and an alternative to incarceration in a city where Giuliani cracked down on graffiti as part of his zero-tolerance campaign. "DiLillo also tried to rehabilitate lives," wrote *Newsday*, "offering tough love for those sentenced to community service or to work release." While DiLillo managed the exterior, Wolkoff opened the interior to artists, renting out inexpensive studios, sometimes taking art in lieu of rent. It was all good. Then the century turned and the changes long awaited began to arrive.

Across the street from Phun Phactory, scrappy P.S. 1 partnered with the Museum of Modern Art and became MoMA P.S. 1. The partnership put the art center on the map. Tourists and Manhattanites who'd never ventured to Long Island City began trekking out on the 7 train. They discovered that it wasn't such a trek after all. In 2001, the City Council voted to rezone more than thirty blocks to encourage residential high-rises and new retail. The boom was on. That same year, Wolkoff barred DiLillo from the Phun Phactory. Details on their breakup are sketchy. "I have no problem with the graffiti guys staying there," Wolkoff told *Newsday*, "but I don't want Pat running the show anymore. If someone else takes over, that's fine, but Pat is a loose cannon." In the article, DiLillo is described as "hard-boiled" and "abrasive," a tough but guiding father figure to the graffiti artists. Without him to manage the walls, the Phun Phactory devolved into a chaos of scribbled tags and throw-ups. About a year later, local graffiti artist Jonathan Cohen, who goes by Meres One, took over as curator. He renamed the project 5 Pointz, a reference to the five boroughs of New York, and encouraged artists to create more elaborate productions. It started looking less like graffiti and more like art.

When the Bloomberg administration came to power, they set their laser beam on Long Island City. In their vision, it would be all about mixed use, high density, and vibrancy. It would not, however, be for the people living there. Said Amanda Burden to the *Times*, "There is a need for more residential foot traffic to bring stores and restaurants to the area, the kind of amenities the contemporary businessman is looking for." In the luxury product city, some people are just more valuable than others.

At the distant other end of the 7 subway line, Willets Point remains the last undeveloped piece of the Corona Dumps, the "valley of ashes" made famous in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and transformed by Robert Moses into Flushing Meadows–Corona Park. Described by Fitzgerald as "a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens," that valley, the natural salt marsh of Flushing Meadows, was the dumping ground of the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company in the first decades of the twentieth century. As Robert Caro writes in *The Power Broker,* it was the spot where "all the garbage of Brooklyn" was sent to burn, a hellish place infested by giant rats "so numerous that nearby shanty dwellers eked out livings trapping them and selling them to fur dealers." Most of those giant rats were probably muskrats from the marshland around the dump. As Ted Steinberg describes in *Gotham Unbound,* the Brooklyn Ash property did not cover all of Flushing Meadows—only 300 of the 1,257 acres Moses would claim—and much of it remained natural and wild, in parts cultivated by Depression-era squatters and working-class Italians into vegetable gardens where tomatoes and radishes ripened rapidly in the heat given off by the burning.

In 1936, Moses and the city began the process to condemn the land, evict the people, demolish more than one hundred buildings of homes and businesses, and haul away the mountains of ash so Flushing Meadows Park and its roadways could be built, all with the 1939 World's Fair as an excuse. The Italians moved out in horse-drawn wagons and the "landscape was smashed right down to the bocce courts," says Steinberg. Moses got all but Willets Point, the horn-shaped bit of land that breaks Flushing Bay into Flushing Creek. By the 1940s, auto body shops had moved in, establishing it as the city's center for the repair and junking of cars, along with other industrial businesses. Somewhere along the line, the spot was nicknamed "the Iron Triangle."

