

Marlon Peterson

marlonpeterson10@gmail.com

mdp365@nyu.edu



Crown Heights:

The Question of Gentrification, Violence, Social Disorganization, and Social Preservation. More questions than answers and the inevitability of neighborhood harms caused by gentrification. How does a community minimize the problems of in-migration?

“In [the] beginning God created the heavens and the earth. –Genesis 1:1 (New World Translation)

“Crown Heights Brooklyn is my home. From the hallways of P.S. 138 on Prospect Place and Nostrand Avenue to Brower Park to Sonatas Steel Orchestra on Sterling and Troy to the West Indian Day Parade on Eastern Parkway, Crown Heights is my home. I am a true product of this neighborhood. I have received academic accolades in one vein and handcuffs in the other. I have seen Crown Heights grow from the crack-filled, crime-riddled days of the 1980’s to the gentrifying neighborhood it is becoming. Throughout it all, however, there has remained one constant; crime” (Peterson, yosos.org).

When I grew up in Crown Heights during the 1980’s and 1990’s Prospect Heights was only the name of a notoriously low performing school with an even more infamous nickname for the way young girls from that school were viewed—Prostitute’ Heights.’ Now this name, Prospect Heights—still with the dubious nickname for the high school according to neighborhood teens—is the chic new name of an expanding co-opted section of Crown Heights. Real estate companies in an effort to sell homes at higher rates constantly increase the boundaries of Prospect Heights into the neighborhood formerly known as Crown Heights. Every day I walk through my old neighborhood I am amazed by the complexion of the people in the community; the modern residential buildings, the SoHo-like cafes, shops, and bars. The neighborhood looks cleaner, brighter, and more cosmopolitan. A recent Wall Street Journal article speaking of the changes in Crown Heights over the past decade is suggestively entitled, “Brooklyn’s Crown Heights Rediscovered.” To the untrained eye, this new Crown Heights is the fulfillment of Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream Speech” where he said:

“One day..., little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers”

—*I Have A Dream*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

But my trained eye and ears could tell that this was no fulfillment of King’s speech. Within apartment buildings where blacks and whites were neighbors there were great economic disparities. The new residents are college educated professionals that travel

out of state to visit family in Connecticut and Maine on weekends while the ‘tenured’ residents are a mixture of high school dropouts struggling to pay rent. The children of these tenured residents are the guys on the corners and young babies. These are the suspects and victims in these crimes of violence and narcotics.

Co-existing within the same block are modern residential high-rises, SoHo-like cafes and shops, and West Village types along with Blood and Crips gang hangouts and newer gangs like the Brower Gang and Wave Gang, abandoned buildings, run-down liquor stores, and murals on street corners tattered with the names of young people who were murdered by gun violence. This dynamic of oddities is exacerbated by the de facto segregation of the Hasidic Jewish community from the rest of the community that includes Caribbean-Americans and African-Americans is what we call Crown Heights. This social *mélange* that includes the 77th and 71st police precincts, approximately 230,000 residents, high crime rates raises questions revolving around the complexities of tolerance, co-existence, social disorganization, neighborhood disinvestment as it experiences what some call the 21st century renaissance of Crown Heights, Brooklyn known as gentrification.

In those days cheap apartments were almost impossible to find in Manhattan, so I had to move to Brooklyn

-William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*

This quote from William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice*, written in 1979 is set in the summer of 1947. One of the lead characters arrives in Brooklyn only to find out that his female friend, Sophie, has committed suicide. This work of fiction written over 30 years ago and based in a time 60 years ago speaks to the role Brooklyn has played in the population shift in New York City. Historically, Crown Heights, originally known as Crow Hill, was a succession of hills that began “as a posh residential neighborhood, a ‘bedroom’ for Manhattan’s growing bourgeois class” (Wikipedia). Prior to World War II Crown Heights was among New York’s premier neighborhoods because of its tree-lined streets, and array of cultural institutions and parks. One of the neighborhoods parks,

Brower Park, according to the 1894 Annual Report of the Brooklyn Department of Parks was considered to be “one of the prettiest small parks in the City” (NYC Parks).

During the 1920’s as the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing, a huge influx of immigrants from the West Indies and African Americans from the South moved into the community. They were followed in the ‘40’s, ‘50’s, and ‘60’s by middle-class Jews. In 1950, the neighborhood was about 90% white of which 50-60 percent being Jewish. Still making up one-fourth of the neighborhood in 1957, the black population filled in the gaps where white flight (non-Jewish) occurred. By 1991, 90% of Crown Heights was of African descent, 9 percent were Hasidic Jews, and less than 1% percent were Latino, Asian, and other ethnic groups that included whites non-Jewish.

It was also around this time that racial tensions between the Jewish and Black community exploded into three days of rioting and murder infamously known as the Crown Heights riots. On August 19, 1991 in Crown Heights, one of the cars in a caravan transporting the spiritual leaders of the Lubavitcher Hasidic sect, ran a red light and struck a seven-year-old black boy, the son of a Guyanese immigrant. That accident lead to members of the black community, African-American *and* Caribbean-American, reacting violently against the Lubavitch community in the area. Later that same evening a group of young black men murdered a Lubavitch man not too far from the car accident. These two incidents were the catalysts for the three days of rioting. “The conflict reflected long-standing tensions between the Crown Heights blacks and Jews, as well as the pain, oppression and determination that these groups felt within their own communities”(W. Michigan University). Seeking to mend to scars inflicted upon both factions of Crown Heights, community leaders opened the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center, a neighborhood institution that works to improve a community



collaboration, and inter-group relations in Crown Heights.

problem-solving, collaboration, and inter-group relations in the area. The Crown Heights Community Mediation Center is a neighborhood institution that works to improve community problem-solving,

The Mediation Center, my place of employment, where I am currently the program coordinator for a teen violence awareness program has made me ultra-sensitive to the violence in the community. My former position at the Mediation Center was a Violence Interrupter, where my job was to literally interrupt violent situations between community residents late at night, and also to prevent violence from happening by building relationships with people within the community who are most likely to engage in violence, particularly gun violence. Although I am a life-long Crown Heights resident, I did not live in the neighborhood between 1999-2000; thus, as I walked the streets building relationships with those high risk individuals, those most likely to engage in gun violence, by walking through public housing buildings, street corner bodegas, and local parks I noticed a Crown Heights that looked aesthetically different from the one I knew as youth during the 1980s and 1990s.

I saw some of the same guys that used to hang out on the street corners selling drugs and getting drunk doing the same thing, now with more facial hair, and some with streaks of grey. I saw teenagers with red flags hanging out of their back pockets, signifying their gang affiliation, also haphazardly hanging out in the streets with seemingly no place to go. I saw more liquor stores. Paradoxically, I also noticed the new stores and cafes that were akin to SoHo, the West Village, and the Meatpacking districts of Manhattan. I observed more white and Asian people. I also observed that violence in the neighborhood was at the same level that it was over a decade ago. Labor Day weekend 2011 in NYC saw an unprecedented number of shootings, with Crown Heights being the ground zero of the violence. According to NBCNewYork.com, "Three people were killed and two police officers were wounded in a shooting a few blocks from the annual West Indian Day Parade in Brooklyn, capping a violent holiday weekend in which nearly 70 people were injured by gunfire" (Dienst et al.). Coincidentally (or not), the victims and suspects were all Black. This neighborhood with increased diversity and economic development still experiences high levels of violence. Why is that? Investigating deeper, why are the victims and suspects still of the same demographic if there are more people of other ethnicities in the neighborhood? The NYC 2010 census documents that Asian non-Hispanics were the fastest growing group in Brooklyn, increasing by 41.2 percent during the decade between 2000-2010,

while white nonhispanics increased in Brooklyn even as their numbers declined citywide. The same sources tells us that the long-established West Indian neighborhoods of Crown Heights, Flatbush, and Prospect Lefferts Gardens each lost between 10 and 14 percent of their black populations. These statistics reinforces the increased diversity of Brooklyn, but raises another question: What relationship, if any, does increased diversity in a community have on neighborhood violence?

