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T/Here in Williamsburg, Part 2: Dis/Possession

Dennis sinneD · Wednesday, September 20th, 2017

"Let us do evil, so good may come…"
Romans 3:8

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Democrat Abraham Beame defeated Republican John Marchi for New York City Mayor and presided over the city's worst financial crisis, where bankers' perceptions and priorities on class and race defined payments (and defaults) on city bonds—more parallels for today's Puerto Ricans to appreciate, concerned about the Commonwealth's debt. Abe Beame was a graduate of the 1950s Brooklyn Democrat "machine politics" significant early on in Sulemain Osman's *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, detailing the earlier gentrification of western and central Brooklyn. History is kind to Beame, and his navigation through New York's crisis is portrayed as fair and equitable, but his budgeting was *initially* criticized as pandering to New York's wealthy and elite. Before Nixon dismantled the Office of Economic Opportunity one year later, Beame directed federal anti-poverty funds earmarked by the OEO under the Economic Opportunity Act to the grassroots and inner cities, and reversed that criticism.

In 1974, like so many neighborhoods in New York City and across the nation, Williamsburg was yearning. My mother was employed at Domino Sugar at the Kent Avenue waterfront plant, now under redevelopment by Two Trees Management after the refinery ended Southside operations in 2004. We struggled to remain at 388 South 1st Street. Desperate people, sometimes strangers, sometimes neighbors, began entering empty apartments, stripping wiring and fixtures, punching holes into walls and removing plumbing, seeking copper to sell. Terrible conditions worsened. Surrounding the Shell Oil fuel station, and especially surrounding us to its south, a large part of the neighborhood's housing was outright *destroyed*, and much of its remainder, too much, was 'distressed,' 'derelict' or 'abandoned,' and where the city owned such properties they were '*in rem,*' a curious term meaning 'in the thing itself'—which nevertheless fails to capture the home and residence of Williamsburg's Puerto Ricans under perilous conditions.

'Abandoned' or 'vacant' is not necessarily 'empty.' The buildings remained occupied irrespective their ownership or legal status. When New York City seized 388 South 1st Street from its owner for

failure to pay taxes, my mother was the last of the Martinezes and one of the last tenants to move, enduring months without heat, hot water or electricity. Along with many of our neighbors in their surrounding residences, we held some degree of *adverse possession* over 388 South 1st Street.

Lacking basic services, disinvested by the municipalities, challenged by increasingly dire conditions, *el Pueblo de Williamsburg* endured through religion. Osman points out early in *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn* that scholars and investigators have mistakenly ignored education as a basis for inequality *within* central 'downtown' Brooklyn's gentrification, though the disparity is greater than class, race or gender. Ignoring religion in Williamsburg's gentrification further obscures things. It is through religion that actors in Williamsburg's gentrification have attempted relating to longer-term residents in the absence of any substantive understanding or relationship—the history and structure of the gentrification has made any other way of knowing between the groups impossible. Outside of individual and exceptional cases, recent residents knew their longer-term neighbors through the social service net of community organizations, which *all* projected from area houses of worship. And whatever religion's history, Williamsburg's flocks are more contemplative, literate and socially engaged than their peers. Houses of worship are deeply involved in the area's public as well as parochial education. Yet, over the years, Williamsburg's gentrification has successfully represented itself as thoroughly secular, if not atheist.

Especially after Facebook but as far back as the earliest Internet, Williamsburg's gentrification has been largely understood through the social media autobiographies of artists crucial to it in the early 1980s to mid-1990s, and those persons, in positioning themselves in Williamsburg, still frequently and explicitly describe themselves as projections of the 'Enlightenment' and 'Renaissance' *juxtaposing* the implied 'Dark Ages' of Williamsburg's Puerto Ricans and Hispanics. The world's religions, except, conspicuously, those of the 'Far East,' are reduced down to 'superstition' and 'fear' and then conflated into one imponderable 'Church,' easy to cast as not just historically but contemporaneously oppressive, and religious practice in Williamsburg is seen under that light rather than understood in its present function and meaning—in sum, Williamsburg's People are backwards and ignorant, likely homophobic and misogynist, not because of anything they do inside the neighborhood, but because of the history of religion outside.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, like their neighbors in Williamsburg and the *independistas* from which my family claim lineage back in Puerto Rico, the Martinezes were *espíritos*. Everything was animate, not merely Williamsburg's People, but also her East River, buildings, streets, roofs above and sewers below, ultimately numinous, not deserving of but *demanding* recognition, solemnity and respect. Williamsburg's storied environmentalism of the past forty years, at least from the Puerto Ricans, stems from this 'superstition.' The *botanica* was the center of daily religious life. Diego Echeverria's *Los Sures* (1984) captures a spiritist ceremony by Puerto Ricans and Hispanics in the Southside when *Espiritismo* was already in decline, fragmenting into other forms or absorbed by area Pentecostalism. It's a rare and valuable record, but attention and review on the documentary has unfortunately been spent on its images of deprivation.

