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T/Here in Williamsburg, Part 3: A Spark of Impenetrable Darkness

Dennis sinneD · Wednesday, September 27th, 2017

I don't want to hear about what the rich are doing
I don't want to go to where the rich are going
They think they're so clever, they think they're so right
But the Truth is only known by guttersnipes

The Clash, "Garageland"

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UNITED STATES – OCTOBER 30: Daily News Front page October 30, 1975 Headlines: FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD Vows He'll Veto Any Bail-Out President Ford gives his message at Washington's National Press Club. Gerald Ford (Photo by NY Daily News Archive via Getty Images)

In 1975, President Gerald Ford promised to veto any federal bailout legislation for New York's ongoing fiscal crisis, emphatically attacking spending by New York city and state officials. Governor Hugh Carey attacked Ford's motivations and assessment of New York City's financial state. The back and forth between federal and New York state and city officials was infamously covered by the *NY Daily News*, "Ford to City: Drop Dead," and repurposed for Donald Trump's withdrawal this previous June from the Paris Agreement, "Trump to World: Drop Dead!"

Williamsburg community groups could not count on federal anti-poverty funding by which they first organized and incorporated. Later, under Carter's presidency, they also faced declining federal housing aid, and by the early 1980s, that aid was virtually eliminated under the Reagan administration. Williamsburg's grassroots were already adjusting. Los Sures designed a model after the blue collar 'building as household' but adjusted to fit the widespread adverse possession by North Brooklyn's Puerto Ricans and Hispanics, whereby tenants rehabilitated and gained cooperative ownership over *in rem* properties with city and state aid, and presented it to City Hall.

388 South 1st Street became intolerable living in the dark and without heat nor hot water for months. We unhappily moved to 330 Keap Street between South 4th Street and South 5th Street

before moving into a fifth floor apartment one block to the northwest at 322 Rodney Street, where my brother was born, when Jimmy Carter gained the presidency in 1977. The air wars with life t/here, turbulent and dirty from the exhaust of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway across from Rodney Park. We could not open our windows for long. There was little relief from pollution back then, green sprouted out of concrete cracks and the few trees were planted *outside* park fencing, while today there's a hopeful initiative to cover over a part of the BQE and connect Rodney Park and Marcy Park adjoining South 4th and South 5th Streets, *ve ha hokhmah me ayin timmatse*. A tunnel at Hope Street ran under the BQE and connected Rodney Street and Marcy Avenue that is now filled and invisible to passerby, soiled over and covered by trees and growth. My stepfather and the Martinezes would purchase Bacardi rum at Manny's Liquors on South 4th and Rodney Street, and stumble back and forth the BQE overpasses between Marcy Park and Rodney Park, consuming and burning their bittersweetness. The darkest nights found them celebrating or inconsolable in the Hope Street Tunnel.

New York City experienced a major blackout that first summer at 322 Rodney Street. My mother lit candles on all the windowsills, and late into the night we listened to the thunder of riot along Broadway to the southeast. The city last 'blacked out' to general calm on a cool November evening in 1965, but this hot night cost hundreds of millions in damages. Conservative and liberal alike condemned the looting across the city but especially in North Brooklyn, and the Bushwick Riots were distinguished from previous instances of racial unrest in American history. The participants were not 'dissidents' with 'something to say,' but 'opportunistic' and 'self-indulgent thugs' empty of ideology or rationale. The Bushwick Riots' consequence and enormity had another ironic effect: effectively displacing the memory of the Shell Oil fuel station raids. Criminology and gentrification is already a treacherous intersection but now when the major crimes that ironically inspired the gentrification are raised, discussion defaults and is confined to the Bushwick Riots, largely because news media paid attention—the Riots' principal victim was white. The Shell Oil fuel station raids and the surrounding turf gang violence were affairs internal to the Puerto Rican and Hispanic community and never gained that sustained attention. They are now entirely forgotten or ignored outside the community, confined to witnesses either displaced or departed from Williamsburg or internalizing the larger apathy. Since machismo is also braggadocio, the neighborhood's *bochincheros*, our amateur anthropologists, prefer the greatest, charismatic and scandalous acts, and discourage even silent talk of *cosas menores*—'lesser things.' Only the most considerate and durable of community elders remember, and where the Shell Oil fuel station raids and surrounding gang activity are conjured, they are similarly characterized as the Bushwick Riots, stripped of rationale and justification. No longer are they seen as conditioned or provoked by widespread adverse possession of area properties, but are, like the Riots, 'opportunistic' and 'self-indulgent.'