During the years of my youth I only saw white people in my neighborhood when they were wearing blue uniforms with guns and badges, wearing fireman outfits, or driving in to wherever to teach at a local school. The only people I saw were the Koreans that owned and ran the local frsh produce stores and Chinese take out restuarants. Either way, they all left the community and returned to their homes in Brooklyn Heights, Manhattan, or Long Island when their shift was over at work. But now, these groups could be seen here any time of the day or night. They were going to corner stores, coming from the cleaners, sitting in front of residential buildings, putting keys in doors that were apparently their apartments, and sitting behind counters wecoming in cutomers in the new chic cafes, organic stores, and bars all over the neighborhood. They were shooting hoops in the park; jogging and riding bikes in the new bike lanes installed by the Department of Transportation. They were walking their dogs late at night. They were conspicuously visible at the community board meetings. They were home? And if they were home, what happened to this neighborhood that was 90% Black—where did those people go? Whare are they going? What effects does this movement of people have on community norms? What does this incoming of new residents mean to a community, and how can they socially preserve or take take away from community norms?

Gentrification, by Mz. Prose

*A Tree Grows In Brooklyn
A Blade of Grass grows in the concrete
And I remember both of them
I've realized I've been suppressing*

*memories
As if storage facilities can hold my identity
for just one dollar a month
And when I tell you I've been holding off on*

writing this
 Its the equivalent of saying I owe them
 payments
 So
 before my soul is auctioned off to the
 highest bidder
 I just want to write my story
 I want to draft it like I remember it
 Raw
 like abrasions
 and
 painfully beautiful like noticing the color red
 is at its richest tone
 when its flowing through an open wound
 I assume Brooklyn never wanted to hurt me
 simply bruise me
 until I developed tough skin I never knew It
 would come in handy one day
 Brooklyn raised hungry warriors
 I still remember the bacon sizzling on a
 skillet
 with no handle
 simply a rag to avoid getting burned
 I learned to multi task by watching her
 hand grazed my forehead
 comforting me and imparting thoughts
 simultaneously
 I think I grew up too fast
 They tell me I look older than what I am
 Because my
 Pupils sit pretty on heavy bags and
 I miss my eyelids sometimes
 When sleep hides beneath them
 I want to pull them like curtains over
 sunlight
 Some might think I dream like the children
 do
 Scared of the monsters under my bed
 I keep telling myself I'm too old for this
 I want to outgrow her
 Move through her with ease
 Hop scotch through her streets
 But she's more than just a game drawn out
 on city sidewalks
 And I can't help but wonder what happens

when the chalk runs out
 So before I find out
 I skip carefully over the needles they look
 like bic pens to me
 I want to write until I'm high enough to cry
 ink through my nostrils
 And breathe the stories I have yet to write
 about her
 Whisper secrets I promised not to tell
 through blunts
 I might as well burn my fingertips in the
 process
 Cause She's lost her identity too
 You have not seen Brooklyn until you learn
 that her pores are telescopic
 Pretend to kiss her skin and take a peek at
 her in her weakest moment
 Back when graffiti decorated her womb and
 she called the art she birthed beautiful
 Back when she used to be sexy without the
 makeup
 When even her run down alley ways made
 me feel safe
 And I smelled what she was cooking from
 two blocks down
 I know Brooklyn before her bodegas
 became delicatessens
 I realized I've been suppressing memories
 And I see her slipping like a woman after
 unsuccessful plastic surgeries
 I don't recognize her at a glance
 But when I look deeper I see her children in
 her eyes
 Brooklyn raised a nation
 And I am proud to say that she has made
 me believe that as long as I keep planting
 trees her stories will always be told
 Amidst the rustling of the leaves
 Screaming
 Where's Brooklyn at ?
 And the blade of grass will respond
 By growing just one centimeter taller than it
 was yesterday
 In rebellion of the cement truck that just
 pulled up to try and stop it.



I thought about that poem as I saw Jay-Z on
 the news announcing the name of the NBA team

that will be playing in the new Barclay's Arena in Brooklyn—walking distance from the area formerly known as Crown Heights, now Prospect Heights. I admit to claiming Jay-Z as the best rapper alive, and I have been a fan since 1997. Similar to Jay I boast about my Brooklyn heritage and we both have had interesting lives involves street life, violence, regrets, and triumph—stories that people write books about, except that my net worth is much less than Jay's. Thus, hearing this ghetto child officially announce this investment in Brooklyn of my favorite sport brought a symbolic Stokely Carmichael fist to the sky. I was proud. Inspired.

Then, I looked at my fist as it came down and smashed against the arm of the chair I was sitting on as I watched the announcement on Good Day New York on Fox 5. The smashing made me think about the people that have been smashed, displaced into the corners of East New York and Brownsville from Crown Heights, Fort Greene, and Bedford-Stuyvesant (where Jay-Z was born and raised) because of the skyrocketing rents that this arena development has brought to the entire north Brooklyn. I wondered if Jay-Z knew that his new investment only benefitted the Jay-Z wannabees in Marcy Projects, his alma mater, in spirit; that they would probably never be able to afford to live near the stadium anymore; that most of the people that could afford to live near this previously neglected section of Brooklyn are people that are not from Brooklyn. I wondered if he knew that the ghetto kids that look up to him and his rise to fame would probably be stopped by police more often when they went to the Atlantic Center Mall across the street from the arena because new investments meant new protection for those investments. I wondered if he knew that one blog said:

"The fact that Brooklyn's prodigal son is leading the charge to displace some of its most vulnerable residents underscores the fact that despite rap's proletariat beginnings, Black popular culture, specifically hip-hop and pro sports, has become a major vehicle for gentrification in the past twenty years"(ColorLines).

Did he ever hear the following aforementioned words of Mz. Prose in the poem *Gentrification* that said:

*Screaming
Where's Brooklyn at?*

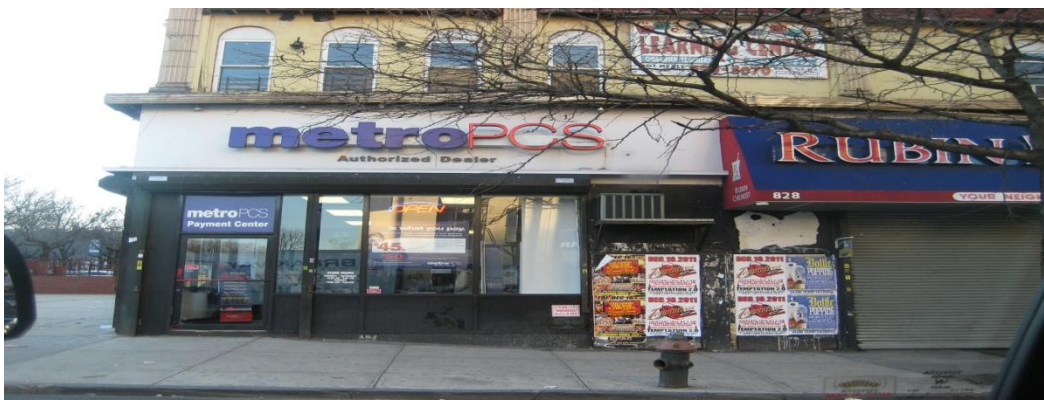
*And the blade of grass will respond
By growing just one centimeter taller than it was yesterday
In rebellion of the cement truck that just pulled up to try and stop it. (Emphasis added)*

What would he say if he ever heard those words? Did he consider that his real audience, the black and brown people from the ‘hood, would rebel, would suffer, would be displaced, would be arrested more, would have less opportunities in their own neighborhoods, would be disconnected from their home communities, thus leading them to hate their communities, hence acting out against their communities, then their communities hating them, which leads to crimes of opportunity usually against themselves—meaning people from their community?

