Cultural Daily

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T/Here in Williamsburg, Part 5: Let Me Die With The Philistines

Dennis sinneD · Wednesday, October 11th, 2017

Entonces Sansón dijo al muchacho que lo tenía de la mano: "Déjame tocar las columnas sobre las que el edificio descansa, para apoyarme en ellas."
–Judges 16:26

"Lost is the name of the Ocean."
–Zarur, Facebook comment (February 2016)

"How malicious philosophers can be!"
–Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

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The strongest evidence for sweat equity's centrality early in Williamsburg's gentrification is Loft Law and the establishment of the New York City Loft Board in 1982. In less than three years of gentrification, Williamsburg's white artists were contributing to citywide voices influencing legislation. Its 2010 renewal was co-authored by Assemblyman Vito Lopez, whose political career in North Brooklyn began as a VISTA volunteer under anti-poverty funding. Assemblyman Joseph Lentol took up its most recent renewal. Private real estate bargaining for sweat equity with artists in Williamsburg and other Brooklyn locations attracts the *New York Times*' notice one year later, with Brauchli's report in 1983, without connecting to earlier HDFC and city housing programs: "Ramshackle buildings in neighborhoods once considered undesirable are newly marketable…to tenants who are willing to make improvements themselves if the rents are low, the spaces are large and the subway to Manhattan is close…Some real estate agents are beginning to offer special arrangements for artists…" In the documentary *Gut Renovation* (2012), Su Friedrich ignored these kind of early and 'special arrangements,' while polemicizing against amenities, subsidies and tax abatements for wealthier residents much later in Williamsburg's gentrification.

The relationship between property owners and loft dwellers has been more congenial than characterized in Jaime Peck's "A People's History of NYC's Jeopardized Loft Law," (*Village Voice:* June 20, 2017) or taken a wrong turn down 55-65 South 11th Street (*New York Times*, Colin Moynihan: "The Good Life on South 11th Street" March 15, 2006), where publisher Autonomedia has been housed since the early 1980s. Autonomedia's influence on American culture cannot be overstated. In this gentrification of ironies, North Brooklyn publishing is another.

Autonomedia is perhaps best known, outside the con/text of modern anarchism, for Muhammad Knight's *The Taqwacores* (2004), but earlier for partnering with Semiotext(e) out of Columbia University in the 1980s and publishing an early translation of Baudrillard's *Simulations* in the Foreign Agents Series, which in turn influenced the Wachowskis in filming *The Matrix* (1999). That partnership reflects on the seminal influence of Nietzsche, French philosophy and 1968 Western European student unrest on the early agents of Williamsburg's gentrification.

Since the Young Lords held office on Havemeyer Street, Nietzsche is well read and attested, alongside Freud and Marx with and against *liberation theology* taught in progressive religious quarters en los Sures de Williamsburg—from Espiritismo to Catolicismo. Yet I take dim over their influence in North Brooklyn's gentrification, especially weighing against 'anarchism.' 'Thought' and 'speak' in Williamsburg's gentrification is better understood as a duel between Rand and Nietzche. The latter, especially with *Genealogy* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, appears to have guiled the agents of gentrification into believing the locals to be 'captives' of sorts, whose captivity is, quite literally, embrace and be embraced and anything outside of that is *ressentiment*. More importantly, fetishizing the student unrest in 1968 Western Europe is one reason why people for so long believed punk rock came from England, or that 'British punk' owed more to Bakunin than to Malcolm McClaren following hipsters appropriating the homoerotic language of *fight* and *enslavement* by the 'locals' over t/here in the United States—in lower Manhattan, as Afro-Puerto Ricans are characterizing Loisaida. It's incredible that 'anarchism' could be the mission of *any* North Brooklyn organization while ignoring adverse possession by so many neighbors—in Real Estate terms, there is literally *nothing* more anarchic.

