The Life and Death of Urban Ethnic Enclaves: Gentrification and Ethnic Fragmentation in Brooklyn's 'Polish Town'

Aneta Kostrzewa

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The Life and Death of Urban Ethnic Enclaves: Gentrification and Ethnic Fragmentation in Brooklyn’s ‘Polish Town’

by

Aneta Kostrzewa

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

iii
ABSTRACT

The Life and Death of Urban Ethnic Enclaves: Gentrification and Ethnic Fragmentation in Brooklyn’s ‘Polish Town’

by

Aneta Kostrzewa

Adviser: Sharon Zukin

This dissertation examines the intersection of immigration and market-led gentrification in a fragmenting ethnic neighborhood of Greenpoint, Brooklyn—once home to a vibrant Polish community, now at risk of losing its social character as a traditional ethnic enclave. Extending Albert O. Hirschman’s theory of action to the Polish community in Greenpoint, I examine the conditions under which immigrants “participate”, “adapt” or “exit” as a response to neighborhood change. Based on participant observation, in-depth interviews and quantitative data, I argue that displacement or loss need not be the primary experience of longtime residents in gentrifying ethnic neighborhoods. Instead of emphasizing ethnic ties and cultural unity, this study theorizes the Polish-American community as an aggregate of private actors including real estate agents and developers, store owners, homeowners, tenants, church leaders and elected officials; each distinguished by diverse and sometimes conflicting interests. Such intra-ethnic divisions and cleavages, rather than ethnic bonds and community solidarity define how immigrants make sense of, and respond to, neighborhood change. By generating, facilitating, and adapting to processes of gentrification, immigrant actors become active city-builders and in the process renegotiate existing definitions of ethnicity and urban ethnic community.
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Chapter 1. Gentrification in a White Immigrant Enclave

Introduction

This dissertation examines the intersection of immigration and gentrification in a fragmenting ethnic community of Greenpoint, Brooklyn—once home to a vibrant Polish community, now at risk of losing its social character as an ethnic enclave. In contrast to recent narratives of gentrification in inner city, where affluent whites and in some cases the black middle class, move into low-income ‘racialized’ neighborhoods (Betancur 2002; Taylor 2002; Boyd 2005; Freeman 2006; Patillo 2007; Wherry 2011; Valli 2015), I examine the impacts of white gentrification on white residents—landlords, tenants, shopkeepers, and community leaders—who face not only neighborhood change, but also the dissolution of the traditional ethnic community including the disruption in social relations of housing, social and institutional networks and local commerce. Although ethnicity invites assumptions of group homogeneity and social solidarity, this dissertation focuses on internal divisions and cleavages—homeownership, migrational and generational cohort, social class, educational attainment, English language skills, and cultural literacy—that shape Polish immigrants’ divergent responses to gentrification and sometimes set differently positioned community members on conflicting paths.

Greenpoint is a waterfront community in North Brooklyn situated just north of Williamsburg, a fashionable neighborhood recently deemed a “mecca for young people” (Ellin 2014). In contrast to ultra-chic and sophisticated, but extremely exclusive Soho, Brooklyn’s Williamsburg attracted creative newcomers with countercultural leanings and entrepreneurial
energy focused on do-it-yourself philosophy and on building alternative brands in the arts as well as in everyday consumption. The neighborhood itself, however, has a long working-class history. Industry once concentrated along the East River waterfront and attracted working class immigrants from the Lower East Side. Most of them settled in tenement buildings near the Williamsburg bridge, but later migrated directly to Greenpoint (Susser 2012). When the industrial downturn of the 1950s decimated Greenpoint’s waterfront factories the change led to population decline, community decay and widespread disinvestment. Polish immigrants settled in the area starting in the late 19th century through the early 2000s, with the most recent waves entering during the 1980s and 1990s. During those decades Greenpoint became the largest concentration of Poles on the East Coast, and nationally second only to Chicago. Growth in Polish homeownership, expansion of ethnic commerce and the development of new ethnic institutions reversed economic decline and branded Greenpoint as “Little Poland”, a long-established ethnic enclave replenished and reshaped by recent arrivals.

In 2005, the City Council approved North Brooklyn waterfront rezoning, which opened the area to massive residential and commercial redevelopment. Attracted by affordable industrial lofts, artists and students have been coming to Williamsburg since the 1980s. But following the post-rezoning rent and land value increases in Williamsburg, gentrification began overflowing into neighboring Greenpoint. Creative types, young professionals, and middle-class families, began to settle side by side the Polish immigrants.

Although Greenpoint experienced intense resistance to in-migration of outsiders in the 1970s and 1980s, white gentrifiers who entered the neighborhood in the early 2000s, did so without significant opposition from the local ethnic population. In the past, white, working-class ethnics used informal control of the housing market and community safety patrols to keep
African American and Puerto Rican ‘outsiders’ from moving further into the neighborhood (DeSena 2005). The recent in-flux of middle-class whites, however, elicited a different set of responses.

Polish homeowners and landlords welcomed the rapid real estate appreciation in Greenpoint and happily participated in gentrification, which brought them substantial economic benefits in the form of increased rent and land values. Advanced age, low community attachment, and changing neighborhood character further motivated Poles to sell property and relocate to suburban areas, or return back to Poland. Landlords’ embrace of gentrification exposed Polish immigrant tenants to new economic pressures and intensified the threat of displacement. Yet, because the immigrant community began to slip away to the neighboring Maspeth and Ridgewood in Queens, and because of the lack of community-wide political response to neighborhood change, tenants left Greenpoint without voicing their discontent. Declining neighborhood-based ethnic institutions failed to mobilize Polish immigrants politically, because not all of them felt victimized. Besides the property owners, younger Polish entrepreneurs who appealed to the new, middle-class residents redefined business practices and forged a path to thrive in the new, gentrified Greenpoint. As a result, Greenpoint’s Polish community did not fight gentrification on a collective level, but yielded to it and in some cases even actively participated in Greenpoint’s remaking.

Gentrification has been theorized as a process driven by a set of key actors from outside the community—investment capital, developers, banks, city officials (Smith 1979; 1982; 1987), as well as the creative class (Ley 1996; Florida 2003), including artists (Simpson 1981; Zukin 1982; Lloyd, 2006), single and career-oriented women (Warde 1991; Bondi 1999) and members of the LGBT community (Gluckman & Reed 1997)—who intentionally and sometimes
unintentionally initiate neighborhood change (Brown-Saracino 2009). In contrast, majority of the earliest scholarship on gentrification conceptualized local residents, or *insiders*, primarily as passive bystanders and victims of gentrification-spurred residential displacement (Gale 1980; Lee and Hodge 1984; Henig 1984; Smith and LeFaivre 1984; Slater 2004).

Stories of political contestation in various communities, however, challenged the notion that gentrification impacted locals primarily by displacing them. New evidence on community opposition and grassroots action showed that far from playing the role of passive actors, local residents are determined to fight gentrification and guard their neighborhoods against displacement (Auger 1979; Levy and Cybriwsky 1980; Abu-Lughod 1994; Wilson, Wouters, & Grammenos 2004). Yet focusing exclusively on political issues, generated only partial and incomplete answers, leaving the larger question of how gentrification impacts all segments of community life largely unanswered. As Freeman (2006, 7) argues, although a useful method of understanding dynamics of gentrification, the sole emphasis on political conflicts “obscures” and “muffles” the experiences of everyday residents as it disproportionately focuses on the most “active and vocal” members of the community at the expense of the ones less outspoken. To complete this picture beyond political conflicts that often play out in gentrifying communities, this dissertation documents the responses of ordinary residents—property owners, tenants, shopkeepers, as well as community leaders and neighborhood activists—who all are a subject to the same general process of gentrification, but are impacted by this process differently.

A few studies in the early gentrification research offered a glimpse of local residents as either supporters, or direct proponents of neighborhood change. Peterman (2000) drew attention to homeowners in Chicago’s West Town area who welcomed gentrification with open arms, embracing especially the flow of economic benefits associated with neighborhood improvements
and rising property values. Mele (2000) mentioned “old timers” on Manhattan’s Lower East Side who opposed anti-gentrification protests, and instead supported neighborhood redevelopment and waves of investment that it brought into the previously deteriorating area. Finally, Wilson, Wouters, & Grammenos (2004) examined Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood, where Latino shopkeepers broke community solidarity by changing business practices to appeal to area’s middle-class newcomers. Outside of these initial attempts, however, most gentrification research continued to present supportive local residents as a minor exception within the dominant discourse of victimization and displacement.

Recent gentrification scholarship provides a more comprehensive, “bottom-up” (Valli 2015) analysis of the complex ways in which residents experience, talk about, and respond to neighborhood transformation. These new studies have not only centered core analysis on the long-time residents, but did so by giving them a voice of their own to describe how their economic, social, psychological and emotional well-being has been impacted by the lived experience of gentrification. They also provided a deeper understanding of the conditions and circumstances leading to local residents’ support of the neighborhood redevelopment.

In Freeman’s (2006) account of urban revitalization in two predominantly black New York neighborhoods, Clinton Hill and Harlem, some local residents expressed satisfaction over new amenities in the neighborhood such as better supermarkets, and safer and more lively streets, but felt displeased the changes were owed to the increasing presence of whites. Others feared that the influx of wealthier newcomers might trigger a steep rise in rent and property values, ultimately leading to a massive displacement of the low-income black and Latino population.

Wherry (2011) argues that residents of economically depressed and socially stigmatized
areas may desire and actively support gentrification as a strategy for community development and local economic growth. Focusing on El Centro de Oro neighborhood, the center of Philadelphia’s Latino life, Wherry shows how internal community decision to improve neighborhood image by marketing local cultural authenticity to outsiders, resulted in an infusion of capital and local business revitalization, but also opened the community to further transformation. In other cases, gentrification is deployed as a tool of racial control. In Dundalk, MD, for instance, racially-motivated local homeowners and community associations actively sought commercial and residential redevelopment as a revanchist strategy to reclaim suburban land from impoverished racial minorities (Niedt 2006).

Redirecting their analyses to communities consisting of multiple groups (or publics), all with distinct backgrounds, identities and interests, current gentrification scholars also argue that local narratives of neighborhood change grow increasingly complex as gentrification diffuses into new locations and intersects with competing and overlapping place identities. Deener (2012) documents contested gentrification in Venice, California where conflicting definitions of urban order as conceived by distinct groups including African Americans, Latinos, whites, rich and poor, housed and homeless, citizens and non-citizens divide the neighborhood in ways that are intertwined with, and reproduce urban inequality.

Comparably, in her recent study of Brooklyn’s Sunset Park, Hum (2014) focuses on the consequences of deep intergroup and intra-ethnic class disparities among the areas competing stakeholders: established white homeowners, newly arrived white gentrifiers, Chinese developers, and working-poor Asian and Latino immigrants. While Chinese developers use transnational capital to push Chinese-led neighborhood redevelopment, impoverished Chinese and Latino immigrants build informal interethnic alliances to represent and protect their interests.
in a political environment that tends to exclude them. Such collaborations add another narrative to the existing tensions between Chinese developers and established white homeowners and show that contemporary urban gentrification research must engage with the city’s multiracial composition to capture increasingly complex politics of neighborhood change and immigrant community-building.

At the same time, scholarly interest in the issue of gentrification-led displacement has not disappeared. New studies emphasize physical displacement as the single, greatest threat to the survival of gentrifying working-class communities (Slater 2006; Newman and Wyly 2006; Curran 2004; Slater, Curran, & Lees 2004; Wyly et al. 2010). Yet, returning to an earlier concept of "displacement pressure" (Marcuse 1985), and building on the new notion of "displacement without spatial dislocation" (Davidson 2009), recent scholars have also began to examine the social, psychological, emotional and affective dimensions of displacement even before residents are forced to move physically out of the neighborhood (Stabrowski 2011; Valli 2015).

Bringing together key insights from newest gentrification studies, my dissertation shows that the line between gentrifiers and non-gentrifiers is not as fixed as previously assumed. Besides the usual suspects of outside real estate developers, city officials and “hipsters”, Polish homeowners, landlords, and entrepreneurial shopkeepers in Greenpoint also play a significant role in driving gentrification from the inside of changing community itself. But not all Poles are affected in the same way. Economic pressures in the form of rising rents force lower-income tenants — either unable or unwilling to pay higher prices— to relocate to more affordable areas where they build new settlements and gradually reestablish feelings of attachment.

Poorest members of the Polish community—particularly elderly residents dependent on subsidized housing, as well as aging shopkeepers threatened by declining numbers of co-ethnic
customers and commercial rent increases—suffer the greatest loss in the face of neighborhood transformation. For them gentrification disrupts feeling of attachment and belonging in a neighborhood that has become their home. Advanced age, limited economic and social resources, as well as lack of English proficiency severely restricts their capacity to relocate outside the gentrifying enclave (Stabrowski 2011).

For these reasons, I treat Polish immigrants in Greenpoint as neither strictly gentrifiers nor non-gentrifiers. Instead I argue that ethnic communities consist of actors whose different degrees of economic, social, and symbolic capital condition their different responses to gentrification and neighborhood change. Those responses in turn impact the process of urban transformation recasting Greenpoint from an ethnic urban village to a trendy district of cosmopolitan middle class life. Ethnic tenants in gentrifying communities have little impact on their situation unless they mobilize neighborhood-based ethnic organizations, or engage outside allies including other groups struggling against displacement. Polish tenants in particular are aspiring homeowners and display a tendency to sympathize with landlords’ right to raise rent rather than to mobilize politically to oppose it. While Polish property owners do not directly initiate gentrification, they respond to rising property values and help ‘open’ the enclave to an inflow of gentrifiers. Younger, better-educated Polish shopkeepers respond by changing business practices and catering to the needs of the new middle-class residents. But older ones, who communicate primarily in Polish and lack economic and cultural capital are not likely to adapt to new economic pressures deployed in the form of increasing commercial rents and dwindling numbers of co-ethnic customers. Different social types of local residents develop different strategies to deal with gentrification. Despite the assumed ethnic unity that underlies many gentrification studies, I stress that ethnic communities produce manifold and often conflicting
responses to neighborhood change.

My exploration of gentrification in Greenpoint focuses on the following key research questions: How do urban reinvestment and gentrification rupture the physical space of an immigrant neighborhood and the cultural space of ethnic identity? And how does gentrification reshape the relations between the two? What narratives do white immigrants tell about white gentrification? How do white immigrants—homeowners, tenants, shopkeepers, and community leaders—renegotiate social relationships in response to changing structural contexts? And lastly, how does neighborhood growth and loss of a strongly place-based ethnic community—often described as an ethnic enclave—alter the meaning and practice of ethnicity in everyday life?

**Ethnic Enclaves**

A distinctive socio-spatial configuration in the American urban landscape, ethnic enclaves are the result of the combined effects of discrimination and prejudice in the mainstream society on one hand, and of ethnic solidarity and mutual assistance on the other (Model 1985; Portes & Manning 1985; Waldinger 1993; Alba & Nee 2003).

In contrast with the earlier cohorts of immigrants almost entirely of Anglo-Saxon origin, the immigrants arriving at the turn of the twentieth century came mostly from countries in southern and eastern Europe. With the exception of Jews who were already urbanized in their home societies, the rest of this cohort consisted of landless peasants, mostly poor, uneducated and lacking English language skills. Socially constructed as non-white (Ignatiev [1995] 2008; Brodkin, 1998; Roedicker 2006), the Irish, Italians, Jews, and Poles were subjects to prejudice and discrimination and became “white” only after the institutionalization of racism demarcated African-Americans as the ‘racial other’ (Omi & Winant 1986, 6).
Although enclaves reinforced ethnic identity and empowered immigrants through the formation of political organizations and associations (Thomas & Znaniecki 1918-20; Lopata Znaniecka 1994; Kwong 1994), other aspects of enclave life, particularly economic exploitation in the ethnic economy undercut the potential for upward mobility among vulnerable new arrivals. As Portes & Manning (1986) argue, newly arrived immigrants rely on the solidaristic ethnic community for protected access to jobs, informal sources of credit, and business information. Ethnic economy is particularly appealing, because it offers on-the-job training rather than requiring higher education, prior experience, extensive resumé, or other hard to get credentials. However, it can also be the locus of severe exploitation, such as low wages, poor benefits, no labor rights and sweatshop-like conditions.