Or maybe he is now more accustomed to hearing the words of people like Randall Walsh, an associate professor of economics at the University of Pittsburgh that said "...in general, across all neighborhoods in the urbanized parts of the U.S., it looks like gentrification is a pretty good thing" (Time Business).

Maybe he knows that people like me will support his investment by going to the concerts and basketball games there even if we know we cannot afford to buy the tickets and pay rent in the same check? Maybe he knows that the displaced peoples will be so immersed in following his latest trends and buying his music that they will not realize that they could never afford to live in the areas surrounding his new investment. Maybe he knows that many poor people remain poor because they do not realize they are poor because they can buy (not afford) name brand clothes. Oh, yes, what you can afford and what you can buy are two different things. I can buy a \$1,000 dollar coat every paycheck, but I would be homeless if I did.

Maybe Jay-Z knows that gentrification is only an issue for as long as it takes to displace and quiet the current residents of the “redeveloped” community, or as Ms. Prose puts it in her poem, “until that cement truck pulls up”.



“Soon enough, you’ll be able to go to Amazon and order a starter kit for these transformations: Gentrification in a Box. The contents include: one economically depressed neighborhood, a bargain compared with other places in the city; one wave of artists looking for a place to hang their easels and sleeping bags; one handful of the young and priced-out; one dozen lucky landowners and real-estate speculators rolling dice; one gaggle of new businesses looking for a foothold. If you can afford it, the Deluxe Edition comes with a branch of Corcoran, for that extra-fine, glossy finish” (Whitehead, 2009).

Derived from the word ‘gentry’, in 1964 the British sociologist, Ruth Glass coined the term “gentrification” to denote the influx of middle-class people to cities and neighborhoods, displacing the lower-class worker residents. The 1998 *Encyclopedia of Housing* defines gentrification as “the process by which central urban neighborhoods that have undergone disinvestments and economic decline experience a reversal, reinvestment, and the in-migration of a relatively well-off, middle- and upper middle class population” (Freeman, 29). This in-migration includes middle- to upper-class blacks along with the more stereotypical middle-class whites and Asian demographic.

The research on gentrification is expansive. To effectively introduce the varying perspectives on the subject I have determined that it is necessary to exhaust the theoretical avenues on this topic. This angle of the topic will allow me to effectively weigh the pros and cons of gentrification objectively along with the subjectivity already examined. This research also allows me to accurately preface my vision of gentrification in Crown Heights as we look into the future. In the book *Displacement and Neighborhood Revitalization*, Palen and London introduced three reasons that explains the spread of gentrification: (1) demographic-ecological, (2) sociocultural, (3) political-economical.

The first explanation, demographic-ecological presents gentrification through the lenses of demographic factors such as social organization, environment, and technology. Referring to the people between the ages of 25-35 during the 1970’s, this baby boom generation increased tremendously. Hence, more people were looking for housing, and since this particular demographic tended to be child-free which made them different from their house-hunting predecessors. They were usually more affluent couple

in search of white-collar employment. They were not so concerned about the conditions of local schools and playgrounds and elected to live in the inner-city because many of their white collar jobs were near in the city. Thus, “a neighborhood with more white-collar jobs was more likely to be invaded; the relationship between administrative activity and invasion was positively created (London and Palen, 1984).”

Forty years later, the similarities from the baby boom era of gentrification to the 21st century Generation Y version of gentrification are seen. The age of the gentrifiers in Crown Heights and the greater Brooklyn area are also within the 25-35 categories. The newbie's into the community also tend to be child-free, at least for a little while, and affluent with white collar jobs or aspirations.

The second approach to explain gentrification is the sociocultural explanation. “This theory argues that values, sentiments, attitudes, ideas, beliefs, and choices should be used to explain and predict human behavior, not demographics (et al). They go on to explain that middle- and upper-middle-class people of the 1970's were becoming more pro-urban. This is observed today in the growing influence of inner city hip hop culture spreading to suburban communities during the 1990's and early 2000's. The middle- and upper-middle-class children that rebelled and listened to rap music have grown into middle- and upper-middle-class young adults that viewed urban values as being more salient. London and Palen refer to these people as “urban pioneers” that demonstrated that the inner-city was an “appropriate” and “viable” place to live, resulting in the “cool” of the inner city.

The third theory is the political-economic and is divided in to two very distinct approaches: traditional and Marxist. The traditional approach asserts that economic and political factors have led to the inner-city invasion loosely known as gentrification. In the original explanation the theory claimed that the changing political and legal climate of the 1950's and 60's had an unanticipated role in the gentrification of neighborhoods. New civil rights legislation and antidiscrimination laws in housing and employment led to more blacks moving to the suburbs and whites no longer rejecting the idea of moving to the city. Similarly, the terror attack in Manhattan in 2001 has led many Manhattanites to

move into Brooklyn because they see it as safer and less of a terror threat than Manhattan.

The Marxist view, very different from the political-economic view promotes the notion that “powerful interest groups follow a policy of neglect of the inner city until such time as they become aware that policy changes could yield tremendous profits” (London and Palen, 1984).

This phenomenon was further explained in a scholarly paper by Neil Smith. Smith argued that the essence of gentrification is the uneven development of metropolitan land markets. Smith further asserts: The basic theme is that disinvestment in certain areas of central cities, a disinvestment paralleling suburban investment and further exacerbated by the financial dynamics of construction and land interests, has resulted in residential areas whose capitalized ground rent is significantly below their potential ground rent. The value of the buildings themselves is considered of little moment. In the search for location of profitable investment in metropolitan areas where suburban land has been almost fully developed, finance and real-estate capital discover these undervalued locations and undertake actions (e.g., rehabilitation, new construction, speculation) to capture the difference between the capitalized and potential ground rents (Smith, 38).

Disinvestment in a neighborhood equates into fewer social resources, second class education, balloon unemployment, higher drug use, increased policing, and more arrests. Residents now find that they are increasingly likely to be defined as dangerous or undesirable by newcomers to the neighborhood, which has a widely demoralizing effect on the quality of neighborhood interactions.

Further, these low-income residents according to (Smith & Williams, 1986) are those living in these inexpensive but architecturally desirable housing near central business districts. This statement is fortified in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article entitled Brooklyn's Crown Heights Rediscovered where the author asserts “what continues to attract many home buyers to Crown Heights is the large stock of historic

homes that were built around the turn of the century. The neighborhood's large historic district boasts rows of Colonial, Romanesque and Medieval Revival homes. Hence, the resulting **investment**, contrasting the generational disinvestment.” One resident interviewed in that article who is a broker with Prudential Douglas Eliman said, “Some of the best architects left their marks on Crown Heights.”

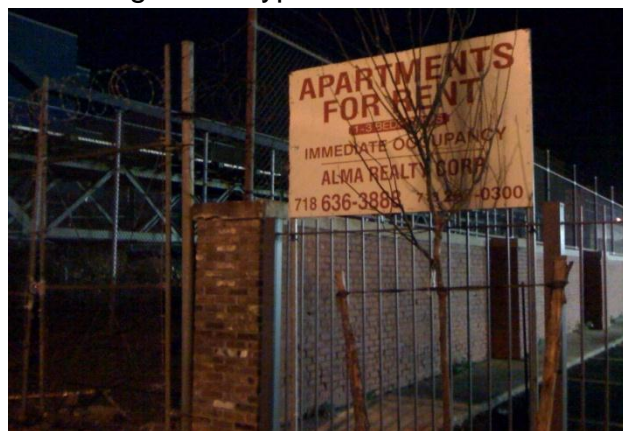
Today in Crown Heights we see the results of this investment. According to the census data the White non-Latino population from 2000-2010 increased in Brooklyn by 4.5% and by 20% in Crown Heights even as their numbers citywide decreased (U.S. Census 2010). During that same time period the Black non-Latino population in Brooklyn decreased by 5.8% while their numbers declined by 10% in Crown Heights (*Wall Street Journal*). Could this be the echoing of the quote?