In the 1960s, with plans for another World's Fair, Moses tried to take that last bit of land. As the Mets' Shea Stadium was rising, the city parks commissioner, Newbold Morris, got the ball rolling on the land grab, claiming he would build more parkland on the Iron Triangle. The Willets Point Property Owners fought back. They were mostly working-class Italians, holdouts from Moses' last round of evictions. Their lawyers were Italian, too, including a young Mario Cuomo, the future governor of New York. They threatened to sue the city for misapplication of taxpayer money when it became clear that the Flushing Meadow Extension would not be a public park, but a private parking lot for Shea Stadium. If the deal went through, ninety-three businesses would be destroyed and a thousand people would lose their jobs. The fight went on. Moses, Morris, and the extension's supporters described the Iron Triangle as "an eyesore, a disgrace, an affront to thousands of motorists a day and a blemish on the glittering facade of the World's Fair." The fair came and went, Shea Stadium opened, and still the fight continued, until the city finally backed off in 1967. The working class won.

In the 1980s, they were fighting again. This time the enemy was not Robert Moses—it was their former defender, Mario Cuomo. As governor, he supported Mayor Koch's plan to evict the industrial businesses of Willets Point and build a domed football stadium next to Shea to lure the Jets back to New York. The workers weren't happy. "I never thought he would stab us in the back," said the owner of an auto salvage business to the *Times*. He'd been one of Cuomo's original clients. "It's un-American," said another. When asked why he wanted to take the little spot, Cuomo said "he had been guided in the choice by Donald J. Trump," who got the green light to build on the site. But like many big development plans of the past, for reasons too complicated to enumerate, the football stadium fell through.

Throughout the 1990s there was talk of bulldozing the Iron Triangle for hotels, shopping malls, a convention center. There was talk of tearing down Shea Stadium and building a new ballpark, under

Mets owner Fred Wilpon, with an option to muscle out the industrial businesses. In 1997, Giuliani's NYPD, along with federal and state officials, raided the Triangle in an operation called Spring Cleanup. Men were charged with running chop shops. Some were detained by immigration officials. Giuliani, as we know, loved a good raid, a tactic he repeatedly used in neighborhoods targeted for revitalization. By that time, the ethnic mix of the Iron Triangle had diversified into a "kind of gumbo," as the *Times* described it, of "Hispanics, Caribbeans, Asians, East Indians, North Africans, Eastern Europeans and white Americans." A few Italians remained, but they were not the majority, and immigrants—especially the undocumented—are easier to push around. Still, the Triangle survived. Its working-class people continued laboring together in a muddy swamp neglected by the resentful, revengeful city government. For years, City Hall would not give them sidewalks. They would not pave the roads. They would not plow the snow. And they would not install a sewer system. With that, the city created blight, the required condition for eminent domain. It was all part of the long game to grab this long-contested land. Nothing was natural about it.

One summer evening in the 1990s, a friend brought me to the Iron Triangle for dinner. If that seems like a strange place to get a meal, well, it is. We had tickets for a Mets game and didn't want to spend our money on overpriced ballpark food. My friend knew of someplace more interesting, far back of Shea. He led me down the street beneath the elevated train tracks and into the Iron Triangle, through the ravaged roads between auto body shacks decorated with glinting hubcaps and piles of tires. I felt like I'd entered a border town. Dogs roamed unleashed. Salsa music played from open garages where mechanics worked on a steady stream of cars. New bumpers, new headlights, new windshields. Men sat at folding tables playing dominos. Women pushed carts selling shaved ices and empanadas. A scavenger pushed a busted grocery cart loaded with scrap metal. The place felt like another country. My friend and I stepped into a tidy,

scruffy deli and he ordered for both of us in Spanish from the steam table of roasted chicken, empanadas, yellow rice, and beans. Jarritos sodas in neon-liquid bottles. The island taste of tamarindo. We sat and ate, surrounded by mechanics eating out of Styrofoam containers, the grease of work on their hands. This would not last. In 2004, determined to succeed where Moses, Koch, Cuomo, and Giuliani had failed, Mayor Bloomberg set in motion an aggressive plan to take the Iron Triangle from its people.

At two ends of the 7 subway line, 5 Pointz and Willets Point book end a borough on the cusp of change, where gentrification is happening sporadically. Some of that change has been directly manufactured by City Hall, and some is indirect, spillover from rezoned, redeveloped Brooklyn, the endless push of Manifest Destiny. These days, we hear most often about Ridgewood, Queens. Its borders touch three of Brooklyn's most gentrified neighborhoods—Greenpoint, Williamsburg, and Bushwick—and the L train, that hipster express, skirts its lower regions. Just looking at a map, you can see it was only a matter of time before the Williamsburg diaspora crossed the line.