A long-present feature of the American labor market, *ethnic economy* plays an important role in providing employment opportunities for immigrant workers (Morawska 1990; Logan, Alba, & McKoly 1994; Waldinger 1994, Light and Gold 2000). Although the exact definition of ethnic economy is still debated, it is generally accepted that *niches* and *enclaves* are two common modes of immigrant economic incorporation (Waldinger 1986).

In *enclave economy* immigrant entrepreneurs establish firms and businesses of their own, cater to co-ethnic customers and hire co-ethnic workers (Wilson & Portes 1980). Enclave economy depends on a pool of unskilled immigrant workers whose lack of English language proficiency and/or immigration status bars them from entering the mainstream labor market. In comparison, *ethnic economic niche* or concentration of one ethnic group in specific occupations (Chinese take-out restaurants, South Indian motel owners, Polish construction crews, Korean drycleaners etc.) depends on more complex linkages with the dominant economy and mainstream society.
In sum, ethnic and enclave economies provide job opportunities and upward mobility to some immigrant entrepreneurs and workers (for Chinese see Zhou 1992; for Japanese Boyd 1971; for Koreans Bonacich, Light, and Wong 1977; for Cubans Wilson & Portes 1980), however, as Kwong (1987) documents for the Chinese, and Barrera (1977) for Mexicans, internal division of labor and exploitation of new arrivals may also block upward mobility especially among undocumented workers.

Incorporation

Ethnic enclaves are the first stepping stone to acculturation and assimilation, a set of processes by which ethnic groups gradually blend into the host society and lose their distinctive identities. First pioneered by the Chicago School of Sociology, the ecological succession theory asserted that competition for land and resources ultimately lead to spatial differentiation of urban space into ‘zones’, with more desirable areas commanding higher rents (Park, Burgess, & Mckenzie 1925). Early European immigrants have first concentrated in ‘zones of transition’ near the central business districts, but as they became more affluent, out-migrated to the more desirable suburbs.

In his “straight-line” assimilation theory, Gordon (1964) associates suburbanization of immigrant population with weakening ethnic identity. According to this perspective, later generations of European immigrants become indistinguishable from other whites whose ancestors arrived much earlier. Later generations of sociologists challenged such rigid conceptualizations of assimilation and promoted a more nuanced approach to immigrant incorporation. Gans (1979) theorized white ethnic assimilation as leading to “symbolic ethnicity” or ethnicity expressed on purely voluntary basis, and displayed most often privately through
consumption of ethnic foods and celebration of ethnic holidays and no longer through residence in ethnic communities. Similarly, Alba (1985) conceptualized the incorporation of Italian immigrants as “twilight of ethnicity” to underline that ethnic identifications may dissipate and change form, but never completely fade. In sum, for white ethnic groups—Italians, Irish, Poles—suburbanization and structural assimilation does not negate ethnic identity, which remains essential in the process of social construction of identity. Yet, how specific individuals arrange ethnicity into definitions of self is a series of different options and different circumstances (Waters 1990).

Gateway cities like New York continue as reception areas of new immigrants, but today recent arrivals come from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America rather than from Europe. For those groups, ethnic identifications are not as optional or symbolic and dispersal from the inner-city does not simultaneously indicate integration into mainstream American society. In fact as Li (2008) argues among “racialized” immigrants in some metropolitan areas spatial segregation persists in the form of “ethnoburb”, a spatial concentration of ethnic residents and businesses in suburban areas. Despite the emerging suburban pattern, Asian, Latino and Caribbean immigrants continue to concentrate in the inner-city by forming hyperdiverse neighborhoods, rather than distinct enclaves.

Transitioning Enclaves

Most of ethnic studies literature examines ethnic enclave formation and social organization, but relatively little attention has been paid to the process of ethnic enclave dissolution. In the existing research, structural assimilation and suburbanization have long been considered the leading causes of white ethnic neighborhood demise (Gans 1979; Alba 1985;
Waters 1990; Gamm 2001; Sarna, Smith & Kosofsky 2005). In addition, a number of classic urban ethnographies point to urban renewal projects, racial change, economic restructuring and the intensification of the 1970s “urban crisis” (neighborhood deterioration, local government financial difficulties, racial hostilities and discrimination, rising crime, etc.) as key factors affecting rate of change in ethnic communities.

Among them, Gans (1962) documents a massive urban renewal project on the West End of Boston in which the city government justified the demolition of an Italian-American neighborhood by portraying it as an “ethnic slum”. Similarly, Caro (1975) illustrates physical transformations carried out by Robert Moses in New York, where stigmatization of ethnic enclaves as “ghettos”, “obstacles to assimilation” and their equation with “blight” resulted in their removal and replacement with modern infrastructure serving predominantly motorized middle class urbanites. In Manhattan, riverfront Lower East Side tenements were cleared to build East River Drive and public housing, further up, in the South Bronx, a thriving Jewish community was destroyed in the construction of the infamous Cross Bronx Expressway (Lin 2011:28-29). Postwar city planning and urban renewal were among the key forces initiating the dissolution of white ethnic enclaves in changing American cities, later the process was intensified by deindustrialization and shifting racial composition of inner-city areas.

In contrast to the above scenarios, Rieder (1985) analyzed the impacts of postwar entry of minority groups—mainly African Americans—into predominantly white ethnic working-to-lower-middle class communities. Rieder ‘s research focused on Canarsie, a southeastern Brooklyn neighborhood home to a large population of Jews and Italians, who responded to attempts at racial integration with hostile and at times violent opposition. Fearing losses associated with black poverty, declining property values and rising crime rates, white ethnics of
Canarsie eventually succumbed to the processes that were redefining their community. Moving away from an ethnic enclave was accompanied with a sense of loss and feelings of social and cultural dispossession, which eventually developed into nostalgia for the old neighborhood.

Besides government-sponsored urban renewal and in-migration of impoverished minorities, the restructuring of the industrial economy and the fiscal crisis of the 1970s has also affected the presence and persistence of white ethnic enclaves in American cities. Susser (2012) examined the effect of loss of manufacturing jobs and retraction of municipal government on white ethnic community in Williamsburg-Greenpoint area, where a large percentage of second and third generation white ethnics depended on industrial jobs. As city as a whole made the shift from an industrial production to a service-oriented economy and the urban political elites showed little interest in either sustaining or creating blue-collar jobs, the social fabric of the last existing European immigrant enclaves began to tear apart. White ethnics dispersed to the suburbs in search of jobs and better housing and the neighborhoods they left behind succumbed to increases in poverty rates, falling property values, lack of resources and social instability.

In some cases when ethnic groups shrink or disperse, but their shops and restaurants remain, ethnic neighborhoods become less commercial-residential and more purely commercial enclaves serving tourists as well as nonresident ethnics. This situation may promote commodification of the neighborhood’s ethnic identity, especially if this ethnic identity is in some way appealing to tourists. New York’s Little Italies are the classic example of ethnic commodification. Very few Italians actually live in either Manhattan’s or Bronx’s Little Italies today, although some of the businesses are still Italian-owned. Most of the restaurant workers are Albanian Kosovars who “assume” Italian identity for the purpose of creating a spectacle of Italian-ness for tourists (Kosta 2014; Becker 2015). Indeed, the tourism industry and the city hall
promote Little Italy as an “authentic” Italian space, where “authentic” Italian culture is experienced. Similarly, following the dispersal of Chinese immigrants, Chinatowns become “ethnic theme parks” (Krase 2006), or landmarked heritage sites (Lin 2008), important more for their significance to the outsiders than to the ethnic community that once inhabited them (Zukin 1995; Wang 1999).

In contrast to those scenarios, which for the most part have been articulated against the backdrop of deindustrialization, state-led urban renewal, racial change and urban disinvestment, the dissolution of the Polish enclave in Greenpoint coincides with a period of unprecedented growth and neighborhood reinvestment. Today, as opposed to half a century ago, change is driven predominantly by market forces, local policy, as well as strategic choices of the ethnic community itself, rather than by large-scale urban planning and federally-funded urban renewal projects.

Two recent studies examine the impacts of market-driven urban revitalization and gentrification on white ethnic enclaves in Toronto and New York. Murdie and Teixeira (2011) focus on Toronto’s Little Portugal, where the Portuguese relocation to the suburbs has coincided with a period of intensive gentrification. The study relies on the typical narrative of “gentrifiers” vs. “local residents”, in which gentrification leads to the ethnic populations’ residential and commercial displacement and changes area’s character from ethnic to trendy. Despite findings of “considerable ambivalence” towards gentrification among the Portuguese, the authors emphasize mostly negative impacts of neighborhood change and portray the Portuguese immigrants as “victims” of the area’s transformation.

In his study of social relations of housing among Greenpoint’s Polish immigrants, Stabrowski (2011) broadens the typical analysis of gentrification to show that ethnic “place
entrepreneurs”—Polish credit union and Polish real estate agents—have played an integral role not only in the early formation and development of the ethnic enclave, but following the spectacular rise in property values in Greenpoint also in the enclave’s dissolution. Although this new emphasis is useful in understanding how gentrification implicates the interests of the immigrant propertied class, it neglects the responses and actions of equally important ethnic actors, particularly ethnic shopkeepers and community leaders. This dissertation fills in this gap by showing a broader picture of gentrification’s impact including a focus on ethnic commerce and ethnic institutions. It also delves into the important question of the lack of Polish opposition and resistance to neighborhood redevelopment and gentrification, which sets Greenpoint apart from other gentrifying ethnic communities. Gentrification is a multifaceted process that impacts urban communities in diverse ways. As the process itself becomes more complex and changes over time, sociological definitions and explanations of its causes, origins, and consequences must continue to evolve.

**Defining Gentrification**

Since Ruth Glass first coined the term in 1964, gentrification has become one of the cornerstones of urban studies research and an extensive literature has been generated on the origin, explanations, and consequences of the process in North America, Europe, and, in different forms, around the world.

The earliest mode of thinking about gentrification is based on the observation that the middle class homebuyers moving into working class housing, cause an increase in property values, which ultimately drives the original working class families out (Glass, 1964; Smith, 1982). This process, often referred to as classical gentrification, is gradual and piecemeal,
sometimes affecting only a few buildings on a single bloc, but as it intensifies, property values increase across an entire neighborhood and result in the direct displacement of the original residents.

Initially excluded from the definition, the construction of new buildings on reclaimed industrial land was later characterized as ‘new-build gentrification’ (Zukin 1991:193). Some scholars saw new-build development as creating effects similar to earlier renovation-based gentrification (Davidson & Lees 2005). Capital is reinvested in previously disinvested inner areas and the lower-income people in the adjacent residential communities are displaced by middle- and upper-middle-class newcomers. Envisioned by developers as a “creative” urban lifestyle to be bought by those with sufficient economic capital to afford it, new residential and commercial development transforms working class neighborhoods into upscale communities for the affluent (Florida 2003). The concept of ‘new-build gentrification’ is significant in North Brooklyn where the rezoning and residential and commercial redevelopment of the waterfront (previously a brownfield site) drove property values across the entire area resulting in the displacement of thousands of lower-income residents in the adjacent upland communities.

Hackworth and Smith (2001) refer to the current stage of gentrification as “the third wave”, which began in the mid-1990s, and is defined by increased presence of corporate developers linking inner-city neighborhoods to global flows of investment capital. In addition, the role of federal and local state in facilitating gentrification becomes far more prominent as private-public partnerships strategize to spur economic growth in specific neighborhoods. Hackworth (2002) also argued that third wave ‘diffuses’ outside of the urban core into more isolated neighborhoods, causing a rampant spread of gentrification to areas that were previously untouched by it.
Overall, the process and the definition of gentrification have changed over time, from targeting a single city bloc or a neighborhood to its emergence as the ‘global urban strategy’ ‘deeply connected into the circuits of global capital and cultural circulation’ (Smith 2002, 80); a process that becomes the new battleground as global struggles over urban space continue to intensify (Lees, Shin, López-Morales 2015).

**Commercial Gentrification**

Early gentrification scholarship focused mostly on land speculation, real estate development and housing market dynamics. As a result, until recently the commercial dimension of gentrification has been left relatively unexplored. Retail consumption has long been considered important to the construction of a distinctively urban middle class identity, one separate, in various aspects, from other definitions of the middle class (Ley 1996). Indeed, early scholars established strong links between particular types of retail, middle class consumer preferences, and gentrifying neighborhoods (Crewe & Lowe 1995; Smith 1996; May 1996; Butler 1997; McDowell 1997; Bridge & Dowling 2001). More recently scholars stress commercial change as a significant, but often overlooked symbol of growing urban inequality.

The production of a neighborhood’s commercial space reflects and combines the economic, as well as the dominant group’s *cultural power* (Zukin 1982; 1987; 1993; 1995; Zukin *et al* 2009). Commercial expressions of such power are visible in the high status identity of the new stores, bars and restaurants that open in gentrifying neighborhoods. Seemingly trivial, local stores are actually the building blocks of neighborhood identity (Deener 2007; Zukin *et al* 2009; Zukin, Kasinitz & Chen 2016). In other words, local commerce provides otherwise hidden information about the residents who give a neighborhood its meaning. By looking at local stores
and other small businesses, one can tell the social 'story' of the neighborhood: Who are the people who live here? What types of income do they earn? How do they spend their free time?

Upscale stores, bars, restaurants and coffee shops in gentrifying neighborhoods, do more than just satisfy basic consumption needs of the new residents. As Deener (2007, 299) argues, by controlling the aesthetics of the street the new retail entrepreneurs establish “symbolic ownership” over it. Because new retail spaces tend to reflect not only the economic power, but also the moral, cultural and ideological positions of the middle class newcomers, they overshadow the economic interests and cultural identity of the original working class residents. In this sense, new retail entrepreneurs are also cultural and social entrepreneurs who take the power to coin neighborhood identity away from local residents (Zukin 2010, 19-20; Zukin et al 2009, 58).

Ultimately, gentrification-led commercial change is an expression of dominant modes of spatial production at the expense of the disempowered ones (Valli 2015). In similar manner in which land speculation and upscale housing market produce residential displacement, the material inequalities that drive commercial change result in the displacement of local stores. In this sense, the disappearance of traditional mom-and-pop stores and their replacement by upscale boutiques and chain stores plays into broader dynamics of urban inequality (Zukin et al 2009, 49). By catering to certain consumer preferences, new retail entrepreneurship expands shopping experience for the wealthy newcomers. Yet, at the same time, it ignores the everyday needs of low-income, working-class residents who rely on affordable products and services, but assign less importance to high-status cultural or aesthetic ambitions.

Traditional retail spaces are also places of working-class sociability and their loss engenders a sense of psychological and emotional dislocation. When confronted with new bars,
restaurants and boutiques local residents in the gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick—predominantly low-income Latinos—experienced feeling “out of place” and “othered” (Valli 2015). Not only the price ranges in the new establishments, but also the sense—real or imagined—of being perceived as “not belonging” stirred feelings of discomfort. Similarly, in his study of gentrification on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, Ocejo (2014) presents the new, upscale downtown as a place geared toward affluent outsiders, but less welcoming, sometimes hostile, to working-class locals, many of whom are the earlier wave of now older and impoverished gentrifiers. In comparison to the ritual of belonging, which socializing in neighborhood’s numerous grimy bars has for decades constituted for the area's longtime residents, the arrival of exclusive, “dress-up” clubs frequented by out-of-towners has left the earlier gentrifiers feeling disconnected and nostalgic for the neighborhood's less glamorous past.