In those days cheap apartments were almost impossible to find in Manhattan, so I had to move to Brooklyn.

----William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*

The Marxist theory also explains what happened in the Ingersoll and Walt Whitman housing projects, to be discussed later, in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. These are currently the grounds where luxury cooperatives are located, several years after these projects were known as Brooklyn's largest low-income housing development.

The ironies of these three theories encourages the hypothesis that Crown Heights and other previously low-income neighborhoods are falling victim to a social process that has occurred before—making the displacement of these residents an inevitability of “progress.” It is the “gentrification in a box” starter kit able to be purchased on Amazon.



Comparatively, gentrification is a phenomenon that has replicated itself in many different neighborhoods throughout New York City within the past 20 years. In *Power at the Roots* gentrification in the Lower East Side of Manhattan during the 1990s is discussed. The author highlights three major themes that emerge from the scholarship on gentrification that relate to the issue of gentrification and community politics. The theme that impresses me is the third issue: “the repressive character of many of the policies that are enacted with gentrification. As with neoliberal policies generally, gentrification is usually accomplished with rhetoric of neighborhood revival that will benefit all, but is usually enacted with measures, such **as increased surveillance, that specifically target low-income people as obstacles to revival** (Martinez, 23) (Emphasis added).

At the core of this revival are the rising rents and the subsequent displacement of low-income people. In the Lower East Side, total population increased steadily from 1990 to 2000, except in the public housing areas where it diminished in the same period and where Latinos represented 70% of the decreased population. This population decrease in public housing became a political issue when the census figures were released in 2001. The local city council representative accused then Mayor Giuliani of warehousing empty apartments in preparation to privatize the projects for market-rate housing. Interestingly, a 2008 *New York Times* article reported that almost 75,000 units, about 6% of the city’s rent-regulated apartments, were purchased by private equity firms whose prospectuses stated that future profitability depended on displacing regulated tenants in favor of market-rate renters (Morgenson, 2008). This type of revival took place in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn during the last decade.

In 2005, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) said the following:

The Walt Whitman and Raymond V. Ingersoll Houses in Ft. Greene in Brooklyn will undergo major renovations to bring apartments to current standards and to ensure that units are in optimum condition for future generations. NYCHA is investing more than \$100 million on comprehensive improvements including bringing elevator service to every floor, enlarging apartments, creating separate and/or upgraded kitchen areas in every apartment, and upgrading the heating and electrical systems in all buildings (The Brownstoner).

Before

Ingersoll/Whitman Public Housing Development
(Fort Green, Brooklyn), circa 1998

After

Fort Green Brooklyn co-op for sale,
November 2011

So how would this renovation be implemented? According to *City Limits* the 1,526 families whose apartments were slated for overhaul were given three options: They could move to other apartments in their developments, move to other NYCHA complexes, or leave public housing entirely. The Housing Authority set up an onsite Relocation Assistance Unit and offered grants to cover moving expenses. Translation: Low-income out, middle-income to upper class in. According to nyc.gov, the Black population in Fort Greene declined by 32 percent from 2000-2010.

In the years prior to the coop-tation of these housing projects it was Brooklyn's largest low-income housing development. It was historically disinvested in until there was a realization that the capitalized ground rent was significantly lower than the potential ground rent as was iterated earlier by Neil Smith. In a nearby high-rise recently constructed, rents for studio apartments start at \$2280 per month, a far cry from low-income housing prices.



Avalon high-rises with the Fort Greene Housing Projects in the background, now converted into condominiums.

Carmen Lopez, a 35 year-old African-American single mother of one, holder of two Masters Degrees, a first generation American, and the founding principal of a middle school in Brownsville, Brooklyn spoke about to me about her experiences with students from the housing projects in Fort Greene and her overall thoughts about gentrification. We sat and spoke for several hours about not so genuine nonprofits, the

NYC Department of Education her 10 year-old daughter (who apparently has her own blog), and of course the world of gentrification. Interestingly, the interview took place on Halloween in The Candy Rush, a retro 1950's candy store that sells ice cream floats, has an old Pac-man game, free wireless service, huge coffee cups that you would expect to see at Central Perks from *Seinfeld*, and lots of candy. Kids of all complexions and creative costumes come in and out of the store looking for Halloween candy. One of the store owners, a 40-year-old Black man from Trinidad, WI, who incidentally had a short stint in prison in the 1990's, serves as the candy dispenser this night. Amid these dynamics, Carmen and I talked over cups of coffee and chai tea about gentrification, occasionally making sure we don't talk too loud as the White residents of Crown Heights/Prospect Heights joke with the owner and bring in their children for candy.

The Ballad of a Maybe Gentrifier, by Kelly Zen-Yie Tsail

*"I'm not White, but I love me a white person's wireless internet café.
I don't wear a thrift store grandpa sweater, scraggly beard, and oversized plastic
glasses with my skinny jeans.
I don't expect the neighborhood to change around me;
I don't want it to..."*

*The lifetime residents clinging to legacy and rent control apartments. The old folks
hanging in clusters on the stoops.*

*The families at Marcy Projects.
 The bodega owners stocking more and more organic produce.
 The children who went abroad and returned to family buildings with European accents
 and college degrees.
 The Bloods **and** the Crips.
 The storefront imams and the pastors.
 The hasty landlords with key rings and credit check form ready on clipboards in the
 drivers seats of park cars.
 Will the real Bedstuy please stand up!*

*The Bedstuy of Timothy Stansbury and Rashan Brazal;
 The Bedstuy renamed Clinton Hill and Stuyvesant Heights by real estate agents.
 The Bedstuy before and after white flight.
 The Bedstuy before and after White flight
 The Bedstuy that survived the looting and burning of '77.
 The Weeksville Bedstuy
 The do or die Bedstuy
 The Bedstuy
 and proud of it*

*The neighborhood is changing, it is plain to see.
 I am a part of it.
 It is a part of me.*

What is your definition of gentrification?

Carmen: White people moving into a neighborhood and changing the dynamics of the neighborhood and there are three types of gentrifiers:

1. The White family—mom, dad, and one or two kids
2. Hipsters from the Midwest or southwest who come from money, but can't afford to pay high rents by themselves, so they share a room with 3 or four people. They have no problem living like they are in a college dorm
3. Then there are the young people who just graduated from college and are now starting their adult lives and independent people.

All of a sudden violence that was always here becomes a problem. There is a shift in the pride also. The new residents help beautify the neighborhood; they pick up trash from the ground. When you go to a community board meeting where there is an overwhelming amount of Black people. You always hear a bunch of complaining and arguing, but when the community board has a good amount of White people you don't hear so much complaining and arguing. You hear them want to offer solutions; volunteering to give of themselves and their time for their neighborhood.

Me: So, in your opinion, gentrification is a good thing?

Carmen: Well, businesses thrive. Look at us here in this store. A store like this can thrive because of the people that live around here now. Think about it, across the street

is a Mexican restaurant. On that same block is a sushi bar. One block in the other direction there is a Thai spot. All of this is on Franklin Avenue, where you wouldn't have wanted to walk about 10-15 years ago. Unfortunately, most Black people from the hood lack exposure. Generationally we are taught to stay contented in the 'hood. Whereas, White kids travel from here to there and back with no problem making their current location their home. Black people say, "this is our shit," and therefore, do nothing to change their surroundings for better. So politicians don't have to care about them because they no matter what the people will not leave or do any worthwhile advocacy for themselves. This is all a damn shame but this is the way it is.

Me: I heard someone say the neighborhood that the neighborhood is safer because White people are her now. What do you say to that?