In 2006, a realtor told the *Times*, "We are getting a lot of people from Williamsburg and Greenpoint, selling there for $1 million, then buying in Ridgewood for $550,000." The president of the Ridgewood Property Owners and Civic Association made a wish for more upscale businesses. "A Starbucks would help," he said. Seven years later, the *Times* reported "Costly Rents Push Brooklynites to Queens." And then, just like that, it was official. Ridgewood had arrived.

One age-conscious young newcomer told the *Times* that Ridgewood was "an old-school place" full of "older people." He likes to wear stylish clothing so he doesn't "feel old." Aptly, he met his girlfriend while working at the chain store Forever 21. Said another young newcomer, "When I first moved there, I never saw people that were my age." She would only need to wait one year for Ridgewood's

demographic shift. "Creative people," she concluded, "love to be the ones that explore new territory." In came the vegan muffins, yoga studios, and "destination pizzerias."

"Queens is the new Brooklyn," real estate brokers began insisting. The *Times* nicknamed the place "Quooklyn."

Excited young entrepreneurs, encouraging more cool young people to move to the dowdy old borough, started selling Queens-branded merchandise, sweatshirts that read "I Heart Astoria" and "QUEENS VS. EVERYONE." The owner of one "premiere lifestyle store," a former stockbroker who moved to Astoria, told the American Express website, "I was living in this neighborhood that was really underserved. There was nowhere to shop: no gift store, boutique, clothing store." Of course, Astoria was full of businesses—discount shops, low-key restaurants and bars—but they didn't count.

One Upper West Side couple told the *Times* they moved to Jackson Heights for that "being-in-the-melting-pot feel." About midway between Long Island City and Flushing, Jackson Heights is celebrated for its exceptional diversity. Perhaps comparable to what the Lower East Side used to be, it is a neighborhood of recent immigrants and the working class. It's also popular with blue-collar queers. Though no stranger to homophobic and transphobic violence, it hosts several racially diverse gay bars, Queens Pride House, and the annual Queens Pride Parade. Transgender sex workers walk the stroll of Roosevelt Avenue under the girders of the elevated 7 train. But look out. The ex–Upper West Siders, like many others, have begun "recruiting friends" to join them. They hope "the Jax," as they call the neighborhood, will catch on. So do politicians.

In 2012, the *Times* called Jackson Heights' Roosevelt Avenue a "corridor of vice." While violent crime was low, prostitution was high and undocumented immigrants could easily get fake IDs. People were stopped and frisked. Trans women were arrested just for carrying condoms in their handbags. "When you walk up and down Roosevelt Avenue, you'll see the dirt," said Jose Peralta, Demo-

cratic state senator for the district. He hoped Bloomberg's vision for Willets Point would bring national chains to Jackson Heights, and that its transformation would be like Times Square's. The *Times* connected the dots between the two neighborhoods: "If Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's long-held plan to develop Willets Point, the industrial area near Roosevelt's eastern terminus, into a residential neighborhood comes to fruition, the avenue will become a tributary to that community." And that dirty tributary would have to be sanitized and homogenized.

When Bloomberg put out the call for proposals to redevelop Willets Point, dead plans resurfaced like zombies from the grave: a convention center, a shopping mall, a football stadium, an Olympic village. Then the Mets broke ground on Citi Field, a new ballpark named after Citigroup, the multinational bank fined by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission for helping Enron commit fraud. They demolished Shea Stadium, that blue and orange bowl named after William Shea, who brought National League baseball back to New York. Citi Field was situated within spitting distance of the Iron Triangle. That old eyesore, that steadfast survivor, would have to go.

In 2007, Bloomberg revealed his administration's "master plan," announcing, "After a century of blight and neglect, this neighborhood's future is very bright indeed." In the architectural renderings, the new Willets Point is another extension of the Generic City, a grid of glass boxes and shops stamped with global corporate brands, another geography of nowhere with a high-rise hotel and convention center, nearly two million square feet of restaurants and national chain retail, and housing—much of it unaffordable to most New Yorkers. And if the owners of the 250 existing businesses refused to sell their property? The city would use eminent domain to take it from them. Hundreds of workers protested. Sawdust manufacturer Jake Bono told the *Daily News*, "This is the American Dream, to own your own business, your own land. Now, it's turned into an American nightmare."