In American cities, commercial gentrification is not a centrally organized process. Rather, it is an outcome of the combination of market forces, state intervention (e.g. changes in zoning) and media marketing. Commercial investment may be initiated by new entrepreneurs moving into disinvested areas, then expanded by state actions; or it may be a direct result of economic development policies implemented to revitalize historically disinvested or special status areas (Zukin et al 2009). In either case, local state plays the role of a facilitator, while the actual work of retail change is carried out by new entrepreneurs whose businesses get extensive coverage in the media and in turn attract more local investment.

In ‘global’ cities outside the United States retail investment may take the form of centrally organized strategy. In some of Amsterdam's dense ethnic districts, for example, commercial gentrification is deployed to appeal to "creative" and middle class residents whose presence adds "social diversity" to area's local streets (Hagemans, Hendriks, Rath & Zukin
In this context, city government makes conscious effort to increase the number of upscale restaurants, art galleries and boutiques on immigrant shopping streets, which city officials believe will attract middle class residents and prevent "ghettoization", a process of concentrating immigrants into one area. Similar dynamic is at work in Toronto, where inner city retail dynamics are centrally managed through business improvement areas program, which operates through city-supported and funded, but voluntarily organized associations of local shopkeepers to stimulate business by expanding local improvements (Rankin, Kamizaki & Mclean 2016).

Whether state-led, market-led, or both, commercial gentrification of shopping streets reshapes the physical and social structure of working class, ethnic communities. Although it adds economic vitality to previously disinvested and underserved neighborhoods, it does so at the expense of social and ethnic diversity, and, as my dissertation shows, changes the way ethnicity is defined and practiced.

**Gentrification in Brooklyn**

As early as the 1940s white collar workers (artists, journalists, bankers, etc.) begun to appear in formerly white working class Brooklyn neighborhoods, with the intention to restore dilapidated Victorian-style brownstones and townhouses (Osman 2011). Although predominantly working-class, some areas of Brooklyn had always had a moneyed class of doctors, lawyers and industrialists concentrated in Brooklyn Heights and along the “Gold Coast” of Prospect Park, as well as near their factories in Williamsburg and Bushwick (Reiss 2001). By the 1950s, however, a new type of people began flooding into South Brooklyn; they were the well educated and “cultured” members of the new postindustrial middle class—writers, artists,
designers, editors, journalists, advertisers, bankers and managers (Osman 2011).

Unlike other members of their generation they did not identify with the conformity of the suburbs, neither did the modern, high rise apartments in Manhattan appeal to their romantic sensibilities. Instead they searched for authenticity, community, and a closer connection to history, which they saw imprinted in the aging urban core (Zukin 2010).

As part of this postindustrial remaking, most ethnic Manhattan neighborhoods transformed into sterile zones of concrete and steel. In contrast, what attracted the early pioneers of gentrification to Brooklyn, was the quiet, the greenery and the human scale of a real neighborhood; something slightly reminiscent of the countryside, but in close proximity to all the eclectic cultural resources and economic opportunities Manhattan had to offer.

The migration of artists, writers, journalists, and actors across the East River continued during the 1980s and 1990s and began to change Brooklyn’s gritty image. By this time property prices in “Brownstone Brooklyn” (Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens) increased well beyond the reach of the artists and young professionals, who began migrating further up the Brooklyn coastline to Dumbo and Williamsburg (Zukin 2010).

A sporadic process carried out by individual gentrifiers moving into individual buildings and altering the appearance of specific blocks has by the 1990s morphed into an economic development strategy based on attracting the middle class back to the city. The development that over the past two decades has altered the nature of gentrification is the return of state intervention (Hackworth & Smith 2000). Although in the past state agencies formally supported systematic urban renewal, today, gentrification is not as much linked with urban policy, as with large-scale developers and global capital assisted by local governments. Tax abatement programs, rezoning, and reduced protection of affordable housing are just a few forms of state
assistance in the market-led process of urban reinvestment. This more assertive role is related to the need to drive local growth to increase tax revenues. In New York the involvement of the local government in redevelopment intensified in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Post-9/11: Bloomberg and the “Luxury City”

Local government’s collaboration with real estate developers after 9/11 expanded gentrification as part of a major effort to rebuild the city’s economy and to show that the city could still attract capital investment. The catastrophic events of 9/11 and the destruction of the World Trade Center towers had a major impact on the city’s economy, labor market dynamics and area’s small businesses (Chernick 2005). During the 12 month period immediately following the terrorist attack, NYC’s Gross City Product (GCP) was estimated to have been reduced by approximately $27.3 billion (Makinen 2011). The city budget was additionally depleted of billions of dollars in lost tax revenues and more billions spent in emergency and recovery efforts (NYC Comptroller Office 2011, 43). As many as 130,000 jobs were lost city-wide, most of them in the financial, insurance, real estate, air transportation, tourism, and export sectors (Chernick 2005; NYC Comptroller Office 2011, 49). Thousands of small businesses in Lower Manhattan and other parts of the city were dislocated, disrupted or destroyed (2011, 38). In sum, post 9/11 chaos and economic instability cast a shadow on the future of the struggling metropolis. Urban elites feared massive flight of businesses and capital, loss of jobs, rise in crime, and an overall decline in quality of life; factors that could potentially set the city on a downward economic spiral and reproduce the fiscal crisis of the 1970s.

In November 2001, an entrepreneur Michael Bloomberg was elected the mayor of New York. From the very beginning, Bloomberg centered his electoral campaign—made possible
largely by his enormous wealth— on the “corporate approach” to urban governance. He famously vowed he would be “the CEO mayor, one that conceived of the city government as a corporation, businesses and residents as clients, and customers and the city itself as a product to be branded and marketed” (Brash 2011, 74). The idea of entrepreneurial government and a CEO Mayor resonated well with the urban elites who saw economic growth and investment as the only viable remedy to city’s fiscal problems. In general, the notion that in a same way a charismatic CEO can turn around a struggling company, a mayor with extensive experience in the private-sector can effect real change in urban government dominated the political climate and ultimately positioned Bloomberg as the winning contender.

In his 2003 State of the City Address Bloomberg presented his comprehensive economic development strategy based on city’s brand as a “luxury product”: “New York is in a fierce, worldwide competition; our strategy must be to hone our competitive advantages. We must offer the best product—and sell it, forcefully” (2011, 112). He then clarified his notion of the city’s new brand at an economic summit held at the Rockefeller University: “If NYC is a business, it isn’t a Wal-Mart—it isn’t trying to be the lowest-priced product in the market. It is a high-end product, maybe even a luxury product” (Cardwell 2003). The recasting of the city’s image as a “luxury product” clearly emphasizes high-end corporate market, prestigious cultural institutions, mega-events, and even highly-skilled white-collar workers, all identified as desirable and beneficial for the city’s prosperity.

This new focus on the value of a New York City location rather than on production costs marked a shift away from the traditional development policy based on tax breaks and tax incentives which ‘bribe’ businesses into staying in the city. As Bloomberg emphasized, “New York City is never going to be the lowest-priced place to do business; it is just the most efficient
place to do business” (Brash 2011). The “luxury city” brand signified the prestige value attached to and emanating from the location itself. Rather than a slogan or a logo, the “luxury city” brand presents a vision that encompasses the city as a whole, and provides a logical coherence to all domains of urban policy.

The Bloomberg administration executed an aggressive marketing campaign that would take charge of the city’s image—which they felt was key to the city’s prosperity—and sell it nationally and globally to executives and cultural leaders, as the ideal place to invest in, visit and even to live. To that end, in April 2003, Bloomberg created the position of chief marketing officer for the city of New York responsible for inscribing the city’s new brand into the visual culture of global mass-media through multi-million dollar advertising campaigns and other promotional events (Brash 2011).

In a similar way the stigmatization of places as “blighted”—especially when mixed with racial and class ideology—legitimated earlier urban planners’ efforts to discredit and destroy low-income ethnic communities, today urban branding continues to legitimate the desires and interests of the privileged groups over those of others. As Brash further claims the “luxury city” brand was a class project almost entirely premised on the experiences of the corporate elites, keeping them in mind as the “target market” and excluding the everyday realities of New Yorkers struggling in a city with increasingly limited access to affordable housing.

To this end, Bloomberg’s “luxury city” brand encouraged an aggressive program of urban development focused primarily on the construction of high-end office space and luxury housing, as well as development of parks and open spaces especially along waterfront areas. Moreover, new office buildings and luxury high rises were envisioned to expand beyond Manhattan into the previously disinvested outer boroughs, especially Brooklyn, the Bronx and
Queens, where property values were expected to rise.

Bloomberg’s strategy of decreasing the amount of land available for manufacturing use in fact represented a continual failure to support industry in New York that dated back to the 1980s. Rezoning in the early 2000s was the culmination of this policy. But the Bloomberg administration—and the de Blasio administration—claim to support industry by creating a different kind of zoning called IBZ\(^1\). In total the City Council passed 124 rezoning actions converting nearly 40 percent of the city’s industrial acreage to residential, commercial, or mixed uses (Rosenberg 2014). Some of the zoning changes encompassed parcels of land as small as a single bloc, others stretched over more than three hundred blocks. The most important of them involved the West Side mega project known as Hudson Yards, a 90-block area in West Harlem, Jamaica and the Greenpoint/Williamsburg waterfront. Undergirding the land use changes was the idea to reclaim ‘underutilized’ industrial areas — especially along the city’s waterfront and often inhabited by ethnic and minority populations— for new luxury housing and office space development.

*Post-Rezoning Greenpoint*

In May 2005, the New York City Department of City Planning and City Council voted to rezone the waterfront areas of Greenpoint and Williamsburg from industrial use to mixed and residential use. The Greenpoint-Williamsburg Waterfront Rezoning, encompassing 184 blocks of one of the most heavily industrialized areas of Brooklyn, was the largest single rezoning in the

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\(^1\) In early 2006, the City created sixteen industrial business zones across New York City where expanded business services, as well as a guarantee that the areas will not be rezoned for residential use were the core initiatives to foster industrial sector growth. In addition the City implemented other safeguard measures to assure the supply of industrial space such as discouraging illegal conversion of industrial property (especially into lofts and artists’ studios), modifying traffic and parking regulations, easing dumpster restrictions, and expanding specialized training programs for industrial workers.
city’s history. The rezoning opened the northern section of the East River waterfront not only to residential construction, but also to luxury residential construction—all within walking distance of the increasingly gentrified, hipster neighborhood of Williamsburg.

Since the massive rezoning, the neighborhood of Greenpoint has been undergoing rapid residential and commercial change. Initially, Greenpoint proved more challenging to gentrify than the adjacent Williamsburg. Relatively isolated (lacking direct subway link to Manhattan), and home to competing residential, commercial and manufacturing land users, Greenpoint also lacked cultural and architectural qualities that appeal to gentrifies such as Williamsburg’s artists’ studios and music clubs, or Harlem’s stately 19th century townhouses. The 2008 financial meltdown and difficulty in obtaining direct capital investment had also halted some of the large-scale corporate developers from going into the gritty tip of North Brooklyn.

Characterized by the same ‘Brooklyn cool’ brand, but more affordable than the neighboring Williamsburg, the area ultimately became an appealing residential destination in the early 2000s. At that time millennials (those born between 1980-2000) composed the majority of the incoming residents. But more recently older and more affluent renters, many of them priced out of Williamsburg, also find Greenpoint’s urban village vibe appealing (Keates 2013). The emergence of new retail, especially trendy boutiques along Franklin Street, and the 2010 expansion of the East River Ferry service to include a stop in Greenpoint, which connects with Midtown Manhattan via Long Island City, Queens, enhanced the overall quality of life and prompted the in-migration of professional class.

In 2012, a comedy show “Girls”, which is filmed in Greenpoint premiered on HBO and introduced Greenpoint as Brooklyn’s trendiest neighborhood to viewers around the world. The show’s main characters are four young, white women who come from an affluent social
background, and live or socialize in the neighborhood, while trying to put together their new lives after graduating from college. The show depicts Greenpoint as full of other people just like them—young, privileged, and highly-educated—without any references to area’s strong Polish identity, Polish immigrants themselves or Polish business. The four friends are filmed working at and frequenting real local places such as Café Grumpy, Beacon’s Closet or the Bellwether bar, all of which represent neighborhood transformation and a breakaway from the area’s ethnic character. For Girls fans, The Unofficial Girls Guide to New York: Inside the Cafés, Clubs and Neighborhoods of HBO’s Girls (2013), further popularized Greenpoint as a place to find homegrown labels, trendy art galleries, vintage cocktails and five-star restaurants. The effect of “Girls”—driving visitors to Greenpoint—was comparable to the effect of “Sex and the City” on the West Village in the early 2000s. The show attracted thousands of fans to flock to the neighborhood—the fictional home of Carrie Bradshaw, the show’s main character—either individually or on a bus tour and relive the everyday experiences of the show’s main characters who shopped and dined in real neighborhood places.

When in 2013, the crowd-funding company, Kickstarter, moved its headquarters to the landmarked Eberhard Pencil Factory at 58 Kent Street, the neighborhood became more than just a trendy hangout. It emerged as a part of Brooklyn’s future leading digital district extending from Astoria to the north, in Queens, to Dumbo, Red Hook, and Sunset Park, farther south in Brooklyn.

The growing popularity and media coverage of the neighborhood, as well as the rebounding housing market, helped catalyze a major development push for the Greenpoint waterfront. In December 2013, the City Council approved two new luxury waterfront projects, Greenpoint Landing and 77 Commercial Street, the planned development was to be larger than Williamsburg.
and Long Island City waterfronts combined.

Attracted by the growing popularity of the previously ‘high-risk,’ underserved neighborhood, retailers also hoped to claim space for the independent stores, bars and restaurants to service the in-flow of new, middle class residents. This gradual, yet dramatic change marked the reversal of long history of commercial disinvestment that previously plagued the neighborhood. The same area that less than a decade ago was home to only a handful of poorly-stocked bodegas was now making the headlines as North Brooklyn’s emerging upscale retail destination. This fully-blown commercial revitalization received prominent coverage by national lifestyle media as well as by local English-language bloggers most of whom greeted it with enthusiastic approval. Capitalizing on Williamsburg’s proximity, this tireless promotion of Greenpoint, catapulted this previously little known neighborhood into the global circuits of cool and marked it on the map as one of the newest hubs of the fashionable ‘Brooklyn’ brand.

**Varied Responses: Participation, Exit, and Adaptation**

Despite the appearance of cultural and linguistic uniformity, racial and ethnic groups should not be assumed to be monolithic social and economic entities. Members of Greenpoint’s Polish community vary by social class and home and business ownership. This social heterogeneity suggests that we look for varied forms of response to growth and reinvestment, reflecting different economic, social, and cultural resources.

In his famous book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, economist Albert Hirschman (1970) contends that individuals respond to changing environment with two primary forms of agency: to *exit* for better opportunities if such are available, or to stay and alter the situation by exercising *voice*. *Exit* is essentially
understood as a form of economic decision-making, perhaps best illustrated as the result of cost-benefit analysis. Potential benefits of withdrawing from unfavorable conditions (exit) are weighed against the costs of taking the action and the final decision is based on the outcome.

After exit, Hirschman conceptualized voice as a type of social action available to individuals facing unsatisfactory situations. He argues that “forcing improvement” (30) by either politely speaking out or violently protesting against the deteriorating conditions is the most direct form of agency. In this sense voice is classified as any political action distinctly aimed at challenging, preventing or fixing the unfavorable situation, whether individual or carried out collectively as a community. In sum, voice can be understood as any attempt to articulate interests in hope that the situation will be ameliorated.

Finally, loyalty or noneconomic factors as opposed to economic factors can modify the response, causing individuals to stand and fight (voice) rather than resign and withdraw (exit). The presence of loyalty can motivate individuals to persist and embrace voice even if acting so goes against economic self-interest. This is well illustrated in a recent ethnographic study of declining shrimp industry in Louisiana. Harrison (2012) explains that some shrimp fishers decide to forego other economic opportunities and persist in the shrimping industry because the sense of social and cultural loss associated with occupational change cannot be recuperated even with higher economic gains. Thus, exit represents an economic response; voice a political response; and loyalty a cultural response.