Carmen: The neighborhood still isn't safe, not for us. See, Black folks still fear Whites. Maybe this goes back to slavery and the Willie Lynch¹ where we were taught to hate each other and not the Other, but you never hear about White people being victims of the violence in the 'hood. Sadly, violence increases no matter what because these White people embody for them [Black people] success. You would see a one of those White people who is like a freelancer of some kind without a real job and little money walking down the street and guys will look at him like he is an example of success. But, the Black person that has a real job with bags falling over him coming from work will look like a lame. I see it all the time.

Me: Is there anything about gentrification that bothers you?

*"The Bedstuy renamed Clinton Hill and Stuyvesant Heights by real estate agents.
The Bedstuy before and after white flight.
The Bedstuy before and after White flight
The Bedstuy that survived the looting and burning of '77.
The Weeksville Bedstuy
The do or die Bedstuy
The Bedstuy
and proud of it."*

Carmen: The new residents don't know anything about the crack era. They don't know what it was like to run home from school on freshman Friday, the first Friday of the school year. They don't know about the Deceptics². They don't know about the struggle and pride about Jay-Z and Biggy and why we feel a certain way when we hear some of their songs. So many of them feel they are entitled here. The bike lanes—I have been

¹ This speech was delivered by Willie Lynch on the bank of the James River in the colony of Virginia in 1712. Lynch was a British slave owner in the West Indies. He was invited to the colony of Virginia in 1712 to teach his methods to slave owners there. The term "**lynching**" is derived from his last name. http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/Perspectives_1/Willie_Lynch_letter_The_Making_of_a_Slave.shtml

² A Gang Gives a Name to Students' Fear: Decepticons. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/01/nyregion/a-gang-gives-a-name-to-students-fear-decepticons.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

driving for 11-years here, and I sometime like my entitlement is being taken away. But, I'm not upset about all of this. I accept and embrace it. I appreciate their organic pop-ups. I appreciate how they are solution-oriented. And at this point, I don't feel like gentrification is really a race issue, it is about class. There are Black people of upper socioeconomic status that are here and they don't get pushed out by gentrification. It is like a weeding out process. I don't think developers are in a room contriving ways to kick Black people out. I do think that they are weeding out those who are of low socioeconomic status. Yeah, the police will stop them on the street unnecessarily because they fit the description. These Black people take real pride in their community and do all they can to make sure that it is proper resourced and looks good.

Me: So what about the Black folk that don't have a lot of money?

Carmen: They move them into Brownsville and the Bronx. I see poor White folk in Brownsville too. They [building owners/management] tell them there is asbestos in the buildings and they buy them out, or in the case of Fort Green Projects, they force them out.

Me: Huh?

Carmen: When I was teaching in Fort Greene back around 1999, my kids who lived in those projects would come to school telling me that their mom or grandmother got a letter from Section 8 or NYCHA [New York City Housing Authority] telling them that they would no longer have subsidized housing there and that they expect a hefty rent increase and now have to pay utilities, or find another place to live. Now, you see there is luxury housing over there [Fort Greene high rises].

Me: So where do you see Brownsville in 5-10 years?

Carmen: Gentrified just like Crown Heights and the poor Black and White folks, I believe, will have no other choice but to move out of state or upstate New York.

Me: Why?

Carmen: Brownsville has the highest number of charter schools in NYC. The chancellor now has 50 middle schools, and he is starting them from the 5th grade now. This undercuts middle schools like mine that are grades six through eight. Now when these don't measure up or have a slight behavioral problem they are kicked out and sent to schools like mine. Eighty percent of my kids are overage for their grade. I was 14-years old as sophomore in high school. I have 14 year old sixth graders sad to say many of them will drop out of high school by the 10th grade because who wants to be 18 or 19 in the 10th grade. They can't even have a girlfriend in their grade because legally it would be against the law. So, what happens to kid that drops out of school, particularly Black kids that drop out of school with limited education? They commit crime end up in the prison, like you are seeing on the news every week in Brownsville. Soon, the powers that be that include city government and DOE officials will be able to say that "we have tried everything for these people." With people moving, say, upstate, the population up there increases, thus adding to their census for federal dollars. Also, up there, where if you blow your nose you get arrested, the prison population that is now declining will

take an upward swing all over again. This may all sound like a big conspiracy, but logic tells me that you have to out these economically disadvantage people somewhere. And I say 'economically and socially disadvantage' because gentrification is not about race, it is about class.

Carmen's analysis introduces many interesting complexities. As a person that expresses nostalgia about the past of Crown Heights, she also recognizes the benefits of this neighborhood evolution. She admits to the harms that gentrification inflicts, including the influx of charter schools, which in her opinion, causes a disparity in education between the aforementioned and public schools yet she asserts that this process has its benefits. These new residents are "solution-oriented" as opposed to the generational residents that just argue, thus leaving the community in a state of stagnation, even digression. Moreover, as a NYC public school principal her yearly salary is somewhere in the \$120,000 range making her upper middle-class. Her perspective leans favorably towards gentrification as an individual, but not so favorably as an education professional. She also emphasizes the claim that gentrification is a class issue, not a racial one. The uniqueness of her point-of-view is that she grew up in Crown Heights from a low-income household, yet progressed into a middle-class status, but chooses to stay in a neighborhood where her neighbors do not appreciate her struggle to success; a conundrum of sorts because in the same vein she embraces their ability to create change. How does her viewpoint compare with those of the gentry?

The Heywood, by Seena Liff

Limo today
It was such a nice weekend
I know you have to go
You look so right in your
springtime linens
Our kiss is perfect.
I will go shopping now
probably to the Chelsea Market,
past the dingy businesses
that are still here,
the jeweler, the pawnbroker,
the little bodegas
I don't know who shops there
or maybe I do, but it's not me, lol!
I have just left

my prewar concrete
 industrial building
 I hear it used to
 stench the Chelsea air with ink.
 Now its solid walls and oversized windows
 provide such luxury!
 This neighborhood is
 so colorful now, ha ha,
 I hope it becomes
 a little more upscale soon.

In the September 2011 [NY Daily News](#) there was an article entitled, “Turf battle in Brower Park: It's gang vs. residents in Crown Heights.” A community partner sent it to me because of the work we both do in Crown Heights. I run an anti-violence youth organizing program called YO S.O.S. or Youth Organizing to Save Our Streets, and I have collaborated with this person, who is quoted in the article, on different community related projects. The article spoke to the violence that has been occurring in Brower Park, a park in central Crown Heights. Inside of this park, a group of 13-19 year olds who call themselves the “Brower Gang” hang out, stage fights and you tube them, smoke marijuana, and generally just act up. The tone of the article also speaks to role gentrification plays in reinforcing the internalized oppression that contributes to one of the reasons why young black youth perpetuate crime against other black people.

In this article, the author, Simone Weischselbaum, states, “The Brower Park has been attracting a diverse crowd as [Crown Heights](#) becomes whiter and wealthier” (NY Daily News). In speaking with a co-worker that is known for her tireless community activism, most notably for her work on building Black and Jewish relations since the Crown Heights riots of 1991, she opined that, “this article [in the [Daily News](#)] confirms that white life is always more important than black life” (NY Daily News). According to her, there have been complaints about the mischief in the park for years, and it has largely gone unheard; however, now that the neighborhood is becoming ‘wealthier and whiter’ the problem of safety in the park is now being giving real attention.