The unrest during the 1977 blackout was crucial to 'law and order' Ed Koch prevailing over incumbent 'soft-spoken' Abe Beame in the following year's mayoral campaign. Neoliberalism is rising to western paradigm, and would, in two years, be in power in nearly every non-Soviet nation. The Civil Rights Movement is dimming across the nation, while the austerity politics of its conservative backlash persist. In Koch's first year of office, a few blocks to our southeast from 322 Rodney Street, he returned to the locations he referenced to win his campaign, and visited North Brooklyn's sites of devastation. He promised radical changes.

Koch modified many pre-existing housing programs into what would become his storied '10-Year Plan' in 1985. However, his early steps leading to the Plan and engendering Williamsburg's gentrification in 1979 meant to *counter* an extreme rise in rent early in his mayoralty. That absolute measure of gentrification, 'rent' begs for interpretation. Displacement rates are correlated to rent, so where it rises dramatically, gentrification must be occurring. It's generally assumed that Williamsburg's gentrification has been one contiguous incline in rent since whenever beginning it's assigned. It's hip in the neighborhood to root gentrification to the Williamsburg and Greenpoint 2005-rezoning because 'that's when rents *really* rose,' but that might be fake news. Immediately after Koch taking office and persisting to 1981, apartments renting for $200 or less were nearly halved and more than 67% of renters paid one-third of their income on rent. Five years later, Kenn Firpo Realty informs the New York Times that average rent for a one-bedroom apartment west of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway *doubled* to $550. We have to search other causes and effects for gentrification than 'the rent's too damn high.'

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The city established the Department of Housing Preservation and Development in 1978, in part to guide low income residents of *in rem* properties into Housing Development Funding Corporations, limited equity housing cooperatives, directly after the model proposed to the city by Los Sures and other community development organizations some three years before, but also to convey property over to private ownership. Tenants with adverse possession over *in rem* properties formed associations, and were considered for cooperative ownership after demonstrating they could collect rents, purchase oil for heat and hot water, and make repairs over months or stipulated periods of time. After the tenant association passed this initial period, the city assigned administrators and provided tax abatements, low-interest loans for structural repairs, and subsidies where community development organizations undertook new construction projects, largely through the Tenant Interim Lease Program. After more stipulated periods of time, with the requisite hearings and delays, the city conveyed the property over to the tenant association, incorporated under an HDFC. A Southside elder recently explained to me, "There would no Hispanic community today without the HDFC." Over 1,000 such HDFCs have since been created, and a great many in Williamsburg's every quarter.

Simultaneously, the city was not prepared to convey all its *in rem* properties into cooperative ownership by low-income tenants, or we would not be discussing Williamsburg's gentrification today. The city clearly hoped that low-income cooperative ownership was temporary, eventually subjected to the housing market, as officials generally assumed that maintenance expenses for *in rem* properties and their conversion into HDFCs would eventually be taken up by *private* owners. From its fragmented beginnings in the late 1970s, Koch's housing program was an economic development program, not a welfare program. Some ten years after its establishment, HPD tellingly stated, in a document made public, "We're creating more than just apartments—we're recreating neighborhoods." Anti-poverty funds may have evaporated, but partisan and ideological budgeting continued over housing in areas like Williamsburg. Koch drew criticism from all ends—the Right wanted an unregulated housing market and severe limitation, if not outright cancellation, of government subsidies to housing groups and individuals, while the Left wanted housing for the poor and not the middle class. Koch's centrism was crucial, as the gentrification has largely been an affair of the middle class though it continues being characterized as warranting the attention of Occupy Wall Street. As recently as 2014, *Brooklyn Magazine* states the majority of buyers in the Brooklyn housing market are 'wealthy' when the report they cite by Ideal Properties

Group frankly states that majority is “in the $100,000 to $199,000 income range.”