Hirschman’s work focused mainly on responses to decline in firms, organizations and states, but his concepts have been applied in numerous studies with topics ranging from romantic relationships to industrial decline and occupational change (see Rusbult, Zembrodt, and...
Gunn 1982; Withey and Cooper 1989; Harrison 2012). Although the exit, voice, loyalty thesis has not been extensively applied in urban research, the ethnographic study of racial turnover in four Chicago neighborhoods by Wilson and Taub (2006), affirms the applicability of Hirschman’s ideas in analyzing urban change.

Wilson and Taub found Hirschman’s exit, voice and loyalty theory consistent with responses to racial change observed during their research in four Chicago neighborhoods. Hirschman’s theory assumes that dissatisfied residents respond to change by leaving (exit), or staying put and fighting for improvements by exercising voice. The level of loyalty—or neighborhood attachment—ultimately determines whether voice or exit is the primary type of response to neighborhood change.

In Wilson and Taub’s study, neighborhoods with high levels of loyalty—or attachment—show the lowest rate of racial turnover. Strong sense of local identity combined with high level of neighborhood social organization enables the exercise of voice and mobilizes a community to resist the in-migration of different ethnic or racial groups. In contrast, areas with low levels of loyalty experience a high exit rate among longtime residents, and therefore highest rate of racial turnover. This often occurs in areas where social organization is too weak to mobilize community to resist change and to protect area’s established social and symbolic character. In sum, the more potent the neighborhood organizations and forms of social and cultural capital the more likely it is that local residents will use loyalty and voice rather than exit as a response to neighborhood change.

Because it theorizes how local actors will respond when confronted with a deteriorating and unstable situation Hirschman’s model is a useful analysis of how neighborhood change

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impacts local community. His focus on local actors’ responses is particularly suitable to bottom up exploration of gentrification based on the stories told by those most affected by neighborhood change: local residents. However, the responses I observed in my fieldwork, were not always consistent with Hirschman’s classic exit, voice, and loyalty. In this dissertation, I reconstruct those categories to capture the variety of responses by Polish immigrants—property owners, tenants, shopkeepers, and community leaders—that fall beyond Hirschman’s theoretical framework, but are crucial to understanding how gentrification impacts local residents. In place of exit, voice and loyalty, I propose participation, exit and adaptation as a more nuanced way to analyze the trajectory of inner-city immigrants facing gentrification and loss of ethnic community.

*Participation* is a form of economic response embraced primarily by property owners who draw direct economic benefits from neighborhood change. By raising rents, ending leases or even evicting tenants, Polish landlords in Greenpoint emerge as gentrification proponents. Indeed, local real estate elites made up of ethnic homeowners, real estate agents and small builders are the initiators and supporters of gentrification in white ethnic neighborhoods (Stabrowski 2011).

Gentrification has the opposite effect on co-ethnic tenants who respond to new financial pressures with exit or relocation to more affordable areas. Tenants’ exit can be voluntary, for example following a decision to retire and return to Poland, or to buy a single family house in Queens or in the suburbs. In many cases, however, lower-income tenants face a forced exit, because of landlords right not to sign new lease at old rent.

Analyzing ethnic shopkeepers’ responses to changing local retail and different customer profile reveals an alternative form of agency available to Polish retail entrepreneurs, innovation
and adaptation. A segment of Polish shopkeepers adapt to neighborhood change by updating their business practices to appeal to the middle-class newcomers. Because it requires a significant investment of economic, social and cultural capital relatively few shopkeepers go the route of adaptation. The type of shopkeepers most successful at adapting are young, affluent and better educated than the traditional Polish shopkeeper. Adaptation is closely linked with economic and cultural participation in the very processes pushing traditional Polish shopkeepers out of business.

Exposed to the same pressures of rising, even doubling, commercial rents and a changing customer base, older cohorts of Polish shopkeepers, are not only short on economic resources, they also lack the younger generation’s social and cultural capital necessary to implement change. Loosing co-ethnic customers to residential relocation, and unable to attract middle-class newcomers, Greenpoint’s traditional Polish stores face closure, a type of neighborhood exit. Closure may be voluntary when business owners stop commercial activity in order to retire, or forced, when leases end and owners cannot afford to pay double the amount of the old rents.

Polish homeowners who sell their properties at a considerable profit exercise voluntary or “happy exit”. Its meanings and ramifications are quite different from the forced exit faced by lower-income tenants and aging shopkeepers. Because they are getting close to retirement, they are happy to trade their Brooklyn homes for a quieter life in the suburbs or to reverse migrate to Poland, also a form of happy exit. Younger Polish homeowners with children show a strong tendency towards living in the suburbs. For them, good quality public schools, and what they perceive as more nurturing environment for their children are the main reasons for happily exiting Greenpoint.

Finally, Hirschman predicted that local actors may voice discontent in face of change.
But voice was not the response that Polish immigrants resorted to as readily as participation or exit. Although some forms of collective action focused on the displacement of Polish immigrants in gentrifying Greenpoint, such actions failed at mobilizing the entire ethnic community into a unified neighborhood ‘defense’. High rate of homeownership among Polish immigrants partially explains the lack of political contestation. Property owners, particularly landlords, were not willing to jeopardize their own economic interests for the sake of ethnic solidarity and community integrity. Younger small business owners found new niches in the changing retail market and managed—some of them quite successfully—to integrate into the larger neighborhood transformation.

Those most willing to speak up against gentrification-led displacement—lower-income tenants and traditional shopkeepers—were also the ones least financially, socially and culturally equipped to do so. Lacking the support of Polish-American institutions and of other ethnic community stakeholders they were unable to focus the community on the problem of residential displacement.

Methodology

This dissertation moves the focus of study from gentrifiers to longtime residents. With this methodological departure, it joins a new wave of gentrification studies that seek to understand what happens in the existing community as it undergoes a residential and commercial transformation (Freeman 2006; Niedt 2006; Wherry 2011; Murdie and Teixeira 2011; Stabrowski 2011; Deener 2012; Hum 2014; Ocejo 2014; Valli 2015). While the relations between gentrifiers and gentrified in the gentrifying neighborhoods are often assumed to be similar to those between capital and labor (Bridge 1995), my research revealed that is not always
the case. Polish *petit bourgeois* or the propertied class—homeowners, landlords, small builders and some ethnic storekeepers—are driven by the same accumulation logic as the outside real estate entrepreneurs and city government. In this sense, economic incentives overshadow cultural interests and play a major role in the unraveling of a longstanding ethnic community.

To make this interpretation, I draw on ten months of participant observation in two largest areas of Polish settlement in New York: Greenpoint, Brooklyn and Ridgewood, Queens. I have resided in each of the neighborhoods for several years and witnessed how each changed over time. I first encountered Greenpoint in 1993 shortly after my arrival from Poland. At the time, the North Brooklyn neighborhood was the center of gravity for all Poles living in the New York metropolitan area and beyond. While my family maintained residence in the East Village, we went to shop, see a doctor, used financial services and socialized in the cultural familiarity of the core enclave in Brooklyn. Four years later, in 1997, we moved to live in Greenpoint permanently. In the fall of the following year I left to attend college in another state, but came back during winter breaks and noticed the growing visibility of "Americans", especially young, creative and bohemian types who were not of Polish origin crossing the increasingly more blurry border with Williamsburg. Soon, shopping streets and local shops began to change as well; Greenpoint, like Williamsburg before it, was undeniably transforming from an immigrant neighborhood into a global cultural hotspot.

When I came back to New York for graduate school, rents in Greenpoint had gone so high they were far beyond mine, as well as that of most working-class Polish families’ financial reach. Like many other Poles displaced from Greenpoint, I moved to Ridgewood, Queens where growing numbers of Polish immigrants, many of them entrepreneurially oriented, bought homes, invested in businesses and thus, unintentionally, triggered initial stages of gentrification in a
previously white ethnic neighborhood with growing Latino presence. Over the years I watched the process with increasing interest and intellectual attention and became so intrigued by how gentrification impacts city’s last standing white immigrant communities that I chose it for my dissertation topic.

My preliminary dissertation research took place during the summer of 2012. Between June and September, I visited Greenpoint on a regular basis, I walked and biked along the borders of the neighborhood to develop a visual understanding of geography, industrial landscapes, and social life that shaped the community over the past decades, and later to strike up informal conversations with longtime Polish residents whom I encountered on my trail. I also shopped at Polish grocery stores, visited Polish cafes and restaurants; during those visits I asked owners how they felt about the changes taking place in the neighborhood, especially about the increasing in-migration of non-Poles and the gradual disintegration of Greenpoint's Polish community.

In order to reach different populations I spent time at McCarren and McGorlick Parks, where Polish seniors regularly assembled to relax and socialize. I attended Polish-language masses at Greenpoint’s and Ridgewood's Polish parishes and participated in one church group's planning committee's meeting as the members discussed an upcoming annual parish party. Although most of those events were not about gentrification or neighborhood change per se, they provided invaluable opportunities to meet longtime residents in a public forum setting where I introduced myself, described my project and recruited my first interview subjects.

My residence in Ridgewood in close proximity to a local Polish Catholic church and Polish stores, and my Polish landlord, presented me with an opportunity for a day-to-day observation of informal interactions, as well as participation in informal conversations among
Poles. Many of them had relocated from Greenpoint to Ridgewood to have access to more affordable housing. Gentrification, particularly rising property values and escalating rents, was almost always the topic of informal discussions and my chance to listen to the narratives Poles told each other about how neighborhood change in Greenpoint has impacted them personally.

In addition to observation, I had also regularly followed *Nowy Dziennik* [The New Daily], the largest Polish-language newspaper on the East Coast. I sought to learn how the ethnic media perceived and interpreted gentrification in Greenpoint and its impact on the ethnic community. I paid special attention to articles covering the closures of iconic Polish stores, restaurants and bakeries or commentaries on the shifting of the polish community’s center of gravity from Greenpoint to Ridgewood. I also made a trip to Garfield, New Jersey where the headquarters of *Nowy Dziennik* is located to read deeply in the newspaper’s archival issues focusing on the period of increased Polish immigration in the mid-1990s. In order to understand what issues mattered to the broader Greenpoint community—particularly the gentrifiers—and how they perceived Greenpoint's transformation and its impact on Polish community, as well as to probe the extent to which Poles commented on gentrification in online community-based forums I regularly monitored a Facebook group *North Brooklyn Community* and a private, community-oriented lifestyle blog *thegreenpointers.com*.

After preliminary research, I returned to conduct more intensive fieldwork in May 2013. Over the next 7 months, I expanded my observation to include more formal public settings. I frequented community board meetings, and key local Polish and non-Polish organizations' meetings, especially North Brooklyn Community Development Corporation (NBCDC), and Neighbors Allied for Good Growth (NAGG). Getting to know the leader of NBCDC has been particularly important, as on many occasions he acted as a "sponsor", often inviting me to
community events and important meetings, where he introduced me to community organizers, tenant rights activists, or Greenpoint's longtime residents. More importantly, as a well-known and trusted community member and a long-time local activist, he provided the "stamp of approval" which often was all it took to get individuals to agree to an interview.

During the 7 month period I conducted a total of 45 interviews: 40 with Polish immigrants who were either longtime Greenpoint residents at the time of the interview, or resided in another place, but have lived in the neighborhood for at least several years during the past two decades, and 5 with non-Polish residents, three in Greenpoint and two in Ridgewood.

To meet the requirements of the Institutions Review Board on human subjects all interviewees were provided with and asked to sign a consent form explaining the purpose of the study and stating risks involved in participating. All interview data was collected via audio recording with the permission of the persons being interviewed. I used pseudonyms in place of real names and kept subjects’ identities fully confidential, including changing business names when necessary or concealing position rank held by employees of local organizations.

The sample of Polish immigrants was divided into five distinct categories: landlords [n=5], former tenants [n=10], shopkeepers [n=10], community leaders [n=9], and second-generation residents of Greenpoint [n=6]. The purpose of this sampling procedure was to elicit a range of responses to neighborhood change that correspond to internal divisions and cleavages that characterize Greenpoint’s Polish community. This sampling strategy revealed that differently positioned local residents respond to gentrification differently.

Institutional leaders—for example, priests, board directors, local political figures, tenant activists—were formally approached in the organizations for which they work and interviewed
in their offices during regular business hours. I could not reach the representatives of the Polish National Home and Pulaski Association of Business and Professional Men, as they held no public meetings, had no full-time salaried staff, did not list business hours, and were unresponsive to calls and emails. This testifies that the effectiveness of local Polish American institutions has deteriorated over time. Such ethnic channels may no longer be active actors in negotiating for and protecting the interests of Greenpoint’s Polish community.

Store owners were recruited more informally through visits to local stores and brief conversational introductions of my project. In two cases, reviews and coverage of new store openings in the Polish-American press were used in lieu of an interview with owners who did not wish or were not able to participate. All interviews were later categorized according to business type and the type of customers the business was designed to appeal to (i.e., co-ethnics, tourists, or new residents).

Landlords and tenants were recruited using snowball sampling technique, in which an existing subject provides the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on (Vogt 1999). This informal method proved more successful than conventional approaches in obtaining interviews from Polish landlords most of whom live outside of Greenpoint, and make only random appearances in the neighborhood to run errands or collect rents. Even when located, approaching landlords directly, on the street or when present on or around their properties, has almost always failed.

Ranging in age from mid-60s to mid 70s, most landlords were very reluctant to participate because they felt uncomfortable signing the consent form or agreeing to be audio-recorded. These same requirements were not problematic when approaching other subjects including tenants, shopkeepers or community leaders. Feelings of vulnerability attached to their
age and limited English proficiency, but even more importantly fears of “tax” and “money” related questions (despite my assurances that I would ask no such questions) were the main reasons Polish landlords refused to participate. Awareness of the privileged position they occupied in the process of community change made them more cautious to expose their thoughts on and experiences of gentrification in Greenpoint. In contrast, when I used referrals from their social network more landlords responded positively and agreed more readily to be interviewed.

All interviews were semi-structured—allowing subjects to gravitate toward topics they felt strongly about or thought were important—recorded on audiotape and transcribed. On average they lasted from one hour to two hours and were conducted in subjects’ homes, public spaces such as parks and cafés as well as in more formal public settings such as offices and stores.

I supplemented participant observation and in-depth interviews with quantitative data using the latest U.S Census data, American Community Survey and demographic data provided by the New York City Department of City Planning, especially the immigrant population report The Newest New Yorkers including the years 1990-1994, 2000, and 2013.

Chapter Overview

In the following chapters I argue that local residents, in this case Polish immigrants in gentrifying Greenpoint, possess a variety of attitudes about and responses to gentrification and engage in practices that range from adaptation and participation, to exit. Fragmented responses to urban change demonstrate that white ethnic communities are less unified by ethnic culture and ethnic solidarity as they are divided in various ways; such divisions include homeownership and
social class, immigration status, age and immigration cohort, as well as cultural configurations such as lifestyle. Ethnicity need not be the most significant binding force in an immigrant community facing gentrification; it has not proven to be so during the course of this study. Neither is it an impermeable boundary between the white gentrifiers and innovating immigrant entrepreneurs who renegotiate ethnic definitions through everyday business practices.

In the next chapter, I outline the history of Polish immigration to the United States, and describe the four main cohorts that reshaped Polish community in Greenpoint. Understanding the differences between these multiple cohorts as well as socioeconomic, political, and cultural cleavages within each cohort illuminates the internal stratification that constrains ethnic solidarity and generates fragmented responses to neighborhood change. I also place the formation and development of Polish Greenpoint in the larger context of urban political economy, and show how long history of neighborhood marginalization followed with subsequent waves of Polish immigration primed the neighborhood for redevelopment in New York in the twenty-first century.