The audacity of the ‘wealthier and whiter’ comment bolsters the idea of internalized oppression being one of the causes of crime inside of predominantly black and Latino communities. According to one definition of internalized oppression, it is the

process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to accept and live out the inaccurate myths and stereotypes applied to the group (Urban Dictionary.com). In this case, I infer that the myth being applied is that white life is of greater value than black life. Without absolving personal responsibility for committing crime, these young people observe the influx of seemingly financially well-off white people (the black gentrifiers are not so easily seen as white and Asian gentrifiers simply because of the closeness of physical complexion) into their neighborhoods and because of this internalized oppression take out their frustrations and warped ideas of fun on people that look like themselves. Statistically black people victimize other black people at a much higher rate than they perpetrate crimes against white and Asian people. Therefore, the concept of internalized oppression deserves some legitimacy when speaking about minority violence, particularly when the media infuses that message. This idea is fortified by the following excerpt from. *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, by Adams, Blumenfeld, Castaneda, Hackman, Peters, and Zunig:

“[One problem with] being black in America is that you have to spend so much time thinking about stuff that most white people just don’t even think about. I worry when I get pulled over by a cop. I worry because the person I live with is a black male, and I have a teen-aged son. I worry what some white cop is going to think when he walks over to our car, because he’s holding on to a gun. And I’m very aware of how many black folks accidentally get shot by cops. I worry when I walk into a store that someone’s going to think I’m shoplifting. And I have to worry about that because I’m not free to ignore it. And so, that thing that’s supposed to be guaranteed to all Americans, the freedom to just be yourself is a fallacious idea. And I get resentful that I have to think about things that a lot people, even my very close white friends whose politics are similar to mine, simply don’t have to worry about.”

(Adams, et al, 2000)

Young (and older) black people, because of the various forms of systemic discrimination described in this excerpt are methodically made to feel that they are

criminal and less than. This learned criminality that is bolstered by the spatial closeness of the other (white people), contributes to this internalized oppression...this message that “my life is worth less than theirs, so why should I value the life of others that look like me. Paradoxically, how do gentrifiers in general view the communities that they are moving into?

The following excerpt from the poem at the inset of this week’s paper illustrates how gentrifiers, in general, view the communities to which they relocate:

*past the dingy businesses
that are still here,
the jeweler, the pawnbroker,
the little bodegas
I don’t know who shops there
or maybe I do, but it’s not me, lol!*

(Liff, 2008)

The author of this poem gives the reader the impression that gentrifiers see the community they move into as valueless. She concludes her poem by saying, “I hope it [the neighborhood] becomes a little more upscale soon” (Liff, 2008). Weischselbaum in her article leads me to believe that her ‘wealthier and whiter’ statement is written under the guise that the sooner we get those young people (or the Brower Gang, or are they one and the same? I cannot tell according to her article) out of the neighborhood, the sooner Brower and the greater Crown Heights will become “upscale.” Can we not deduce that wealthier and whiter infers less working class and low-income black people? Would it be presumptuous and exaggerated to make that presumption?

The next segment includes two interviews from two very different residents of Crown Heights relate their thoughts about gentrification and violence. One is Trinidadian immigrant that has lived in Crown Heights for over 40 years, and the other is a twenty-four year old bi-racial college graduate from Atlanta that has lived in Crown for almost two years. I wonder how they would answer the questions raised in this paper.

Gentrification, by Sherman Alexie

from [Vol. 38 No. 2](#)

*Let us remember the wasps
That hibernated in the walls
Of the house next door. Its walls
Bulged with twenty pounds of wasps
And nest, twenty pounds of black
Knots and buzzing fists. We slept
Unaware that the wasps slept
So near us. We slept in black
Comfort, wrapped in our cocoons,
While death's familiars swarmed
Unto themselves, but could have
swarmed
Unto us. Do not trust cocoons.
That's the lesson of this poem.
Or this: Luck is beautiful.
So let us praise our beautiful
As a twenty-pound nest of wasps.
Or this: Houses are not haunted*

*That's the lesson of this poem:
Grief is as dangerous and unpredictable
For months, that drunk and displaced son
Appeared on our street like a ghost.
Distraught, he sat in his car and wept
Because nobody else had wept
Enough for his father, whose ghost
Took the form of ten thousand wasps.*

*That's the lesson of this poem: Grief is
as dangerous and unpredictable*

*By the dead. So let us pray
For the living. Let us pray
White neighbor. Let us write poems
For she who found that wasp nest
While remodeling the wreck.
But let us remember that wreck
Was, for five decades, the nest
For a black man and his father.
Both men were sick and neglected,
So they knew how to neglect.
But kind death stopped for the father
And cruelly left behind the son,
Whose siblings quickly sold the house
Because it was only a house.
For the wasps and sons who haunt us*

A 2008 [NY Times](#) article titled, "An Old Sound in Harlem Draws New Neighbors' Ire," reports that gentrifiers in Harlem were complaining about the African and African American drummers playing drums until 10pm on Sundays in a local park. The complainants, most of them white professionals, lament that they cannot sleep, "hear their television sets, speak on the phone, or even have conversations with their spouses without shouting. Some say they cannot even think straight" (NY Times). However, the drummers, who have been playing drums in the park since 1969, have been credited with helping to make the park safer over the years.

“You lose the soul of the neighborhood. People who grew up here; rear children here; they create a neighborhood with a soul.”

--Michael Franklin Sr., 67, 40-year Crown Heights resident

Does a neighborhood lose its ‘soul’ when the gentry move into a traditionally Black or Brown lower-class community as Michael claims? Is the influx of different people, higher class people innately wrong?

Me: What are your feelings about gentrification as it relates to Crown Heights:

Franklin: Well, I am against gentrification wherever it takes place because its gonna be a lot of people that’s gonna be suffering and the people [gentrifiers] that’s engaging in that, they [gentrifiers] don’t care about the people that’s living their already because they use the politicians to create loopholes and laws so that they could come in and take over these people houses.

His words bring to light the sentiments of Sherman Alexie in the poem quoted in the beginning of this paper, “Gentrification.” “Do not trust the cocoons.” Michael believes that the gentrifiers has intention of co-opting Crown Heights away from the generational residents to the make Crown Heights “wealthier and whiter,” according to Emmy-Sue, the Atlanta in-migrant.

Me: What is your definition of gentrification?

Emmy-Sue: OI think in my experience it would be more about class differences with people with more money moving into spaces that don’t usually have money. But that definition doesn’t really work because it ignores the racial implications of gentrification.

Me: Would you consider yourself a gentrifier?

Emmy-Sue: Yes. I’m now getting comfortable with taking ownership of a space that wasn’t traditionally mine. My biggest issue with gentrification is the possibility catering to people like me who might have more money and

people who call this neighborhood home getting kicked out because they can't afford to live here anymore.

When we move on to the issue of violence and its relation to gentrification both persons agreed that violence is a by-product of gentrification.

But kind death stopped for the father

And cruelly left behind the son,

Whose siblings quickly sold the house

Because it was only a house.

For the wasps and sons who haunt us (Alexie).

Me: Is there a relation between violence and gentrification?

Franklin: Violence comes from the fact that they [the traditional residents] can't see themselves having a job paying the rent. So they wondering, "where they gonna go?" And most places where gentrification occurs are poor neighborhoods. You never see gentrification in richer neighborhoods.

Emmy-Sue: It's not a stretch to say that gentrification is a form of violence. When you decide you deserve to be somewhere and by proxy other people no longer deserve to be there it is a violent decision, even if it's not an active decision. Making people leave where they are is a very colonial kind of thing. In terms of person to person violence, when people feel less listened to and even less enfranchised it can cause a lot of tension in the neighborhood and violence.

In these excerpts from my two interviews, I gather that gentrification is lived from a philosophical level where gentrification's biggest indictment is that it makes people **feel** uncomfortable. Not minimizing this emotion, gentrification causes gaps in communication between people, a social disorganization which is defined by Mays & Winfree:

Areas—neighborhoods—become disorganized as businesses invaded their physical space and successive waves of poor immigrants moved in and out. These neighborhoods lacked many of the social support and educational mechanisms found in other areas of their respective cities. Residents subsequently turned to crime since illegal activities “may be regarded as one of the means employed by people to acquire, or attempt to acquire, the economic and social values generally idealized by our culture, which persons in other circumstances acquire by conventional means. The erosion was so complete, maintained the social ecologists that crime passed culturally from one generation of neighborhood residents to the next. When residents moved to a better and less disorganized area, their old neighborhoods, with new residents, continued along the criminogenic path, engendering crime in the parents and delinquency in their children. In this way, social ecologists viewed the neighborhoods and not the residents as criminal” (Mays & Winfree, 2000).