Like all areas of American government since the dawn of the Republic, especially since the 1920s and Roosevelt, as long as the city has existed it has always made its properties available to speculation and acquisition by private individuals, but this gained new impetus under Koch modifying housing programs with declining federal funds, anticipating his 10-Year Plan and using the city’s capital funds. Outside of HPD, the city made *in rem* properties available through auctioning or to any individuals speculating on, bearing possession over and willing to rehabilitate properties. *These were the earliest actors in Williamsburg’s gentrification*. They had personal and professional relationships with area community development and other non-profit organizations but were not always directly employed or associated. College graduates or having some higher education, they volunteered for area non-profits or were otherwise aware of the city’s *in rem* holdings through campus outreach by City Hall. Poughkeepsie and Buffalo have similarly outreached to art schools or students of art history in places like Vassar College by first coordinating with community development corporations and other non-profit organizations physically and politically situated between the college campuses and government agencies. Poughkeepsie in the early 2000s and Buffalo very recently, under models inspired by Williamsburg’s gentrification, announced programs to condemn supposedly distressed properties and convey them to ‘artists’ where they can bargain *sweat equity*. In Poughkeepsie, these properties were to come from African-American and immigrant Mexican quarters. In 2003, Poughkeepsie Mayor Nancy Cozean announced an ‘Artists Office’ modeled after New York’s Loft Board would oversee this mass property conveyance, but neither Office nor gentrification materialized.

Negotiating labor for property possession or ownership is a longstanding practice, but its form across the nation wherever gentrification was happening from the mid-1970s to mid-1980s inspired the so-called ‘DIY ethos’ of punk and hardcore punk rock and anticipated today’s ‘creative economy’ in North Brooklyn and other locations. Its bargaining in Williamsburg early in Koch’s mayoralty engendered a ‘gold coast’ as described by 33rd District Councilman Steven Levin where ‘claims were staked’ as described by Felice Kirby. The latter, previous proprietor of Teddy’s Bar and Grill on North 8th Street and Berry Street, gained an apartment on Havemeyer Street in the Northside by bargaining sweat equity with the city, and is a founding member of the People’s Firehouse on Berry Street and Neighbors Allied for Good Growth f/k/a Neighbors Against Garbage on Kent Avenue in the Northside. The owners and tenants of 475 Kent Avenue, 55 South 11th Street and the Esquire Lofts at 330 Wythe Avenue all bargained sweat equity for studios and dwellings in manufacturing spaces.

Across the East River and over the Williamsburg Bridge in Loisaida, the ABC No Rio art and hardcore punk rock collective, influential to the final Williamsburg Waterfront Events in the mid-1990s and to the establishment of punk rock ‘dive’ Sweetwater Café on North 6th Street in late-1990s Northside Williamsburg that is transformed today into overtly bourgeois French-American cuisinart, would for years bargain sweat equity for Loisaida’s 156 Rivington Street before the city sold the property for $1 and granted them more than $2 million to rehabilitate and convert the building. Today, visiting the Sweetwater Café in Williamsburg, ABC No Rio in Loisaida, or, more provocatively, CBGB OMFUG’s former location at 313 Bowery, CBGB in Las Vegas or the CBGB Lab in Newark Liberty International Airport, tells us much about punk rock’s

history in gentrification and gentrification's history in punk rock. It is no small coincidence that, before Williamsburg's gentrification but at the zenith of Loisaida's, the word 'punk' is being used to identify latter stage agents of gentrification, or '*hipsters*,' who project themselves as 'anarchists,' 'nihilists' and/or anything *but* agents of gentrification. The relationships have never been explored though they form gentrification's drive and secret essence. The unfortunate propensity of gentrification scholars and activists has been to look at the phenomenon from purely 'professional' perspectives—scientific measurements of the environment, urban design questions of block and city layout and build, population density, surveying what kind of vocations prefer which retail or tavern—survey, survey and more survey, with the requisite charts and graphs. All of this is ultimately almost inconsequential to the early and middle stages, possibly *every* stage, of gentrification—what is preeminent is conduct that is *unprofessional, sexual* and *wild,* factors which today's professionally and academically-minded scholars and planners into gentrification cannot begin to comprehend.

The list of sweat equity hagglers in Williamsburg's gentrification is long and untold. Tax abatements, low-interest loans and subsidies—whatever made available to non-profits were crucial and made available through same or similar instruments to gentrification's earliest actors, unlike described by Roberta Grandes Gratz in her description of the Upper West Side's gentrification as primarily if not entirely *private* (*New York Times* "O Urban Pioneers!" September 2010).

This is part 3 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, 2.*

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