Chapters 3 shows how economic benefits in the form of rising property values and higher rent rolls incentivize ethnic landlords to embrace gentrification even at a cost of undermining the lowest-income members of Greenpoint’s Polish community. By doing so, Polish landlords facilitate a massive displacement of poorer Poles, who either cannot afford, or are unwilling to pay the rents and face neighborhood exit. In turn, displaced Polish tenants initiate spatial changes outside of Greenpoint including the formation of satellite enclaves in the adjacent neighborhoods in Queens, where they become active “place makers” and reshape the area economically. Greenpoint’s status as an immigrant enclave is further undermined when aging landlords use the substantial profits made from home sales and rental properties to exit “happily”
by moving to suburbs or other states, and by reverse migrating back to Poland.

Both second generation landlords and tenants see white gentrification as a positive force stabilizing the neighborhood economically and buffering against an encroachment of minority groups, especially the Latinos. Younger members of this generation are most likely to participate in neighborhood change culturally, remaking and modifying ethnic identity in the process. Younger Poles who can remain in Greenpoint economically, mainly because their parents own property there, feel lucky to live in a newly revalorized neighborhood.

Chapter 4 focuses on ethnic retail in the context of advancing gentrification and the rise of non-Polish entrepreneurs’ increasing encroachment on immigrant commercial spaces. But the story of ethnic retail change in Greenpoint is not so simple. On the one hand, mounting financial pressures in the form of doubling and tripling commercial rents and declining numbers of Polish customers, result in the displacement of traditional ethnic businesses. On the other hand, a new cohort of younger and better educated Polish shopkeepers continues to thrive in the changing neighborhood by engaging in innovation and adaptation. By upscaling and making their stores look trendier “adaptive innovators” (Harrison 2012) intentionally break away from ethnically framed working-class culture and actively cater to middle-class gentrifiers. Ethnic business adaptation complements middle-class definitions of neighborhood symbolic order and the two together gradually dislodge traditional (or working-class) notions of ethnicity and exclude it from playing a role in defining the neighborhood’s future.

Chapter 5 examines the failure of key ethnic institutions to unify ethnic community and mobilize Poles to advocate on behalf of the disintegrating enclave. Community advocacy was especially needed to alleviate the situation of the elderly and the lower-income tenants who were affected adversely. All in all, although Greenpoint’s Polish American residents share a long
history of unifying politically around key community issues, the attitudes towards recent urban redevelopment and gentrification are mixed and often ambivalent. As a result, opposition to gentrification has been weak.

As some Polish American activists participated in community planning and in local resistance, most ordinary Poles largely distanced themselves from local political involvement. Even when Poles faced evictions from their Greenpoint apartments, they mostly dealt with these issues on individual basis. Some sought assistance from Polish organizations, but most simply exited to more affordable areas.

Unlike in other gentrifying immigrant communities such as South Williamsburg or Sunset Park, campaigns for affordable housing did not become the focus of local Polish institutions. In large extent, Polish institutional leadership derives from the very same propertied elite that draws benefits from gentrification, in addition, values and goals emanating from those institutions have historically centered on the promotion of homeownership and upward mobility. This in combination with stigmatization of reliance on public assistance and distrust of local public officials constrained ethnic solidarity and failed to build Polish anti-gentrification coalition.

In the concluding chapter I review the central themes of this dissertation and draw wider implications for this study. I also discuss what the future holds for Greenpoint as a Polish neighborhood. To some extent Greenpoint may follow the path of an “ethnic theme park” similar to Little Italy, ethnic retail entrepreneurs may capitalize on the economic potential of cultural diversity and carve a place for themselves in the changing market. Such commercial branding of Polish identity will most likely persist for some time especially if perpetuated by outsiders and non-resident ethnics. Ultimately, the dissolution of the ethnic community and the
failure to form a local preservation movement will deliver a slow death to the “Little Poland” brand. More importantly I stress that not all gentrifying ethnic communities are the same. Understanding local contexts is crucial in determining how gentrification impacts longtime residents. This requires a broader analysis, one that encompasses both residential and commercial aspects of urban remaking and shows that despite assumed ethnic unity, ethnic communities produce manifold and often conflicting responses to neighborhood change.
Chapter 2. The Neighborhood of Greenpoint: Historical Overview

Introduction

Greenpoint lies on the northernmost tip of Brooklyn and directly across the East River from the Gramercy Park and Murray Hill neighborhoods in Manhattan. In the north the industrial zone along the Newtown Creek separates it from Long Island City, Queens, and the Robert Moses-built Brooklyn-Queens Expressway frames the neighborhood to the east. The west side of the neighborhood features previously defunct industrial waterfront, recently rezoned for residential and commercial uses with major development projects underway. In the south, Greenpoint blends into the Northside of Williamsburg, a former industrial zone, subsequently revalorized and reconfigured as a global cultural hotspot in the early 2000s (Zukin 2010).

Figure 1. Greenpoint, Brooklyn, NY
Source: Map data© 2014 Google

Along with Williamsburg and another parcel of land to the east, Greenpoint became a part of the mid-seventeenth-century town of Bushwick [Heavy Woods]. Though the
neighborhood remained an isolated, agrarian community well into the mid-1800s, a wave of development soon transformed it into the nation’s leading industrial center and established Greenpoint as an important link in the world trading nexus. Beginning in early 1840s Manhattan shipbuilders expanded ship-building activities along the vast Greenpoint waterfront and built some of the most innovative ships of the day. Two historical vessels, the *Great Republic*, the largest wooden ship of the day, and the *USS Monitor*, Union’s first naval vessel completely covered in iron armor, were built on Greenpoint’s shores. An array of other industries, and particularly the “five black arts:” oil refining, cast iron manufacturing, glass and pottery making, and printing, also took hold on Greenpoint’s booming waterfront (Reiss 2001). Further upland, rows of wooden frame houses were cheaply built to house the growing population of skilled and unskilled European immigrant workers (Susser 2012).

As an industrial hub, Greenpoint sequentially attracted new cohorts of German, Irish, Italian, Russian and Polish immigrants. Through the second half of the 20th century, Greenpoint became a home to successive waves of Dominican, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Italian and eastern European immigrants, in addition to artists, students, and professionals who identify with various racial and ethnic groups. However, the largest concentration of polish immigrants on the East Coast, unofficially established Greenpoint as Brooklyn’s “Little Poland”, pejoratively as “Polish Ghetto” or simply, “The Polish Town”.

Poles entered the United States in four major waves. Each was a consequence of Poland’s major political transformations: 19th century struggles for independence, Second World War, birth of the Solidarity labor movement in the 1980s and collapse of state-socialism in 1989, as well as of U.S. immigration policies. The four cohorts differed from one another in terms of class origins, educational attainment, economic and political conditions under which they left
Poland, the homeland culture that they brought with them and the different assimilation paths they took (Lopata Znaniecka 1994; Erdmans 1998). Each new generation and each new cohort forged its own definition of the Polish community in America, and each responded differently to the historical changes taking place in American society. Understanding the differences between these multiple cohorts illuminates the heterogeneous nature of ethnic groups, and shows how those differences shape immigrant communities and how those communities respond to outside forces including urban redevelopment and gentrification.

First Wave—The Old Polonia

The 1880s brought the first major wave of Polish immigration to the United States, and since then the polish diaspora has been referred to as Polonia, Latin for Poland. Though exact number of Poles that entered US in the 19th century is unknown, the official census records in 1915 indicate a population of approximately 2.5 million, with the highest number, 1.4 million, arriving between 1899 and 1915 (Barymora, Sikorski, & Pula 2008). These early immigrants consisted mostly of bachelors of peasant background—many of them illiterate—who came from rural areas (Lopata Znaniecka 1964, 204; Morawska 1985, 72; Erdmans 1998). During this time Poland was stripped of national sovereignty. By 1795, the country was carved by its neighbors into three separate parts. Prussia controlled the Western regions and the northern areas around the Baltic Sea, Austro-Hungary ruled the southeastern part and Russia dominated the northeastern corner. Majority of Polish immigrants came from the Russian partition, the largest

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3 Immigrants coming to the United States registered on the basis of their citizenship or the harbors where they embarked on ships leaving for America. However, in the 19th century Poland was not a sovereign state and many Poles were registered as citizens of the countries that partitioned Poland: Germany (Prussia), Russia, and Austro-Hungary.
one in terms of land surface and population (Erdmans 1998, 20). Beginning in the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and following pivotal changes in western Europe all three partitions underwent a transformation from traditional feudalistic societies to capitalist, money-based economy. Land reform, emancipation, modernization of agriculture and industrialization pushed hundreds of thousands of peasants out of the traditional niche of estate-based farming. And because few opportunities awaited the newly emancipated, but also landless peasants, most of them made the journey to the United States, where high rate of industrialization absorbed them as cheap labor. America’s industrial centers offered wages more than double what peasants were offered for seasonal work in eastern Europe (Morawska 1985, 68).

Not all 19\textsuperscript{th} century polish immigration consisted of peasants seeking material gains; many Poles immigrated to the United States to escape religious, linguistic and cultural persecution. In Prussian Poland, a harsh Germanization program or Kulturkampf introduced by Bismarck in the 1870s suppressed religious institutions, especially Roman Catholic parishes, which encouraged Polish Catholics and clergy to emigrate (Erdmans 1998, 21). In the Russian partition, Polish revolutionaries, mostly members of the intelligentsia, fled from political persecution and Russification program, which intensified after Poles carried out a series of failed uprisings against imperial Russia. Both Kulturkampf and Russification programs sought to assimilate Poles into the language, culture and religion of the partitioning powers. Since among Poles, the religious and cultural identity is tightly interwoven, suppressing Roman Catholicism was the most effective way of denationalizing Poles. In contrast, Austria’s Hapsburg regime imposed no such assimilationist policies and as a result Poles who migrated from this region came mostly for economic reasons.

Better educated and more nationalistic than the peasant cohorts who came after them, the
revolutionaries, intelligentsia and clergy who escaped persecution in the Prussian and Russian-dominated regions of Poland, built the institutional base of Polonia, or polish community abroad (Brożek 1985). These newly minted Polonian leaders not only organized polish neighborhoods socially, they also consolidated cohorts of immigrants with strong regional identities and from different partitions into a single ethnic community. By turning peasants on to national identity and awakening them into national consciousness, the intelligentsia mobilized a new political force that could be harnessed in the struggle for Polish independence. This struggle shaped Polish immigrants’ awareness of their own identity as Poles and inspired patriotic sentiment and interest in the Polish cause, it also helped them make the adjustment to immigrant life (Brożek 1895, 170-85).

First formed by revolutionaries and clergy fleeing political and religious persecution, the early Polish American organizations represented two different conceptualizations of Polishness. The Polish National Alliance (PNA), a fraternal organization established in 1880 by political exiles stressed the secular definition of Polishness and applied the category “polish” to any immigrants from the partitioned Poland, including Polish Jews (Thomas & Znaniecki 1974). In contrast, founded by exiled clergy in 1873, the Polish Roman Catholic Union defined the core of polish identity as a religious and cultural entity. This exclusionary view focused on ethnicity rather than nationality, and espoused adhering to Roman Catholic faith and maintaining linguistic and cultural ties as the key prerequisite to membership in the polish nation.

Consistently with other ethnic groups, early polish immigrants often saw their transplantation as temporary and expressed almost no interest in the mainstream affairs of the American society (Thomas & Znaniecki 1974). Upon their arrival in the New World, most Poles continued west toward the anthracite mines of Pennsylvania and West Virginia, the
slaughterhouses and stockyards of Chicago or north to New England’s textile mills where they organized in tightly knit and inward-looking ethnic enclaves (Pierce 1972; Morawska 1985; Bukowczyk 1996). A portion of them, however, settled in the gateway city of New York.

Along with eastern European Jews, Ukrainians, Russians, Serbs and other immigrants, Poles first settled in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Like other ethnic groups, they maintained separate grocery stores, restaurants, community organizations, schools, and most importantly, houses of prayer. The Catholic Church has always been a pillar of Polish community. This rang particularly true in the years 1772-1795 when Poland was partitioned by Prussia, Russia and Austro-Hungary and lost political sovereignty for the next 123 years. During this period, their Catholicism distinguished Poles from the partitioning powers: Protestant Prussia, Orthodox Russia and the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. Enduring even under 20th century communist repression, the Catholic Church served as the guardian of Polish identity and provided Poles with a sense of national continuity and cultural and historical belonging (Borowik 2002; Kubik 1994). For this reason, Polish immigrants did not feel at home in their ethnic neighborhoods until they established a Polish parish and brought a polish priest to provide community leadership and guidance (Bukowczyk 2007).

The ethnic parish served as the focus of the community’s social and cultural life (Thomas and Znaniecki 1974). Groups and ethnic associations that formed around the parishes established social networks where peasants learned the skills of community leadership necessary to build ethnic representation in America’s mainstream politics (Lopata Znaniecka 1994).

By 1863 there were enough Poles in New York to launch the first Polish-language newspaper, *Echo z Polski* (Polish Echo), but it was not until 1872, the year the population reached 2000, that Manhattan’s first polish parish, St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr was
established on Henry Street, in the heart of the Lower East Side. It was later moved north to its present location at 101 East 7th Street, in the East Village. In 1937 New York’s Polish community established the Pulaski Day Parade to commemorate General Casimir Pulaski, a Polish hero of the American Revolutionary War, and to display their growing presence in the city. The second oldest ethnic parade in New York, the event continues to attract thousands of Polish Americans every year. St. Stanislaus continues as Manhattan’s oldest and only polish parish to this day, but the surrounding Polish community has disintegrated over the years.

As New York’s industrial boom expanded east, Poles and other immigrant groups, followed it across the East River to Brooklyn. This cross-river migration reached its height with the completion of Williamsburg Bridge in 1903. Though Poles settled in different places along the Brooklyn waterfront, most made their way to Greenpoint, where they first concentrated in the north, along Box Street, and later migrated south to Lower Greenpoint (previously a German enclave), where Greenpoint’s first Polish Roman Catholic church, St. Stanislaus Kostka, was established in 1896 (Piątkowska 2002). The construction of the second church, SS. Cyril and Methodius, followed in 1917. At this time New York’s Polonia (or Polish community abroad) rose to 200,000 and began to expand in both the Lower East Side and Brooklyn. Lower East Side, however, remained the main artery of Polish life in New York.

After Poland regained national independence in 1919 at the Versailles Peace Conference, which officially marked the end of WWI, American Polonia became less involved in the Polish affairs and committed to improving its situation here in America (Brożek 1985). Although, many Poles went back to witness the rebirth of their country and to help rebuild it, faltering economy, chaotic political scene and ingratitude for their material help left many returnees wanting to leave “home” again (Lopata Znaniecka 1964). Disillusioned and discouraged by the
realities of independent Poland, Polish immigrant community— now also under the attack of rising nativism— reoriented their agenda to protect the interests of Polonia abroad instead of focusing on homeland politics.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Nativism, a reactionary, anti-immigrant movement, swept across the United States. It emerged in the aftermath of WWI and pressured newcomers, particularly immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, to give up allegiance to foreign countries and to reject political beliefs associated with either socialism or communism (Fry 2007). During this time Ku Klax Klan made a reappearance for the first time since the Reconstruction era, targeting not only blacks, but also Catholics and Jews, who made up the largest portion of immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe. The rise of nativism and the associated anti-immigrant sentiments and eugenics theories further motivated Polish immigrants to loosen their ties to Poland, emphasize their allegiance to the United States and redefine themselves as Polish Americans (Erdmans 1998, 29).

In early 20th century America Polish ethnicity was affixed with social stigma. Negative stereotypes including Polish jokes and “dumb Polak” characterizations associated Polish Americans with a set of undesirable attributes such as being poor, naïve, stupid, stubborn, and narrow-minded (Obidinski 1976). Because this negative identification stood in the way of social mobility and made incorporation into mainstream American society difficult, many Poles rejected their Polish heritage, often by changing last names, to avoid the ethnic stigma (Erdmans 1998, 33). The benefits of self-identifying as white American far outweighed the costs of losing one’s ethnic heritage.