This social disorganization has the underlying effect of tension. Tension that can be exacerbated by selective policing that caters to whiter and wealthier residents, those young professionals referred to in the NY Times article, or the wasps in the Alexie poem. With this catering to the wealthier and whiter people in the community, there is the consideration of how law enforcement polices the neighborhood. In a recent meeting with a fellow community organizer, his personal contact within the 77th precinct told him in confidence that, “because of the amount of white people now in the neighborhood, the police are gonna police around here differently.” What does that mean? Does it mean that we are going to have better police service and protection for all of Crown Heights? I have a personal experience that gives insight to the possible answer to that question.

In the fall of 2010 I was walking through Brower Park, a park that is right across the street from my home on my way to work as a Violence Interrupter around 6:45pm. As I enter the park I see a police squad car parked halfway into the block long park. Both cops are in the car and a young Black man is standing outside of the car, seemingly being stopped and questioned by the officers. I proceed to walk through park approaching the squad car thinking that there is no reason to stop me. Wrong! They

stop me and ask me where I am going. After I told them, “to work,” they tell me that they will have to write me a summons because I am walking through the park after dusk. They go on to tell me that because of a recent shooting in the park and the subsequent community outrage by the shooting, their commanding officer instructed them stop and summons **everyone** walking through park after dusk. They tell me not to take it personal and that they are doing this to everyone that walks through the park, no exceptions. Several minutes into this stop, a 20ish blonde-haired white woman walks near the squad car with her dog and the same officer that explained “summons everyone” policy to me amplifies to this woman, “The Park is closed. You should leave now,” then hands me my summons that had a February 2011 court appearance date for me. Several months later, I went to court and had the ticket dismissed because of a clerical error. The issuing officer signed his name in the wrong place.

Notwithstanding the ticket dismissal, this sort of selective enforcement criminalizes and devalues the Black people of the community. This incision of criminality into the psyche can lead to a learned hopelessness that contributes to why young Black people may feel that crime is expected of them. It also contributes to the mentality that White people are of more value and that other Black people are of lesser value, making it more acceptable to commit crimes of violence towards people that look like them because they are, in their opinions, not worthy of respect.

If the police in this community covertly believe that there is a hierarchy of people in this community based on race and social status and the property owners subscribe to this perspective as well, then those at the bottom of that hierarchy will be the marginalized at all angles. No money, vacant self-esteem, and systematic discrimination easily sums up to crime. But this crime will be exclusive to peoples of color because they will have also been conditioned to think that, “you don’t mess with White folks because the police will have your head for that.” The evidence of this is the stop and summons of me and the convenient reminder to vacate the park to the young White woman.

Are gentrifiers the cause of violence in Crown Heights? No, but their large influx into Crown Heights with their social and economic capital contributes to the social disorganization of the community.



If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and we so we weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place.

--Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament In Three Primitive Societies*

“A consequence of gentrification is that the local public schools experience a segregated student body by social class and possibly ethnicity and race by extension” (DeSena, p. 54). Several weeks ago I took a group of teenagers from my violence awareness after school program to the local community board meeting. As youth anti-violence organizers, the goal of the experience was to expose them to local government. Many of them never heard of a community board, and when they did their research they were upset that they were too young to join the board as they felt they had valuable input to what the community needed. I observed during this visit, my third, was that the audience filled with middle-aged and senior citizen. Blacks with conspicuous splashes of whites, looked at the young people with feelings of disconnect.

If I could read faces I would have read from many of the black face, “What are *they* doing here?” I guess my teens interrupted this adult’s only community club. I forgot to mention that they initially sat in the front row, but was told by the district manager that they had to move because only board members sat in the front row.

My observation also leads me to assume that Blacks of low socioeconomic status are not accustomed to young people being involved in government; which leads me to contemplate how white people feel about their young people being involved civically. Why don’t more schools from lower income neighborhoods take their students to community board meetings? As more gentrifiers move into Crown Heights, will they make sure that their young people are civically educated and engaged? What effect can civic engagement have in the social erosion of Crown Heights, if any?

My final primary resource for this research is a 28-year-old Crown Heights resident that does seasonal construction work, usually out of season, unfortunately. Stocky with long dreadlocks, this man Quacy, has lived in Crown Heights for most of his life. He left to Queens for a couple years when his family was evicted from their apartment for reasons he preferred not to disclose. Now Quacy lives with his father, his older sister along with her two young children in a three-in-a-half bedroom apartment on the same block that he grew up on. We sat in his unfurnished bedroom for the interview as he sat on his bed in a pair of faded army fatigue shorts, slippers, a black stocking cap over his dreads, and white t-shirt.

Me: What’s your definition of gentrification?

Quacy: Wealthier people—more like white people. That’s my observation. Also, more gays in the neighborhood. Before you asked me to do this interview yesterday I never heard of the word so I did my research on it. I think it started around here in, like 2008. I think it started when they started that recession talk—that’s when this neighborhood started changing because that affected everybody. It affected everybody in some way, rich, middle-class, poor. So now the middle class is moving into poor neighborhoods and poor people “is just assed out.”

Me: Nice observations. I chose to interview you because not only have you been out here for most of your life, but you have a connection with the streets. You know what younger people who hang in the streets in the neighborhood are thinking. So, how do you think gentrification affects younger people?

Quacy: It’s good and bad. No, wait, it’s good overall because they [the youth] can learn what it’s like to live with other kinds of people, know what I’m sayin’. This is good because the world is bigger than Crown Heights.

Me: With this change do you see more or less police out here now? Does it make a difference now?

Quacy: I would say it's more police, but it's still same amount of crime going on, or more so. It's like I don't think the police is really making a difference. I would say they [gentrifiers] would call the police quicker because people would try them.

But to me I don't think they [gentrifiers] are here to stay. I see them move in and move out all the time. I don't see no wealthier people and white people coming here and making this their home. I say shit got rough for them wherever they was at then they came here. This is more affordable for them, and when shit get back to normal they out of here. I seen that happen already in this building a lot. They don't wanna raise they kids around here. Come on, man. My sister and them [her friends] went to the park with their kids and little kids start shooting at other little kids. Why would you wanna raise your kids around that? That's like not giving them a fair chance.

Me: How can the people here stop those sort of things from happening in the neighborhood.?

Quacy: I think that the people that wanna make change got to make it look cool because people will follow suit. There's power in numbers too. It gotta be more than a few people saying, "let's do this," and "let's do this." It got to be a lot of people.

Me: Does it matter what those people look like in terms of wealthy, poor, rich, black, or white?

Quacy: Change don't got shit to do with that so I don't think it matters, na mean. Find a common denominator—a common ground and work from there.

Me: What can that common denominator be?

Quacy: Common suffering. People got to find something to relate to with each other. Maybe we want our kids to play in the park again. That's something different kinds of people meet up in the middle and be like, "let's push for that type of change," by starting a petition or something. Little things like that can change the neighborhood. But this also takes money and I don't think people like the mayor has money to giving to Crown Heights like that. I just think that if you made shit more appealing in the neighborhood; simple things like a glass backboard [in the park] would probably make niggas wanna play basketball again.