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In the late-1970s, as life ordered itself around Williamsburg's Puerto Ricans and everyday objects became more everyday, I received my first Holy Communion at Transfiguration Church on Marcy Avenue and Hooper Street, but my family also attended services at the United Methodist Church at the junction of South 3rd, Hewes Street and Union Avenue, wherever breakfast and lunch programs operated, or, quite literally, we would have starved to death. We went to multiple religious services weekly, to reaffirm spirits, take cheer in burden, and supplement meager diets. Later, we turned to Pentecostalism and La Primera Iglesia Gethsemane on Graham Avenue and Scholes Street—across from the schoolyard preceding the Williamsburg Community Center recently visited by Mayor de Blasio. At every house of worship, no matter the denomination, the trials endured *por el Pueblo* punctuated all service. Gang violence, then later, crack and HIV/AIDS, fueled sermons for decades. Two years before 388 South 1st Street fell into *in rem* and we came to adversely possess our home, Saints Peter and Paul on South 3rd Street and Transfiguration Church, with anti-poverty federal funds funneled through New York City, gathered the People to confront and address rising violence and to identify causes. Brooklyn Legal Services, also under anti-poverty funding, drafted and filed the necessary legal documents, and with the help of neighborhood churches, the People incorporated Southside United, generally known today as Los Sures HDFC. They were charged by their churches to outreach to and integrate gangs into the neighborhood's mainstream.

Many *banditos*, however, could or would not be drawn into church or civics. They remained drawn to the gangs. *Easy Rider* played in movie theaters when the Martinezes moved to Williamsburg and it was closer in spirit to Williamsburg's Puerto Ricans than *West Side Story*. The Southside Puerto Rican gangs, especially those around the Shell Oil fuel station at Block 2399, unapologetically macho, nevertheless fetishized the American biker—riding Harley-Davidson bikes, donning rebel caps, motorcycle jackets and boots and, most importantly, denim and leather vests embroidered in identifying patches. The Dirty Ones were East Williamsburg and Southside gangsters for years before 'patching' in or around 1974, and helped the Unknown Bikers, their allies, patch that same year—my uncle and father counted among them, and my uncle's stepson is a founding member. South Bronx gangs organized under similar conditions at the same time. Gabriel Torres, formerly of the Young Lords' Ministry of Defense, observed in documentary *Flying Cut Sleeves* (1993) that these gangs developed as security forces in the absence of police and municipal services. They organized *apart* from Puerto Rican civil rights groups like the Young Lords. For residents, the gangs were police, and there was no education and ideological gap between them, unlike the Young Lords' college education and Marxism, often incompatible with the community's socially-conservative quarters. However well-intended and effective they were protecting inhabitants within their turfs, the violence *between* gangs posed a serious problem.

The front of 388 South 1st became setting for North Brooklyn's rumbles, 'hosted' and 'judged' by the Unknown Bikers. Even before patching, they and the Dirty Ones were raiding the Shell Oil fuel station one short block to the northwest, attacking staff at Block 2399 and customers in their vehicles, and they were not alone. Gangs that battled in front of my residence lingered. By 1975, after extended outreach with gangs, Los Sures modified their mission to reflect their growing awareness of adverse possession by gangs and 'civilians' of the surrounding buildings.

Gentrification isn't easy to consider. It requires information from multitude fields and specifying conditions to any field without reference to multiple others often reduces conclusions to nonsense. The data's complexity easily confounds. Entire symbolic and interpretive systems are constructed

to simplify issues, events and stakeholders, but their implementation factors them into the data they mean to simplify. Many of Williamsburg's artists have practiced this for decades and persisting to the present: making various representations, reductive but complicating and entirely negative, demonizing the previous and present residents and portraying them as illegitimate possessors of their homes as well as disparaging the neighborhood's condition before their arrival, and there has been no examination into this accounting of 'Williamsburg back in the day.' This unfortunate practice has been repeated among journalists, researchers and academics, recently by Steven Malanga in 2008, who concluded, perhaps flippantly, that while Bushwick's problems are attributable to *specific* persons, gentrification's benefits extend to everyone. Comptroller's Scott Stringer's *New Geography of Jobs* effectively rebutted this last April, demonstrating the reverse is true and acknowledging that 'locals' don't share in financial and commercial gains made in gentrifying neighborhoods, and anticipating him, more influential among the actors for gentrification *everywhere*, Richard Florida conceded the limits of the so-called 'creative class,' a group and term he helped popularize, basically admitting that gentrification is good for gentrifier and hardly anyone else.