Beliefs in racial inferiority of the new immigrants incited anti-immigration campaigns which resulted in passing of a series of restrictive immigration laws, including the National
Origins Act of 1924, which imposed a national quota system implemented to reduce immigration particularly from southern and eastern European countries (Fry 2007). Before WWI, more than 100,000 of Polish immigrants arrived to the US every year, in the beginning of the 1930s less then 7,000 made it across the ocean (Pula 1995, 65). With fewer new arrivals, soon the number of American-born second generation exceeded the foreign-born population. The character of Polish community shifted from predominantly immigrant to mostly ethnic relying mostly on symbolic attachments to polish culture; many individuals broke with their parents’ heritage altogether and rejected ethnicity as a primary identity (Erdmans 1998). It was not until WWII that Polish-American interest in Polish affairs revived again.

**Postwar—The New Polonia**

At the outbreak of the World War II, the Polish American community was largely composed of Americans of Polish descent. They saw themselves as Americans first and aligned themselves with American foreign policy, but they also felt cultural obligations to provide assistance to Poland. Polonia’s mutual aid societies, associations and parish clubs all came to Poland’s aid. Organizations such as American Committee of Resettlement of Polish Displaced People, American Relief for Poland and New York’s Polish American Immigration and Relief Committee provided humanitarian assistance to Poland and financial and social assistance to polish refugees arriving in the US.

During and after the war, thousands of refugees and political exiles escaping war-torn and Soviet-dominated Poland marked the beginning of the second major wave of polish emigration. Close to half million Poles came to the United States as people displaced by WWII or political exiles (Barymora, Sikorski, & Pula 2008). Many of them arrived from POW camps in Germany,
or from Great Britain where they served with the British army, others came directly from Poland under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 (Jaroszynska-Kirchman 2004). Between the years 1957-1962, thousands more escaped communist-dominated Poland under the Refugee Relief Act of 1953.

In 1947, New York’s Polonia responded by establishing the Polish American Immigration and Relief Committee, an organization focused on relief for Polish refugees in Western Europe and on helping them to immigrate to the United States (Cisek 2006). The committee operated out of the original Polish National Home at 25 St. Marks Place in East Village. The objectives of the committee were “to assist in the relief and the care of the health, education and social welfare, primarily of displaced persons, immigrants and the children of the people of Poland” (2006, 42). However, the resettlement and incorporation of polish refugees into Polish American communities across the US has not been a simple task.

In contrast to the first cohort who came as economic migrants, the WWII cohort defined themselves as political émigrés (Erdmans 1998, 43). They were better educated, urbanized and came from higher social class than the earlier, mostly rural immigrants. The second cohort held university degrees, often worked in professional occupations in Poland and identified as members of the Polish urban elite. As the first generation that grew up in independent Poland, witnessed it being rebuilt and then fought to save it, the postwar émigrés were distinctly nationalistic and patriotic. They were also resentful and embittered by the Western Powers’ ‘betrayal’ of Poland at Yalta and the resulting communist takeover (Erdmans 1998, 43; Lopata Znaniecka 1994). Moreover, this cohort included a substantial portion of Polish-born Jews, most of whom were absorbed into Jewish American rather than Polish American communities after arrival in the United States.
Given their higher social status, the new immigrants and their families felt out of place in the working-class Polish-American culture (Jaroszynska-Kirchmann 1996; Erdmans 1998; Bukowczyk 2007). They resented the earlier cohort for their peasant origins, lack of knowledge of the Polish language, and working class lifestyle (Bukowczyk 2007). Until the arrival of the second wave, Polish American identity has been strongly associated with blue-collar workers (Morawska 1985; Pula 1995; Erdmans 1998, 35). Most earlier Polish immigrants came from rural, peasant backgrounds and entered the industrial labor force after arrival in the United States. They settled in urban centers, close to factories where they worked and absorbed the working-class culture that surrounded them.

To make matters worse, as union members and labor organizers, many Polish Americans identified with the political left and supported Soviet domination of Poland; an offensive notion in the conservative minds of polish émigrés deeply opposed to Soviet-backed, communist government installed in Warsaw (Barymora, Sikorski, & Pula 2008). Because of these sharp differences, the WWII cohort opted out of integrating into the existing Polish American community, and instead built a parallel, cosmopolitan society that centered less on residential concentration in ethnic neighborhoods, and more on cultural and scholarly organizations that provided alternative meanings to what was represented as Polishness in American culture (Erdmans 1998, 46). According to one sociological study of the second wave only 20 percent of post-WWII émigrés bought homes in polish communities, majority chose to live outside of polish neighborhoods (Mostwin 1971, 251). The émigrés were also less likely to attend church services in Polish parishes and preferred to develop their own sub-communities and seek incorporation directly into mainstream society through American rather than ethnic educational, housing and employment networks.
By the middle of the 20th century American Polonia became an immigrant community again. A fresh injection of thousands of nationals, many of them journalists, writers, artists, doctors and lawyers, formed cultural and scientific organizations that reflected their orientation towards Poland and their “cosmopolitan” rather than peasant definition of polish culture (Erdmans 1998, 46). Undoubtedly, the arrival of postwar immigrants marked a new dualism in the Polish American community, the “old” and “new” Polonia; the first originating from the peasantry, and the second from the educated middle-class (Blejwas 1981).

One of the main goals of the new Polonian leaders was to fight derisive stereotypes of Polish Americans highly pervasive in American culture. Such stereotyping has entered the canon of American literature with a highly successful play by Tennessee Williams A Streetcar Named Desire (1947). The play was further popularized by a 1951 big screen adaptation starring Marlon Brando. The New York Film Critics and The New York Times named it the best picture of the year and it received twelve Academy Award nominations. The plot of the film centers on the tension between Stanley Kowalski (Marlon Brando), a working-class Polish American, and his visiting sister-in-law, the aristocratic-looking Blanche du Bois (Vivien Leigh). While Blanche is portrayed as gentle and refined, Stanley is ignorant, brutish, offensive and low-born. He drinks whiskey from the bottle, smashes things and abuses his wife, who often refers to him using the derogatory term “Polak”. Stanley’s “animalistic nature is not incidental to”, but rather is “a part of his Polishness” (Goska 2010, 131). It is his Polish identity that is the base of his destructive nature. While Blanche represents all the virtues of American civilization, Polish Stanley stands for all the forces that erode those very virtues (2010, 134). Thus, during the postwar decades the stereotype of the brute Pole has been used as a politically correct discourse to express America’s deep anxiety about the influx of inferior “others”; in the minds of racists,
the South-North migration of African Americans and the growing presence of darker-skinned immigrants, threatened the racial purity of the nation (2010, 134).

Although the new cohort splintered American Polonia into opposing fractions, they also “served to reorient the ethnic community and strengthen its commitment to Poland” (Erdmans 1998, 48). In the long run, an infusion of new immigrants created new incentives to claim ethnic heritage, redefine one’s position in the American society and resist stereotypes of Polish Americans. These values, however, became hard to adhere to in the postwar decades when major demographic shifts and new economic trends once again transformed urban America and challenged the survival of the white ethnic enclave.

Postwar Decline and White Ethnic Communities

Postwar decades transformed the foundation of American society in profound ways. Booming economy and prosperity—the defining social characteristics of the 1950s—led to a growing sense of material security and social contentment, which in turn encouraged young—disproportionately white—people, especially men returning from overseas combat, to settle down and start families. This reorientation of values and mores towards family and domesticity led to a record number of babies born in the United States in the years 1946-1964; an upsurge that had subsequently led to a growing demand for more consumer products, new infrastructure and more housing. Ready to meet this demand, developers used mass production techniques to build modest, inexpensive tract houses on the outskirts of cities for white middle- and working-class households.

In addition to changing housing preferences, federal government incentives, such as subsidized low-cost mortgages to returning soldiers, promoted growth in suburban areas and
helped the middle-class trade cramped urban housing for single-family suburban homes (Jackson 1985). The affluence, high standard of living and the consumption-based lifestyle that went hand in hand with these new developments became a crucial part of the postwar generation’s self-definition, while on a global scale is symbolized the emergence of the United States as a military, economic and political superpower. Much as the dream of suburban life and the government incentives that supported that dream generated powerful pull factors to relocate to the suburbs, it was desegregation and racial change in urban centers that gave white flight its thrust (Sugrue 2005).

African Americans had been recruited to come north as early as 1916 to fill a shortage of industrial labor⁴, yet the postwar boom enticed many more African Americans to migrate North where a factory wage could be much higher than an average pay working the land in the South. Most of them impoverished, African-Americans could neither afford a suburban home nor were they welcomed by the predominantly white population who opposed integration. Instead, they looked for affordable housing in the working-class and immigrant neighborhoods located in the inner-city and next to industrial districts where both European immigrants and African Americans worked.

The sudden in-flow of African Americans into the northern cities had a profound impact on European ethnic enclaves weakened by deindustrialization, loss of jobs and neighborhood deterioration. Soon, fierce competition between the two marginalized groups over industrial jobs, affordable housing and political power resulted in mutual prejudice and open confrontations.

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⁴ The first wave of African Americans into the industrialized areas of the North and Mid-West started early in the twentieth century, however, the outbreak of World War I in 1914 significantly reduced immigration from Europe creating industrial labor shortage in northern cities in the United States. Faced with critical shortages industrialists relied on the pools of African American labor that was recruited in the South. This African American migration North continued through the 1920s, but declined with the onset of the great Depression, only to pick up again in the period of economic growth after the end of WWII.

Ultimately, overwhelmed with large numbers of outsiders and unable to preserve ethnic character of their communities, many white ethnic communities in America abandoned their changing neighborhoods and dispersed in the suburbs. However, different ethnic and religious groups dealt differently with urban change.

In the 1870-1960 period the Polish group had the slowest rate of geographic mobility out of ethnic neighborhoods (Parot 1975). Poles tended to stay put in areas of original settlement longer than other white ethnics and as such they often formed a “buffer zone” between white neighborhoods and the expanding black communities (1975, 27). The spatial converging of Polish Americans and blacks often produced friction and at times broke out into full scale riots. What made Poles so reluctant to leave was the high concentration of economic and social investment in the institutional base of their communities: parishes, schools, colleges, publishing houses, social and cultural organizations, all of which composed a “brick and mortar” connection to physical place (1975, 28).

Religious factor played a particularly strong role in neighborhood attachment. Roman Catholic Poles, like other Catholics, were among the last groups to willingly leave their old neighborhoods where they clung to jobs, houses and especially to their parishes. In Roman Catholicism parish membership is territorial and the members of the congregation are usually assigned to specific parishes based on place of residence. For this reason, Catholics remained tied to their parishes and to the inner-city neighborhoods where those parishes were built,
whereas other groups, especially Jews, moved their synagogues along with the moving population (Gamm 2001). Thus, Catholic groups’ reluctance to move increased their contact with the in-coming African Americans and led to eruption of racial violence in the changing white ethnic communities (Parot 1975, 28).

Although the impact of deindustrialization in the 1950s began to deteriorate the community, the area’s strong manufacturing base was still providing jobs to Greenpoint’s residents, and the two Polish Roman Catholic parishes kept the Polish working class from leaving Brooklyn. Catholic attachment to the old neighborhood and a strong desire to preserve neighborhood’s ‘European’ character, prevented large numbers of African-Americans from penetrating into North Brooklyn, the ones who did, settled in the public housing projects in Williamsburg. Despite that the rest of Brooklyn experienced the greatest decline in white population in all of New York City, Greenpoint remained a predominantly (75 percent) white neighborhood well into the 1970s (Susser 1982, 19). Currently, African Americans constitute 7 percent, whites 61 percent and Hispanics 22 percent of the total population of North Brooklyn (NYU Furman Center 2015).

Starting in the 1950s, a sustained in-migration of Puerto Rican and Dominican immigrants brought thousands of new residents to Williamsburg-Greenpoint area, making them after Poles, Italians and Russians, the next major ethnic group. Between 1950 and 1969, North population of Puerto Ricans in North Brooklyn increased from 10,984 to 41, 563 or about 24 percent of the area’s total population (Susser 1982, 26). As competition over physical space and symbolic ownership increased, Polish community expressed strong desire to maintain ethnic integrity of what they felt, has always been a “European” neighborhood. While young Hispanic families were moving in to Brooklyn, young white ethnic families were moving out, leaving only
the elderly behind. Williamsburg-Greenpoint area, however, deviated from the general demographic pattern in the sense that the in-migration of Hispanics did not trigger a massive out-migration of white ethnics.

Yet, even those who stayed feared decreasing property values and lamented the changing character of the neighborhood, which was increasingly becoming alien to them. Local residents linked those changes with in-migrating Hispanics, whose expanding presence in the neighborhood coincided with a period of disinvestment and community decline. In an attempt to “defend” Greenpoint as a neighborhood where Poles believed they had the historical “right” to live, many long-time residents actively engaged in keeping minority growth under control through discriminatory housing practices (DeSena 2005). Strategies such as Polish-language rental advertisements, use of informal networks to search for ‘suitable’ tenants and selling property exclusively to white buyers constituted some forms of local resistance to racial change.

Failing to absorb new, upwardly mobile immigrants, and mired in racial tensions, old ethnic neighborhoods were about to face more uncertainty and even bigger challenges as deindustrialization, redlining, and fiscal crisis deepened the erosion of America’s urban core.

Urban Crisis

Polish postwar immigration significantly subsided with the passing of the Immigration Act of 1965, which eliminated country of origin as a qualification of entry, but also restricted immigration from some previously overrepresented European countries, including Poland. When this act took effect Polish immigration dropped from an average of about eight thousand permanent immigrants in the early 1960s to an average of four thousand permanent immigrants a year during the 1970s (Erdmans 1998, 7). At the same time, changes inside Poland—government restrictions on foreign travel and improved socio-economic conditions—greatly reduced the rates
of Poles seeking to emigrate.

While at this time Puerto Ricans made up a significant portion of the area’s population, 1970s Greenpoint remained predominantly Polish (Susser 1982). But because many of the upwardly mobile post-WWII immigrants followed the middle-class to the suburbs, Greenpoint’s remaining Polish-American community was made up mostly of the second- and third-generation Poles and predominantly members of the working-class (Susser 1982).

Even though the Immigration Act of 1965 lowered the number of legal Polish immigrants to enter the United States, a deepening economic recession in Poland and a growing political instability, generated incentives to risk going to the US even without a permanent status. As many as 24,000 Poles entered the US annually during the 1970s, majority as tourists, holding a temporary visa without employment authorization (Erdmans 1998, 60-61). Obtaining a tourist visa was a way of getting into the US, overstaying time restrictions (usually capped at around 6 months) and becoming an undocumented immigrant.

As a result of the increasing number of in-coming Poles, Greenpoint’s Polish community grew in strength. During the 1970s, Greenpoint’s St. Stanilasus parish became the largest Polish congregation in Brooklyn (Piatkowska 2002). Already a symbol of polish identity in New York, the parish became even more important after Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, the archbishop of Cracow, and future Pope, visited in 1969. The acknowledgement of Polish community in Greenpoint by the most prominent member of the Catholic hierarchy in Poland further validated Polish ethnics’ spatial claims and tipped the seesaw of ethnic competition to their side.

The 1970s also marked “ethnic revival” in America, a new climate of cultural pluralism that rendered ethnic identities a source of pride as well as a base for claiming state resources (Erdmans 1998, 48; Jacobson 2006). This growing ethnic momentum was also perceived through
new institutional developments that greatly improved the quality of Polish immigrant lives. In 1971, a prominent Polish émigré journalist, Boleslaw Wierzbicki, founded *Nowy Dziennik, The New Daily*, which quickly emerged as the largest and most prestigious Polish-language newspaper in the USA. In the 1980s *Nowy Dziennik* became Polish community’s main source of information about the Solidarity labor movement in Poland. It also organized various forms of assistance to aid exiled Solidarity leaders and political dissidents in Poland. Polish & Slavic Center, a non-profit social and cultural services organization was founded by a group of immigrants in 1972 and four years later, in 1976, the community opened its own ethnic financial institution, the Polish & Slavic Federal Credit Union. However, further community development was stifled by wider structural problems that were now beginning to undermine the neighborhood and the city.