Looking at the décor in photographs accompanying Peck's piece, it's hard to take seriously the captions stating Loft Law is to "fight gentrification." Frankly, artists live in studios. It's common and well-known. And where they've negotiated long-term renovations and repairs for large spaces zoned for manufacturing, they quarter with the landlord's approval or awareness. It's far-fetched that landlords at the early stages of Williamsburg's gentrification were misrepresenting these spaces as 'residential.' Some corners along the Southside waterfront *remain* hazardous for prolonged stay, after some four decades of conversions and manufacturing decline. Department of Building inspectors easily and frequently spot living quarters in spaces zoned for manufacturing, and where artists slept or showered in studios, the city fined the property owner and enforced review. The Loft Board was established because, in less than three years of gentrification, property owners sanctioned enough artists quartering in studios and making enough repairs and renovations to warrant oversight. How artists modified these manufacturing spaces under lease agreements suggests they were bargaining for sweat equity, not that they were in adverse possession, not at least when they first took possession. When these properties were rezoned, or were sold to new owners, previous agreements evaporated and new conditions imposed that *then* made for adverse possession by loft dwellers, which explains the present relationships between property owners and loft dwellers but not at the beginning of the People's history, or rather the People's gentrification.

Loft Law and Loft Board signal protection, but, more importantly, they signal *recognition* and the white artists grow exponentially. Shortly later, the Williamsburg and Greenpoint Warehouse Events are organized and the Waterfront Events transpire in the Kent Avenue Piece Factories, and

usher in mainstream consciousness of gentrification in Williamsburg's Northside. The Warehouse and Waterfront Events deserve separate dedications, but are ultimately impossible to represent. They span three New York City mayors, two American presidents, numerous new non-profit community organizations and bring countless yearnings to North Brooklyn. Clinton champions neoliberalism. As Williamsburg's gentrification gains mainstream consciousness, dozens of cities erupt across China by, as David Harvey puts it, 'accumulation by dispossession.' The Williamsburg Warehouse Events begin as the Parks Department decommissions McCarren Pool after months of racial tensions along Lorimer Street ending with bomb threats by white residents. *Terminator* plays in theaters and *The Day After* on television and manufacturing further declines in the Northside.

Puerto Rican speed metal, New York Hardcore and grunge acts form across the Southside and in East Williamsburg—waiting to be remembered. The Minor Injury Gallery opens in Greenpoint, preceding an explosion in self-publishing and writing for 'zines' out of North Brooklyn. Later, in the final Williamsburg Waterfront Events, as some white artists further specify themselves as 'Immersionists,' I participate in public polemics about the gentrification with other Williamsburg writers—the entire neighborhood participates, across ethnicities, ages and income ranges, educational and religious experiences. Along with Williamsburg, "gentrification" becomes mainstream, previously confined to academic and professional verbiage. Dinkins follows Koch and is as crucial to police enforcement in the middle stages as Koch was to housing in the early stages of Williamsburg's gentrification. His Safe Streets Safe City program is something like the Knights Templars protecting the pilgrims from Western Europe to the Holy Land—the police are muted or absent everywhere in the Southside, but conspicuous along Bedford Avenue to Grand Street from the L train station where the earliest actors in gentrification take route. The Williamsburg Waterfront Events end as Giuliani takes over from Dinkins.

One impossible representation about 'Williamsburg back in the day' has been white artists introducing 'culture,' especially 'Art,' into the neighborhood hinterlands and wilderness. After decades of this rhetoric, the progressive credentials of Williamsburg's artists and hipsters have never been challenged. Conservatives like urban planner Jonathan Coppage at the R Street Institute say the same, if with a bit more Randian panache, "This is an act of civilization…taking a place where no one lives and making it a place where people want to live" (Erin Mundahl: "Community in the City: Conservatives Talk Urban Planning" Inside Sources August 2017). Locals clap back, and it should probably go without saying, that our lives and where we live are never empty, that our private works, as well as our public murals, graffiti and street art, are productive and beautiful, our construction and repair skills comport with sweat equity, and more importantly, our charisma, espíritu and personal deeds, la dignidad de la vida cotidiana, prove that Art has always been t/here in Williamsburg. In emphasizing their distinction to the locals and widening the gulf between groups, rejoinder by artists has been that they are 'fine artists' not 'craftsmen' and this distinction *alone* makes Williamsburg's gentrification possible. Neither the city's housing agencies nor property owners cared if the earliest actors of gentrification were 'fine artists.' That distinction, or its implication, was important *years later* to news media, the city's cultural affairs agencies and international real estate.