On a winter's day in 2007 I went to Willets Point to visit the Bono

Sawdust Supply Company. It's located in a long, low brick building, with silver duct pipes zigzagging over the roof, and the company's logo of a smiling cartoon bumblebee on a sign outside. "That's 'cause we're busy bees," Jake Bono explained as he welcomed me into the office, past posters that read "Not For Sale" and "Stop Eminent Domain Abuse." A third-generation sawdust man, Jake was maybe thirty, with a shaved head, meaty hands, and a toothpick stuck between his teeth. On his winter coat was pinned a button with the message "Willets Point Not For Sale."

The small space he ushered me into was cluttered with American flags, maps of Italy, and mementos—black-and-white photographs of the company's founders standing atop mountains of sawdust sacks, along with a calendar girl from 1961 easily disrobed with the lifting of a cellophane sheet.

"It's just for nostalgia," said Jack Bono, Jake's father. A man with a serious face made more so by the presence of a long, white handlebar mustache, he was the son of Sicilian immigrant Jacob Bono, who founded the company with his two brothers in 1933. During the Great Depression, the Bono brothers spent long days delivering bags of sawdust in horse-drawn wagons to saloons, butcher shops, and loading docks all over town. At night, without rest, they laid the bricks for their building, the same structure that stands today.

"How do you put a price on that?" Jack asked, tugging off a dusty pair of work gloves. "I don't want to move. This is my home."

Jake sat chewing his toothpick. The city was pushing him and he didn't like it. "This is street tactics," he said of Bloomberg's maneuvering. "Strong-arming. Extortion. My father's been working here since he's twelve years old. Since I'm a little kid I'm coming here, playing in the sawdust. I learned how to work here, how to interact with people."

The city, insisting that all the Willets Point businesses would be adequately relocated, showed the Bonos a handful of new sites, but none compared to their intricate complex, custom-built by the

hands of their forefathers. In one insulting offer, they were shown a tiny storefront that housed a check-cashing outfit. Jake and his father laughed at the farce. They had to laugh; otherwise it'd be ulcers and sleepless nights, not knowing what was happening next.

The Bonos gave me a tour of the building and explained how the walls, roof, and basement are filled with a Habitrail of metal tubing that whisks the sawdust from one place to another, filtering and sorting as it goes. Each cinder-block room we entered was dusted in gold. It looked like it had just snowed, but the snow was tawny, like sand piled along the windowsills and drifting into corners. It smelled wonderful, fresh and woodsy. I wanted to scoop it into my hands and breathe it in.

"You know what Bloomberg said about us all up here? I heard this on the radio," said Jack. "He said: '*This land is too valuable for you.*' Too valuable for us?"

Jake shook his head and took the toothpick from his mouth. It was half-eaten, ground to splinters. He said, "What's Bloomberg gonna say next? You're wife is too pretty for you, so you can't have her? People have to realize, they could be next. We're not just fighting for us. We feel proud because we're fighting for everyone who owns or wants to own a piece of property. That's what people work for. But with eminent domain, no one really owns their property. It can be taken from you at any time."

With a tone of resignation, his father added, "There's a reason they have that saying, 'You can't fight City Hall.' We have nobody to stick up for us. Nobody." But that wasn't going to stop Jake. "The two of us," he said to his dad, "we're gonna fight to the last breath in our bodies to keep what's ours." They haven't budged yet.

The City Council approved Bloomberg's $3 billion plan, giving the green light to the chosen mega-developers, Sterling Equities, owned by the Wilpons and Katzes of the Mets and Citi Field; and Related Companies, the main developer of Hudson Yards, back in Manhattan. (It's no surprise that Bloomberg also extended the 7 subway line to link Hudson Yards to Willets Point.) The Queens deal was loaded with corporate welfare, starting with a shocking bargain-basement price: the city sold $1 billion worth of public land to the developers for just one dollar.