By the 1970s, most of Greenpoint’s heavy industry had either shut down or moved to the suburbs to find more space, as well as cheaper services, and non-unionized labor force. Manufacturing jobs declined, most of the ethnic middle-class left for the suburbs, and the neighborhood—much like many other places across the US—found itself in the grip of the fiscal crisis and neoliberal austerity (Susser 1982). As municipal services retreated and landlords began walking out on their dilapidating buildings, Greenpoint’s economic, political and social marginalization became more entrenched.

Curiously, a report published by Polish & Slavic Center in 1979 describes Greenpoint as a robust neighborhood:

*Family life appears stronger than it does in many other communities. Values tend to be traditional, for instance, with regard to sex roles and parental authority. […] The church continues to be the main focus of local community life, though its role is not as important as it used to be […]. Informal neighborhood life is evident in block activities, in families sitting out in front of their homes in the evening, in shopping encounters. Neighborhood pride is*
visible in the cleanliness of the streets and the care with which houses are maintained. (Polish & Slavic Center 1979).

Reminiscent of Herbert Gans’s descriptions of Boston’s West End, the narrative defines Greenpoint as community populated by kind, caring, and hardworking people; a place where life is focused on home, family and church, and people know and trust each other. In this account, Polish immigrants are depicted as the “good people” who came here, like other immigrants before them, to realize the American dream by pursuing educational opportunities and owning their own homes, among other things. Such idealized perceptions of white ethnics, emerged against the backdrop of racial change affecting American cities in the second half of the twentieth century. In contrast to Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and African Americans whose lifestyles were often considered incompatible with the dominant social values, white ethnics were constructed as desirable community members possessing all the right moral and social attributes that make good citizens and neighbors.

**Redlining and the Importance of Ethnic Banks**

Much like other New York City neighborhoods, 1970s Greenpoint struggled against economic decline and social decay. Not only did industry migrate to the suburbs—leaving high rates of unemployment and rising poverty in its wake—mainstream banks withdrew services and blocked Greenpoint residents from access to much needed financial resources. Prompted by broader policies of disinvestment and citing high default rates on home mortgages, banks and insurance companies engaged in redlining, a legally-sanctioned practice that blocked home mortgage loans in certain areas, including Greenpoint (Wilder 2000). Though redlining affected all residents, it created an insurmountable obstacle for newly arrived immigrants, who aspired to homeownership, but more often than not worked off-the-books, held seasonal employment, had no prior credit history and lacked access to financial credit (Stabrowski 2011).
In the absence of alternative resources or legal challenges to redlining, Greenpoint’s Polish American community responded by establishing their own financial institution, the Polish & Slavic Federal Credit Union (PSFCU). Formed in 1976 under the leadership of local priest, Longin Tolczyk, and the non-profit organization Polish-Slavic Center, the ethnicity-based credit union helped Polish immigrants acquire property and become entrepreneurs. Polish credit union was directly modeled on the Ukrainian Federal Credit Union founded in 1953. The idea, however, was first developed by eastern European Jews whose intra-ethnic loan organizations provided a line of credit to the Jewish community and allowed Jewish immigrants to rise as entrepreneurs (Tennenbaum 1993).

In the 1970s, PSFCU emerged as the primary source of home mortgage loans for Poles purchasing homes in Greenpoint. Ethnic banks differ from mainstream banks based on the relationship they cultivate with communities they serve. When determining individual creditworthiness, ethnic institutions are more likely to rely on cultural understanding and intimate knowledge of ethnic populations than on objective, rational calculations (Dymski et al., 2010). Thus, a Polish immigrant applying for a home mortgage loan at PSFCU was able to obtain it based solely on his or her family name, the Polish city they came from, or because the employer, or even a local priest vouched for them. Moreover, by excluding the neighborhood’s significant Hispanic population who remained largely without formal financial services, the PSFCU established Poles as the dominant homeowners in Greenpoint (Stabrowski 2011).

Home and business ownership helped anchor Polish identity in the neighborhood for decades to come. It became particularly important when the area entered a period of rapid gentrification in the early 2000s. Because of the high rate of homeownership Polish community enjoyed increased protection against gentrification-triggered residential displacement than did
small pockets of Latinos renting apartments in the area.

Environmental Crisis

Besides industrial decline, racial change, and redlining, other pressures deepened the neighborhood’s crisis. Dominated by Polish immigrants who lacked the political clout or the will to fight back, Greenpoint became an easy target for siting undesirable and unhealthy city facilities (Yardley 1998).

In 1967, the city’s largest sewage treatment plant opened along Newtown Creek in Northern Greenpoint. Soon, the system’s operational problems created another difficulty for Greenpoint residents—foul smells. Because waste matter was handled without any odor control, a nauseating smell of rotten eggs plagued the neighborhood (Reiss 2001). A garbage incinerator spewing soot and other pollutants and nine garbage transfer stations further compounded the problem (Reiss 2001). To make matters worse, in 1978, the Coast Guard discovered oil seeping into the creek, a leftover from the largest underground oil spill in the country’s history, about three times larger than the 1989 Exxon Veldez spill off the coast of Alaska. Over the past century, oil discharge from the ExxonMobil’s historic refinery formed a fifty-acre “lake” sitting beneath the surface of Greenpoint’s residential sections and now draining slowly into local waterways.

As a result of local government’s negligence and racist policies no action was taken to manage the problem until 1990s. Newtown Creek is currently designated as Federal Superfund site. The Newtown Creek Alliance, a non-profit organization founded by elected officials, local residents and business owners in 2002, works to restore the waterway and to prevent new pollution in coordination with other neighborhood-based non-profits. Unlike majority of Polish immigrants, the new, highly-educated, middle-class residents are politically active around
Greenpoint’s environmental issues and use their votes to exert pressure on city hall to secure continuous monitoring and environmental remediation.

Post-Solidarity—The Third Wave

In August 1980, a massive strike broke out in the Gdansk Shipyard, one of Poland’s most important industrial centers, which led to the formation of the Solidarity Trade Union, known in Poland as Solidarność (Kubik 1994). Within only a few months of its foundation, union membership rapidly expanded to include not only millions of industrial workers around the country, but also students and intellectuals. While Solidarity was officially a labor union, its far-reaching goals and mass-scale (almost 50 percent of total work force identified as Solidarity members) rendered it a social movement (Kubik 1994). Underground press, critical discussion groups, demonstrations and increasingly frequent labor strikes threatened a full-scale revolt. To contain the situation General Jaruzelski imposed martial law in December 198. Approximately ten thousand of all-level Solidarity leaders were imprisoned and the movement was forced to go underground (Kubik 1994).

The imposition of the martial law in Poland as well as the passing of the Refugee Act of 1980 in the United States resulted in the third major wave of Polish immigration to the US. During the 1980s as many as thirty-three thousand Poles arrived to the US as political exiles (Erdmans 1998, 63). Many of the political activists who left, did so to escape imprisonment, discrimination and police harassment. Refugee status in the United States enabled them to certain benefits, unavailable to other types of immigrants, such as state and federal support for language and job training (Erdmans 1998, 75). Even though government assistance placed refugees in a better position than other types of immigrants, most Polish refugees’ social status was
downgraded in comparison to the social standing they enjoyed in Poland.

Not all of the post-Solidarity immigration was driven by political reasons, discouraged by Poland’s faltering economy many Poles came to the US seeking economic gain (Lopata 1994). Although some came as quota immigrants, majority of new arrivals consisted of nonimmigrants. Almost 450,000 arrived in the 1980s, 80 percent of them came as temporary visa holders swelling the numbers of undocumented Poles living in the US (Erdmans 1998, 63).

Consequently, three socially distinct groups made up the Solidarity era immigration: quota immigrants, nonimmigrants (holders of tourist visas), and refugees escaping political repression and prison. All three groups tended to be well educated, working- or middle-class some holding professional occupations prior to leaving Poland. Each group followed a different path of incorporation depending on how permanent they were and what type of visa they held when admitted (Erdmans 2006).

Nonimmigrants were by far the largest group that entered US in the 1980s. A Polish deli owner who arrived in Greenpoint in the 1980s characterized his cohort in the following words:

In the 80s, they came alone, almost always men. They came to work, but without permit. Wives and children stayed in Poland. They worked in construction, roofing, plumbing […] skilled manual labor. […] I knew fellows who came with a shopping list; they went to work and sent money home to buy a car, a combine, or a tractor. When they bought everything, they saved some more and returned to Poland.

According to this account, 1980s immigrants were mostly male family heads, who came for short term to accomplish a specific goal rather than to make a long-haul, although some did. Unburdened of family life, the men were free to take even most demanding and hazardous manual jobs as long as they paid well. Coming solo also allowed them to compromise personal comfort and share rental apartments with several people to minimize living costs.

Lacking permanent status or a valid work permit, colloquially referred to as papiery or
‘papers’, nonimmigrants were more limited in terms of finding employment, which was almost never commensurate with their education or professional experience in Poland. Based in the context of Polish seasonal migration to Italy, the American romantic comedy Under the Tuscan Sun (2003), captures this phenomena well. The movie’s main character Frances Mayes, a writer, moves to rural Tuscany and buys an old villa in need of gut renovation. Having only a limited budget she hires a crew of Polish immigrants to do the job. Soon she realizes that the hammer-wielding Poles in overalls are actually teachers, one of them a literature professor. At first she acts surprised, but then seems to enjoy the high credentials of her construction workers, who happen to be doing an exceptionally good job for a below average rate. Indeed, prior to Poland’s EU membership in 2004, it was not uncommon to see Polish professionals working as seasonal, construction workers or housekeepers in western Europe and the United States supplementing their low salaries with cash payments made in hard currency. Most of them made twice their annual salaries in just six months of working abroad.

During the 1980s, construction was the most common occupation for Polish male nonimmigrants, and domestic service (especially housekeeping and childcare) for female nonimmigrants (Erdmans 1998, 74). Similar gender division of labor characterized Polish immigrants in western European countries prior to Poland’s EU entry (Stanek 2012).

Quota immigrants and refugees, however, were less likely to work in the above sectors. If they did, they generally negotiated better working conditions. Permanent immigrants had better chances of improving their English language skills and finding better paid positions such as foremen and contractors at construction sites (Erdmans 1998, 74). Women with permanent residence status were also more likely to get job training, return to school or learn new skills.

The injection of thousands of new polish immigrants to Greenpoint, reestablished the
neighborhood as a Polish enclave. Whereas second and third generation Polish Americans made up the majority of the Polish American population in the 1950s, by late 1980s Greenpoint became the largest concentration of Polish immigrants on the East Coast.

The new wave of immigrants had dramatic effects on the enclave economy, upon which they were heavily dependent. Reassured of growing demand by the growing pool of Polish workers in need of affordable housing and polish-language services, the well-established members of the community bought houses in Greenpoint, which they rented to immigrant tenants. As a result of the new wave of immigrants, polish homeownership and entrepreneurship rose steadily all through the 1980s, but only in the 1990s did Polish delis, meat markets, bakeries, bookstores, shipping services, and multi-service agencies became ubiquitous on Greenpoint’s streets.

As Polish population swelled in Greenpoint and more Polish businesses filled the neighborhood’s streets, the area’s social identity and symbolic meaning gradually shifted from a mixed Polish American and Hispanic neighborhood, to Polish immigrant enclave shaped by the most recent arrivals from Poland. Moreover, the injection of Solidarity-era intelligentsia enlivened ethnic press, and literary and artistic scenes. A number of Polish-language newspapers, magazines, radio stations, TV stations, and artists’ collectives kept immigrants current with events in Poland, the United States and around the world; it also pulled them closer into the collective orbit of Polish cultural life by reporting on local ethnic events (Jedrychowska-Kern 2008).

This insular social world forged by new immigrants in the old polish neighborhoods stood apart from the Polish American community that received them. While Polish Americans shared common ancestry with the new immigrants, they did not share a collective identity. Polish
Americans were ethnics not immigrants, they were well-established members of their communities and their identity and experiences were shaped by twentieth-century capitalist America (Erdmans 1998, 85). In contrast, Polish immigrants were newcomers and their social identity was shaped by the economic hardships and political repression of communist Poland, which had little to do with the folklore-based conceptions of Polish culture common among the ethnics. Although tied with bonds of ethnic heritage, the two groups, Polish Americans and new Polish immigrants, came from different social contexts and these differences led to intra-ethnic divisions, often splitting the community into opposing camps (1998, 85-86).

The post-Solidarity cohort helped restore Greenpoint’s ties to Poland. Tumultuous political events that unfolded there during the 1980s directly affected collective action across Polish communities in the United States. The new immigrants mobilized ethnic resources to support anti-communist opposition; they provided financial aid to striking workers in polish factories, staged public demonstrations against martial law, helped to elect Solidarity officials in the 1989 elections and once democracy was reestablished they supported Poland’s emerging free-market economy (Erdmans 1998, 215). By doing so they redefined Polishness as a political, and not merely a cultural identity, intimately connected to homeland, not just in small cultural commitments, but in terms of organizational characteristics, concrete collective actions and leadership’s political position (1998, 217).

In sum, 1980s immigration replenished the neighborhood’s Polish population, interrupted the process of assimilation of the earlier cohorts, economically stabilized the previously disinvested and redlined neighborhood, staved off the in-coming minority groups, and paved the way for the next immigration wave spurred by the dissolution of the socialist state in Poland.
After Socialism—Fourth Wave

After the collapse of state socialism, Poland’s newly elected Solidarity government pushed through a package of bold neoliberal reforms known as the Balcerowicz-Sachs Plan—masterminded by the Harvard economist Jeffry Sachs and espoused by Solidarity government’s finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz (Ekiert & Kubik 1999). The purpose of the reform was to quickly and efficiently accomplish three goals of the new post-communist government: stabilization, liberalization and privatization of the economy. The speed of implementation was regarded as an essential element in overcoming social resistance and realizing the dream of Western modernity with “one big bang” (Buck-Morss 2000).

However, the speed and the scale of the reform itself—nation-wide industrial downsizing, massive layoffs, rapid retreat of the welfare state—so deteriorated the situation of ordinary Poles that the hardships went beyond what they previously experienced under socialism. Pressed against failing economy, 12-15 percent high unemployment rate and growing austerity, working-class Poles had only two options left, to seek jobs abroad or face increasing uncertainty at home (Ekiert & Kubik 1999).

At this very time, a change in federal immigration legislation in the United States—the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1990—established the Diversity Visa Lottery. The new legislation triggered a steep increase in European immigration, which rose from 9 percent in the 1980s to 22 percent in the 1990s—the highest rate since the 1920s (Dugger 1997). Among the sending countries Poland and Ireland were given special consideration, and accounted for nearly one-third of the diversity visas in the 1990-1994 period (NYC Department of City Planning 1999). Between 1992 and 1996, more than 50,000 Poles were admitted under the Diversity Visa Lottery (Erdmans 2006, 118). Along with refugees from the former Soviet Union and “diversity
immigrants” from Ireland, they made up the bulk of this new upsurge of European immigration.

As the new, post-socialist wave reached the United States, the number of total Polish permanent immigrants increased from 82,000 during the 1980s to more than 180,000 in the 1990s (Erdmans 2006, 116). Out of 24,875 of Polish immigrants who came to NYC in the 1990-1996 period, 7,653 settled in Greenpoint (NYC Department of City Planning 1999, 34). The new immigrants chain migrated to neighborhoods with high polish concentrations where their family and friends received them. Large numbers of new arrivals increased the demand for housing, employment, Polish-language services and Polish food establishments, once again reaffirming Greenpoint, and other old Polish neighborhoods’ such as Maspeth and Ridgewood, Queens as immigrant enclaves.

In many aspects the majority of immigrants arriving from post-socialist Poland bore a resemblance to the first immigrants that came at the turn of the 19th century (Erdmans 2006). They were za chlebem [for bread] migrants, who came for economic gains. Once settled in polish communities, they held multiple blue-collar jobs, lived below their means and struggled towards homeownership, the very reason that drove them to come to the United States in the first place. Unlike the earlier cohorts, however, 1990s immigrants were on average middle-age, came as family units holding a Diversity Visa, and looked forward to a permanent stay. While they maintained only a limited contact with the larger American society and often lacked linguistic competence, they also longed to leave the dense, urban life for a private home in quieter suburban areas (Erdmans 2006).