Artists in the early stages of Williamsburg's gentrification reflect the city's planning for widespread property rehabilitation, not its plan or accident to engender an 'art scene'—what

followed was a consequence of amassing craft laborers in such a large sweat equity bargaining pool. The city's early interests in Williamsburg's gentrification are represented by their approach to the rehabilitation of distressed properties by area non-profits, but fitted to individual owners of residential spaces and *later* to individuals quartering in manufacturing spaces—as with Loft Law in 1982. In gentrification, 'craft' has been more important than 'charisma,' but has also been more important than 'Art.' Even after close to four decades of gentrification, and untold separation between today's North Brooklyn gallerists and those earliest 'white artists,' while there's *bochinche* everywhere of a North Brooklyn art market, it's not any fine or conceptual art, any 'creative,' 'information' or 'idea' sector that drives North Brooklyn's economy, but *building* and *craft*—'Real Estate.'

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After 63 TenEyck Street, Ruth Martinez loses hope in owning a cooperative unit in an HDFC now that we leave 388 South 1st Street and 322 Rodney Street, and follows her sisters and brothers in applying for project housing with help from Los Sures HDFC. There is *bochinche* that public housing will rise over *las Montañas*, but she loses out to her younger sister, Sylvia, who still lives in La Cabaña Houses on Lorimer Street. My mother now lives at the Taylor-Wythe Houses, one block from a Bedford Avenue that is west of Broadway and alien, bursting with Satmarim and public housing, for the L train crowds. Her route from private housing led to an equally circuitous but *more* troublesome route, through public housing, beginning with the Borinquen Houses on Bushwick Avenue and simultaneous to the Williamsburg Waterfront Events. Los Sures helped get her t/here. And St. Nicholas Housing Preservation, now St. Nicks Alliance, got her work over the years as a nursing attendant.

On a recent visit, Ruth looks out the living room window of her studio apartment and hints that she won't mind if I buy her a car. I laugh, wonder if as she looks northwest, past the projects and Bedford Avenue mansions and Broadway's elevated subway tracks, she imagines herself at Grand Street Extension and Block 2399, pumping gasoline into her Ford Mustang at the Shell Oil *gasolinera* that stopped operating years before. 388 South 1st has been razed to the ground and replaced by a row of three-story brickhouses. My sister passed from complications to asthma already complicated by Williamsburg's pollution. My brother left to the Bronx than confront the neighborhood's ghosts. The boanerges in my mother's generation are silent now, murdered, exhausted, or otherwise died by some violence or madness, and only Abel de los Doce Dedos remains on South 3rd Street between Hewes Street and Hooper Street. My godmother now lives at 322 Rodney Street, three floors below our former home, and my mother's younger sister remains at La Cabaña Houses. The Martinezes have their own Diaspora. And gentrification, initially unnoticed by the Puerto Ricans of all people, has cast its shadow over everything.

Ruth is disappointed she couldn't gain an HDFC at 322 Rodney or 388 South 1st and eventually settled for a studio at the Taylor-Wythe Houses. Aware of my many years of obsession with gentrification, she asks, "Why don't I apply for project housing?" My insistence on staying away only proves my sense of superiority. She still doesn't believe me when I say that all I've ever wanted from government has been an education. Her eyes flash, a glimmer of power that once could freeze fire, but she is tired, too tired to fight now. She's forgiven me, or long moved past my first act of defiance: learning English. So I listen more than speak with her, *finally*—I don't want to

agitate her with silly contradictions she relished picking apart every day for years (for an entire life!) of idealisms, *dreams*, de independencia for Puerto Rico, and Puerto Ricans leading a worldwide socialist revolution. After the *bochinche*, the violence and contemplation, scandals and intrigues, terrible and great deeds, I only regret having ever paled to a drop of her blood, drawing from those murderous and mystical Martinezes.

When I need them most, words fail me. We talk, instead, about gentrification, about the Brooklyn-Queens Express 'streetcar' route slated for construction and operation nearby, and the privatization of public housing. For a happy moment, I stop caring that she pretends to misunderstand and she stops pretending to misunderstand my 'big words.' Except for *one*.

"Don't move, ma. No matter what, don't move."

"*Dennie*, the government can't take people from this housing. It's not allowed."

I laugh and sigh. Maybe we've grown over the years because she goes silent and the possibility dawns on her. "How are they going to do this?"

I explain to her that, ultimately, privatization arguments will go back and forth on who makes best use of *possession*.

"¿Que eso?"

I wordlessly point out the window, at every building and lot, every passerby, *every possible space*, and her eyes widen.

I warn her again, "*Stay*."

To the Real, the Certain and the Most Definite
levantar la Gente de Williamsburg
until I see You again (and After)
Y/our infiltrator, Dennis sinneD

*This is the final part 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, 3, 4.*

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