Quacy's observations coincide with research on the topic. Researchers Freeman and Barconi (2002) looked displacement in New York City in the 1990's and argued:

Our research sheds new light on the gentrification process. Although it does not prove that secondary displacement [i.e., from rising rents] of the poor does not occur in gentrifying areas, it suggests that demographic transition is not predicated on displacement. Low-income households actually seem less likely to move from gentrifying neighbourhoods than from other communities. **Improving housing and neighborhood conditions appear to encourage the housing stability of low-income neighbourhoods to the degree that they more than offset any dislocation resulting from rising rent.** (2002:4) (Emphasis added)

Further, Quacy mentions that exposure to “other kinds” of people is good for youth from Crown Heights because they learn what it is like to live around people of different socioeconomic experiences. This point is fortified by Freeman in another work (2006):

Gentrification certainly brings individuals with more leverageable connections into spatial proximity with indigenous residents...Indeed, my research in Clinton Hill and Harlem did reveal instances where individuals who might be considered part of the gentry played roles that were beneficial to indigenous residents...The neighborhood effects thesis suggests that someone like this [the gentry] living in a neighborhood like Harlem might serve as a role model to others in the community and could potentially serve as a bridge to the wider middle-class world.

Interestingly, prior to me asking Quacy to allow me to interview him about this topic he had never heard of the term ‘gentrification.’ Notwithstanding, he articulated some of the reasons behind the term and the psychological positive effects of gentrification. He even offered a few solutions moving forward. Imagine if he was given the tools to build upon the ‘street knowledge’ that he had and became part of the change he envisioned? What if the more people of the neighborhood, including younger people were civically engaged beyond the normal means of electoral politics, community boards, and traditional town hall meetings?

Richard Margerum in his article for the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* speaks of participatory or collaborative planning, an interactive process that builds consensus and fosters implementation involving various stakeholders and public opinion. Recently, several thousand residents here in NYC critiqued and analyzed the plans for redeveloping the World Trade Center site. “On July 20, 2002, four thousand people from the city participated in “Listening to the City, a process to solicit resident feedback on the redevelopment of lower Manhattan. Not without its flaws, this effort was monumental because it was nongovernmental, as it was sponsored by a not for profit organization. Also, rarely are private developers held accountable to the public in such a manner.

PolicyLink.org is an organization that follows this path of participatory and collaborative planning. Their mission statement is as follows:

Founded in 1999, PolicyLink connects the work of people on the ground to the creation of sustainable communities of opportunity that allow everyone to participate and prosper. Such communities offer access to quality jobs, affordable housing, good schools, transportation, and the benefits of healthy food and physical activity.

Guided by the belief that those closest to the nation's challenges are central to finding solutions, PolicyLink relies on the wisdom, voice, and experience of local residents and organizations. Lifting Up What Works is our way of focusing attention on how people are working successfully to use local, state, and federal policy to create conditions that benefit everyone, especially people in low-income communities and communities of color. We share our findings and analysis through our publications, website and online tools, convenings, national summits, and in briefings with national and local policymakers.

Our work is grounded in the conviction that equity—just, fair, and green inclusion—must drive all policy decisions.

Their website offers an Equitable Development Toolkit that aims to reverse patterns of segregation and disinvestment, prevent displacement, and promote equitable revitalization (policylink.org). In neighborhoods like Crown Heights, the Crown Heights Mediation Center, the organization where I work, within the next few months to years will hopefully replicate this and other equitable development initiatives that implement localized forms of participatory planning. All of my primary sources have conceded that gentrification here in Crown Heights is inevitability. Crime, though steady, is something that all residents, new or old, want reduced. The validating of all residents based on a common denominator will limit the amount of harm that is also an inevitability of gentrification.

Further, a term discussed by Japonica Brown-Saracino called social preservation will result in the overall fairness and justness within the social *mélange* of Crown Heights. Social preservationists are in-migrants that “engage in efforts to prevent the displacement of old-timers in their area” amid the acknowledgement of the disruption caused by their own in-migration.

Type of newcomer	Origins	Vision	Attitude towards Newcomers	Attitude towards old-timers
Social preservationist	Lifestyle choice and affordable housing for middle class	Wilderness to be reserved and enjoyed; recognition of old-timers' culture	Dilutes the authenticity of space; displaces old-timers	Colorful; "authentic"; desirable
Gentrifier	Lifestyle choice and affordable housing for middle class	Frontier to be tamed and later marketed; embodiments of high culture	Welcome fellow "pioneers", increased safety; Rising property values	Threatened by; critical of. If preservation occurs it is historic or symbolic

Key distinctions between the social preservationist and the gentrifier (Brown-Saracino, 265)

The term "old-timers" according to Brown-Saracino identifies those whose families has been in the community for generations. Culturally, the overwhelming majority of those that have generationally resided in Crown Heights are Blacks of American and Caribbean descent. As gentrification continues, community-based organizations like the Crown Heights Mediation Center should shift its focus from mending relationships between only the Jewish and Black communities to include the inclusion of the in-migrants. There should be a concerted effort to include younger people in the plenary dialogue of community problems and solutions beyond unsubstantive measures like simple visits to community board meetings. Schools will play a significant role in facilitating this youth movement towards civic engagement.



That's me with the grey pants and hoodie with my back to the camera!

There should be recognition that Crown Heights has old-timers that are capable of revitalizing their community while organizing along with the newcomers. The precedent for this was set by me and several others within Crown

Heights when we responded to a violent occurrence during

the showing of a children's movie in Brower Park.

Mid-July, Senator Eric Adams' office sponsored a free movie night in Brower Park, a park in Crown Heights, right across the street from my home. The movie to be showed was *Megamind*, a children's movie. I was attended the event partially for work since my affiliate organization, Save Our Streets (SOS), an anti-gun violence program, was offering moral support to the event. The event was also leisure time for me since I was out there with friends enjoying the evening summer weather. There were parents with small children, senior citizens, and people in wheelchairs in the park picnicking in the grass all prepped for this first time event in "our" park. The evening felt so calm and uneventful.

About 25 minutes into the film five rounds of gunfire rang out and people started running, wheeling, and scattering out of the park. My SOS guys and I (not my job description) went towards the gunshots to see who was up to this dastardly act. We found no one and thankfully, no one was hurt—physically, at least. Emotionally and psychologically everyone was visibly hurt and traumatized. Gangbangers who were in the park with their families were hurt by this act. White people, or as they are more commonly called, gentrifiers, were shaken and distraught. The community was taken aback. We were hurt.

Being in reaction mode, I decided that there should be some sort of communal response to the violence. But nothing vitriolic and adversarial like, “let’s take back our park.” I wanted something more symbolic; something that would illustrate our love for our park and the need for us to coddle and care for it more tenderly. The ‘our’ included the responsible taxpayers and the irresponsible people that cannot see the true purpose and value of a community park. Hence, I organized the “Unity for Brower Park” event as seen in the picture on the previous page. I am the tall Black guy standing next to the man in the bright orange t-shirt. Also, as you can see, State Senator Eric Adams came to the community event. Residents had an opportunity to voice their feelings about the park and how much it meant to them. We even had all of them write down their feelings about Brower Park. Overall, the event was a small success that can only be truly determined with time passing without incidents of violence occurring inside of the park.

Included in this ‘all’ in attendance were gentrifiers and maybe a few social preservationists. This small success that was organized by a local resident—me--included the support of local resident, new and old, the 77th precinct, and a local politician is an example of what Crown Heights will be organized in years to come as long as people work together with the interests of the local residents in mind, while not demonizing anyone, including the perpetrators of victimization.

Conclusion

The gentrification of Crown Heights is a dilemma that is not easily solved. Small success such as the Unity for Brower Day does not eradicate the problem of displacement, nor does it guarantee fairness and equity. Rents are rising and will continue to increase. Yet, there is also a benefit to diversity as it exposes those from lower incomes and social statuses to those of higher means, at least socio-economically. Social preservationism, a theory, and a concerted agenda to civically engage young people of Crown Heights must prove to be a practical combatant to the formidable problems social disorganization, selective policing, divestment to revitalization, criminality, and educational disparities. Organizations like the Crown

Heights Community Mediation Center will play a key role in facilitating equity and fairness as the in-migration of middle-class people continues in Crown Heights. Their efforts will lessen the amount of social disorganization caused by this influx; thus, limiting neighborhood violence making Crown Heights the model for people and cultural preservation in spite of gentrification.

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