'Adverse possession' is one factor among many in gentrification calling for simplification and interpretation. Not only are Puerto Rican and Hispanic perspectives wholly lacking, but the Puerto Ricans are divided on how to understand their role in North Brooklyn's gentrification. Today's millennials, *woken* to the question but more concerned with affairs to the southeast in Bushwick, understand 'placement' and especially 'displacement.' But Williamsburg's Generation X, after my mother's generation, was born and raised in gentrification's shadow, and understood daily life through the tension between 'ownership,' specifically their landlord's or property owner's 'absentee ownership,' and their own 'occupancy' or '*possession*.' Indeed, the first official sign of adverse relations between landlord and tenant is a *notice of dispossess.* Unlike middle and western Brooklyn, where gentrification is also very much an internal tension *between* black cultural and economic classes, Williamsburg's Puerto Ricans were possessors but not owners of place. Their landlords were and are presently distinct from them by race and class but especially by education and religion.

While researching cinema parallel or symbolic to Williamsburg's gentrification, to simplify through a popular medium the differences between 'displacement' and 'possession' as understood *between* Generation X and the millennials among neighborhood Puerto Ricans, blind luck drew me to *The Possession of Joel Delaney*, playing in theaters in the spring of 1972, three years after *Easy Rider*, shortly before Beame and Marchi campaigned for the New York mayoralty, when Los Sures incorporated. Incredibly, not a single Puerto Rican I've spoken with or interviewed has seen this film or remembers it screening in Williamsburg or Loisaida. We could have watched it at the Commodore Theater on Rodney Street or the Ambassador between the *cuchifritos* and the *paneria* steps away from the Marcy Avenue elevated train station, but this fiction on Puerto Ricans, whiteness, religion, Art, and inadvertently about Loisaida's gentrification has escaped the awareness, most ironically, of the Nuyoricans. *Joel Delaney* is favorably compared to the more popular *Exorcist* that followed one year later, though its adverse possession seems more wicked when considering the gentrification of Williamsburg and Loisaida. Young Joel Delaney, upper middle class but 'slumming,' sexually obsessed with Puerto Ricans, moves into the Lower East Side and is possessed by his friend's spirit, a local and deceased Puerto Rican vodoun santero-curandero post-colonial 'witch doctor' of sorts. Spoiler: it doesn't end well for poor Delaney. What painful inversion, if not for Williamsburg's Puerto Ricans, at least for Loisaida's! And one year before *Joel Delaney*, Andy Warhol is in *Mephisto Waltz*, also about adverse possession. Seen from the Puerto Ricans, t/here in the setting but somehow outside the mise-en-scène, these cultural

expressions seem less about the supernatural than about unconscious projections and inversions.

In October of the following year, OPEC, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, declared an international oil embargo, but for months beforehand, drivers re-fueling at the Shell Oil fuel station were stalled in lines on Grand Street stretching from Block 2399 all the way to Bushwick Avenue, even further east when rationing was its worst. These long lines, leaving drivers vulnerable in their vehicles for extended periods, increased opportunities for the gangs. Fourteen-year old Nora Diaz was murdered across Keap Street from the Shell Oil fuel station in the year that followed, an innocent bystander gunned down by gang crossfire. Two years later, in 1976, my uncle Saul Martinez would be murdered across Grand Street from the station. By then, the People had enough, a sharp and unprecedented separation formed between area gangs and community organizations, the latter marched on the 90th Precinct on Union Avenue and Broadway, led by Los Sures, and demanded changes.

Their cries would not go unheard. Police reform over the next few years, directed by Ed Koch's mayoralty but also cajoled and prodded along by Williamsburg's Southside activism, resulted in a drop in violent crime in 1980 comparable to any decline that followed for the area, though my neighbors firmly believe that today's relative and ostensible peace began with Giuliani, the mid-1990s and mainstream consciousness of Williamsburg's gentrification.

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*This is part 2 of a 5-part series, **T/Here in Williamsburg**, that explores the history of gentrification in the Southside of Williamsburg, 1968-1982, through personal and historical narrative. Part 1.*

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