Through city-led evictions, condemnations, and buyouts, many of the industrial shops vacated the Iron Triangle. Workers held a hunger strike, starving themselves for the right to stay put. The city handed out more eviction notices. The place became a ghost town as street-long stretches of auto body shops sat shuttered. I walked through one afternoon to find all the life drained from the place. No more salsa music. No more women peddling empanadas. No more men playing dominoes. I went into the only open deli I could find, unsure if it was the same one I'd visited years before. The three people inside turned their heads and glared. A Latino mechanic stepped forward and thrust his hand out to stop me, saying, "Workers only. This place is not for you." I realized what I looked like—a middle-class white man, the enemy at the gates—and understood that I was no longer welcome in this embattled space. The doors of the Iron Triangle were closed.

On November 19, 2013, I woke to a flurry of emails and tweets about the sudden destruction of 5 Pointz. As commuters rode the 7 train into Manhattan that morning, they looked through the windows as they always had, waiting for that kaleidoscopic view. Some looked forward to the bright orange tiger that leaped from the shoulder of rapper Biggie Smalls, the Notorious B.I.G. Others preferred the cinematic panorama of King Kong holding Faye Wray in one hand while he strangled the 7 train in the other. Some just enjoyed the colorful collage of it all. My favorite piece was a large mural that seemed to sum up what was happening to 5 Pointz and the whole city. *Fressen & Gefressen Werden,* "Eat and Be Eaten," by the team of Onur, Semor, Wes21, and KKade, showed a monster fish clamping its

jaws around a smaller monster fish clamping its jaws around a squid swallowing a crocodile with its teeth around a great white shark opening its mouth to devour a businessman. Suit, tie, briefcase, in he goes, dropping his cup of Starbucks coffee to the sidewalk. You think you're powerful now, the mural implied, but everyone is someone's lunch. It was a beautiful piece, vivid and visceral. On that November morning, along with all the rest, it was gone. Buffed. Vanished.

Under the cover of night, with protection from the NYPD, workers hired by the building's owners erased the walls with coats of white paint. 5 Pointz looked like a body spackled in calamine lotion. All the color gone.

Just one month earlier, at the same meeting that buried Willets Point, the City Council approved plans by Jerry Wolkoff and his son, David, to demolish 5 Pointz and build luxury high-rises much higher than the current zoning allowed. The 5 Pointz community protested. On November 16, hundreds of artists and supporters gathered to play music, make aerosol art, and give speeches. The organizers announced their plan to submit a proposal to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, arguing that 5 Pointz should be protected. Just three days later, it was whitewashed, leaving nothing left to landmark.

When threatened with landmarking, building owners will often "scalp" or "denude" historic structures they want to demolish, destroying everything that makes them eligible for protection. Jerry Wolkoff denied this was his motivation. He told the *Wall Street Journal*, "This is why I did it: it was torture for [the artists] and for me. They couldn't paint anymore and they loved to paint. Let me just get it over with and as I knock it down they're not watching their piece of art going down. The milk spilled. It's over. They don't have to cry." To *New York* he said, "I had tears in my eyes while I was doing it." In the *Village Voice*, 5 Pointz spokesperson Marie Cecile Flageul responded, "The only tears he possibly had this morning were tears of joy." She added, "Jerry Wolkoff just committed the biggest genocide of art in the 21st century."

After the whitewashing, kids were arrested for painting "RIP 5Pointz" on the blank building. Activist artists gilf! and BAMN wrapped it in giant yellow caution tape printed with the words GENTRIFICATION IN PROGRESS. Then, in 2014, 5 Pointz was demolished. When you ride the 7 past the site today, there's nothing to see but a muddy hole. Soon it will be filled with generic glass apartment buildings, $400 million monoliths. The Wolkoffs promise there will be a special wall to paint on, but the graffiti artists say they won't lend their soul to towers that toppled their spiritual home. Against protests, the Wolkoffs have gone ahead and registered the name "5 Pointz." They plan to brand it onto the towers to come, no doubt hoping that some of the old vanished cool rubs off.