In her first novel, *The Lullaby of Polish Girls* (2010), Dagmara Dominczyk, a Polish American writer and a daughter of Solidarity-era émigré introduces her book’s main character, Anna Baran, a New Yorker, by way of Kielce, Polska– the birth of Polish rap: “We’re known
Anna tells her American boyfriend (6). Just like the author herself, Anna was born in Kielce, a socialist-era industrial town, a place with strong working-class identity, where polish rap first emerged in the early 1990s. The songs of Kielce-based rap artists often allude to the experiences of working class youth living in large apartment-complexes somewhat similar to public housing projects in the United States. Anna’s life is emblematic of the lives of thousands of other Poles and their families who immigrated to the United States and settled in Polish neighborhoods similar to Greenpoint. Anna’s father, a steelworker, became a Solidarity leader forced into exile after martial law was declared in 1981 when faced with either going to prison or emigrating, he chose the latter. Anna’s family, just like the author’s, moved to Greenpoint in 1982. Typically for Polish immigrants, Anna’s father worked in construction and her mother as a housekeeper. Growing up in 1990s Greenpoint, Anna characterized the neighborhood as “smelling of sausage and tobacco” stereotypically associated with members of the working class whose bad habits result from lack of education and a low socioeconomic status. On that level the phrase highlights the strong association between Polish American identity and its working class character, but for Anna the smell of sausage and tobacco also symbolize the hominess of Greenpoint versus the thrilling and cosmopolitan, but at times also alienating Manhattan. The phrase is also indicative of a set of shared social characteristics that define the post-socialist cohort: industrial working-class origins and parochialism.

Other than in Polish American literature, the working class character of the Polish community was also registered by the in-coming Poles themselves. Wiktor, a middle-age Polish-born accountant who came to Greenpoint in 1992 noted a concentration of Poles in two

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This is a reference to song lyrics from one of the first Polish rap artists Liroy, born in Kielce who became very popular during the 1990s, especially among working-class urban youth.
occupational sectors: construction and domestic service.

When I first arrived, my friend told me Greenpoint is inhabited by a special race of people: construction workers and housekeepers [he laughs]. There was a corner near McGuiness Boulevard, and probably in some other places too, where the newcomers went to get a construction job. I went there every morning and waited for a van to pull up and take us to do work. Women waited at different location to get picked up to do plejsy [housekeeping].

Like the earlier cohorts, the post-socialist economic immigrants entered the US labor market as both skilled and unskilled manual labor. Majority of male immigrants entered into construction and home improvement, while vast majority of women were hired in domestic service on an hourly basis (Erdmans 2006, 118).

Few of the 1990s immigrants regarded Greenpoint as an ideal place for permanent settlement in the United States. They moved to “Little Poland”, because of pre-existing family or friend connections and they stayed for the convenience of having access to polish-language services and the safety of a local network of friends and acquaintances, most of them regarded Greenpoint as a landing pad and looked forward to buying a house in the suburbs. Jolanta, a middle age, Polish café/spa owner who moved to Greenpoint in early 1990s recalls feeling ‘dissapointed’ when she first encountered the streets of Greenpoint, a neighborhood she has heard a lot about from her sister.

I first came to Greenpoint in 1991 to visit my sister. I felt very disappointed. It was so different from the idea of New York I had in my imagination. The area was dangerous. My relatives warned me not to venture far off Manhattan Avenue after dark, because street muggings and other types of attacks were not uncommon. So much trash on the streets and in the parks. Buildings weren’t well kept, most of them looked old, like they were about to collapse. And inside the apartments were just as bad. Polish businesses, especially stores and restaurants, surprised me the most. It all looked like tiny, backwater towns in Poland. Same bleak atmosphere, same plain products.

Based on the level of disinvestment, municipal neglect and crime witnessed in the polish neighborhood, arriving Poles associated feelings of disappointment with Greenpoint and placed
negative valuation on their experience living there. Most new immigrants saw Greenpoint as a ‘polish ghetto’, merely a first step in their long journey to ‘better life’, which required initial sacrifices. Krzysztof, a middle age polish deli owner, who lived in Greenpoint since 1990 described his first impression of the polish neighborhood as a “shock”.

I have to admit, when my cousin picked me up at the airport and dropped me off at my new address on Eagle Street, I was in absolute shock. I never imagined the US looked like that. I came from communist-era Poland, and thought I had seen the worst, but Greenpoint, a neighborhood in New York, which I regarded as the capital of the world, boiled down to downright polish ghetto. It was disgusting, full of industrial noises and it smelled really bad! I coped by thinking of it as my first step, an initial sacrifice, after which I would move to a better place.

But Greenpoint also represented something of a ‘home away from home’, a small corner of the big city, when one felt less alienated and comforted by the ‘familiarity of the polish faces’, polish language spoken in the streets and polish-owned shops that looked much like stores back in Poland. Danuta, a middle-age housekeeper who arrived to Greenpoint in 1994 recounts the sense of belonging she felt living in a polish enclave.

I was really missing Poland when I first came here. I didn’t speak English and everything seemed so alien, even simple tasks like going shopping proved challenging. So, when I first came to Greenpoint and I saw polish store signs and I could buy same food as back home, and I heard polish language and the faces on the street looked familiar, I immediately felt home.

By the 1990s, Greenpoint became visibly more Polish. Until then, polish identity was mainly reflected in the growing number of Polish-born residents, but as new immigrants increased demand for polish products and services, Greenpoint’s streets filled with Polish-owned stores and other types of ethnic businesses that further solidified Greenpoint’s identity as a Polish enclave. Greenpoint has also become more expensive, between 1990-2000 the median rent in Greenpoint increased in every census track (Stabrowski 2011, 47). During the same time, the migration of priced out artists and creative professionals from Manhattan to the Northside of
Williamsburg intensified.

When prices in Williamsburg went up in response to growing demand, some of the would-be Williamsburg residents began looking for less expensive apartments nearby, including in the Polish enclave. This was not an easy task, “Little Poland” was not yet open to outsiders as Polish landlords had a strong preference for co-ethnic, Polish-speaking tenants (Stabrowski 2011). This reluctance continued until a combination of external and internal factors, triggered a wholesale transformation of a Polish immigrant stronghold into an elite bastion of luxury residential and commercial development.

The Dissolution of Polish Greenpoint

Beginning in the mid-2000s demographics of Polish communities in American cities began to change dramatically. One of the key events that contributed to this change is Poland’s 2004 integration into EU economic and political structures. On 1 May, 2004, the European Union made its single, largest expansion in terms of territory, number of states and population. Seven post-communist democracies, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Poland, became the new EU members marking the end of a long period of cultural, political and economic exclusion and separation. Four years later, in 2008, Poland completed the integration by joining the Shengen Agreement, which permits free movement of capital, commodities and labor across the borders of all member countries.

Poland’s entry into the EU and Shengen, reworked established patterns of economic migration by replacing the United States with the United Kingdom as the top immigration destination for Polish professionals and unskilled workers seeking to work abroad. The UK was one of three member states that allowed new EU citizens to work within its borders immediately
after EU integration and without any restrictions. By 2013, 521,000 Poles moved to live and work in Britain permanently, and Polish has become the second most widely spoken language in the country after English (Rainey 2013). Currently, 850,000 Poles live in the UK, making them the largest non-British nationality (Gera 2016). Poles cited legal status, higher wages, access to the British welfare system and shorter distance to home as the main reasons for migrating to the UK rather than the United States. Recently, the latter dropped from second to fifth place in the ranking of the top ten destinations for Polish migrants.

Although new economic opportunities in Europe did not completely halt Polish immigration to the US, most recent arrivals from Poland bypass inner city neighborhoods, and settle directly in suburban communities (Erdmans 2006). This emerging migrational pattern is not specific to Poles. Latino and Asian immigrants continue to be attracted to the nation’s largest urban areas, but are dispersing to more and smaller places across the United States. The New York metropolitan area, for example, saw a critical surge during the 2000–2013 period when foreign-born population increased by 800,000 (Wilson & Svajenka 2014). In the absence of new arrivals to replenish aging ethnic populations, the gateway cities of Chicago and New York begin the process of shed their historical roles as Polish immigrant reception areas (Mastony 2013; Jedrychowska-Kern 2011). With more Poles moving out than in, ethnic businesses closing down and cultural institutions declining, the imprint of Polish enclaves is gradually fading from America’s urban fabric.

The recent demographic decline of oldest and most prominent Polish settlements in the U.S., converges with, and is exacerbated by, economic restructuring, urban revitalization and gentrification. In Chicago’s Polish community of West Town, the out-migration of Poles overlaps with the in-migration of gentrifiers from the nearby Wicker Park. Younger and better-
educated, non-immigrant residents settle in ethnic spaces and use their economic and cultural power to reinvent them according to their needs and desires. In Greenpoint’s case gentrification has been orchestrated by market forces as much as by changes in zoning laws, which made previously underutilized industrial waterfront available for residential and commercial development. In addition, close proximity to trendy and expensive Williamsburg made Greenpoint very appealing to younger, better-educated newcomers, whose increasing numbers pushed gentrification beyond the Williamsburg frontier.

The years leading up to and immediately following the waterfront rezoning, roughly 2002-2007, saw a spectacular rise in rent and housing values in Greenpoint. This placed the neighborhood far beyond the financial reach of working class immigrant families and cast a shadow over Greenpoint’s future as an immigrant enclave. In 2014, the median asking rent in Greenpoint-Williamsburg reached $3,055 (NYU Furman Center 2015). Between 2000 and 2010-2014, the area experienced 44 percent hike in average rent values—the highest increase among all gentrifying New York City neighborhoods. During the same period, average household income increased by 40 percent. Top household incomes of $250,000 or more increased by 2 percent, households with incomes of $100,000-$250,000 constituted the highest growth (9 percent), while the number of households with annual income of $20,000 or less saw the steepest decline (5 percent). By increasing real estate values and attracting new, affluent residents, neighborhood reinvestment and gentrification added an economic “punch” to the process of demographic decline. Unexpected and rapid real estate appreciation created two effects: 1) it forced working class tenants out of the ethnic community, and 2) it incited aging property owners to sell buildings and relocate to the suburbs or resettle in Poland.

The combination of old age and homeownership is an important factor impacting the
enclave. As Table 1 indicates about 20 percent of Poles in New York are elderly, or above the age of 65. In comparison, New York’s elderly make up only 12 percent of the total population. Almost 33 percent of Poles are age 45-64, which falls above the city average of 25 percent. Majority of Poles or 44 percent are between ages 18 and 44, and only two percent are under the age of 18. By contrast, over 60 percent of recent movers into gentrifying neighborhoods like Greenpoint are between age of 20 and 34 (NYU Furman Center Report 2015). Aging Poles show a strong preference to move out of Greenpoint and relocate to quieter areas in Queens, Staten Island, Long Island, or in other states. Some leave the US altogether and resettle in Poland. As they leave they sell Greenpoint properties to private developers who either upgrade older buildings or demolish them and construct new luxury units for the in-coming middle-class residents.

Table 1. NYC Polish-born Population, Age Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Under 18</th>
<th>18-44</th>
<th>45-64</th>
<th>65 and Over</th>
<th>Median Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polish-born</td>
<td>2% (2.1)</td>
<td>44% (44.2)</td>
<td>33% (33.2)</td>
<td>20% (20.5)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYC total</td>
<td>21% (21.5)</td>
<td>41% (41.6)</td>
<td>25% (24.6)</td>
<td>12% (12.3)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The majority of Polish immigrants in NYC consists of immigrants who left Poland in the 1990s or later, and have lived in the US for less than 25 years. Most of them (37.2 percent) entered the US during the 1990s, nearly 30 percent entered in 2000 or later, close to 15 percent entered during the 1980s and 19 percent before 1980 (Table 2). The high percentage of recent (2000 or later) immigrants helps to explain the high rate (47 percent) of Polish immigrants who are not proficient in English. This means they will continue to rely on Polish-language services available in Greenpoint even after the neighborhood has gentrified. Although many of such services are shutting down, some will survive to cater to Poles who communicate only in Polish,
or those who possess only a limited knowledge of English. As the number of Polish-language services increases in the new satellite enclaves in northwestern Queens and New Jersey, Greenpoint will gradually become less central to Poles living in the New York metropolitan area.

Table 2. Entry of Polish Immigrants by Decade, NYC 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent Arriving</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Poles are a moderately prosperous ethnic group. In 2011, Polish median annual income was higher than that of other foreign-born groups. According to Table 3, in 2011 the median annual household income for NYC Poles was $55,392, higher than the $54,679 for native-born population, and $49,792 for total NYC population. Very little disparity exists between NYC Polish median income and the median household income in the Greenpoint-Williamsburg area, which in 2014 was calculated at $57,891 (NYU Furman Center 2015). Only 8 percent of Poles live below poverty line in comparison to 21 percent of NYC total population. And only 1 percent of Polish households receive some form of public assistance, which is lower than NYC average.

Table 3. Household Income and Poverty Status by Country of Birth, New York City, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Population in Poverty</th>
<th>PA Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYC total</td>
<td>$49,792</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native-born</td>
<td>$54,679</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-born</td>
<td>$43,682</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poland</strong></td>
<td><strong>$55,392</strong></td>
<td><strong>8%</strong></td>
<td><strong>1%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>$37,267</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>$33,602</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Upon their arrival in the US majority of Poles entered service jobs. Males mostly as skilled laborers in building construction, demolition, and home improvement, and women as housekeepers, childcare providers, personal care aides, and administrative support. As shown in
Table 4, most are high school graduates (87 percent), 14 percent have a level of education lower than high school, and a relatively low number (35 percent) are college graduates. Language barrier and low educational attainment makes for the underrepresentation of Poles in executive, administrative, and managerial occupations. Even the better educated Solidarity-era political exiles who held prestigious jobs in Poland entered service jobs upon arrival in the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not English Proficient</th>
<th>Less than H.S Grad</th>
<th>H.S Only</th>
<th>College or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NYC total</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native-born</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-born</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poland</strong></td>
<td><strong>47%</strong></td>
<td><strong>14%</strong></td>
<td><strong>87%</strong></td>
<td><strong>27%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Excluded from access to high-paying jobs, most Poles amassed wealth by buying local property and supplanting their mortgage payments by renting out apartments (Susser 2012). Because immigrant wealth accumulation process is tightly linked to home owning and to real estate values, gentrification-spurred housing boom was welcomed, even reinforced, by Greenpoint’s Polish property owners who emerged as local economic actors. But the property owners resided side by side a much poorer, working-class Poles who depended on low rent prices to make a living. After rents increased, and the neighborhood was opened up to outsiders, the lower income Polish households were the first to be priced out, thus, accelerating the rate of enclave’s demographic dissolution.

**Conclusion**

During the course of the last thirty years Greenpoint has undergone dramatic changes.
Since the 1950s, wide-spread economic and social decline, as well as environmental pollution and toxic waste, drove property values down and middle class out. With the disappearance of industrial jobs, the in-migrating Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, as well as existing residents became trapped in the neighborhood’s increasing poverty and high unemployment rate leading to racial tensions and spatial contestation. Mainstream banks reacted by redlining almost the entire neighborhood, and thus channeled the flow of investment away from the community beset by crisis.

The reversal of the neighborhood’s economic decline began during the massive influx of Polish immigrants during the 1980s and 1990s. In need of financial credit to increase immigrant homeownership, Polish community established an ethnic credit union. The institution helped Poles acquire and renovate property, as well as to establish local businesses. The subsequent waves of immigrants who settled in Greenpoint provided a pool of cheap laborers, tenants, and customers who depended on the enclave for housing, ethnic services, and sometimes employment. This dynamic split the community into two economic groups; the first made up of affluent property and business owners and the second consisting of more recent, and poorer immigrants. The ethnic community was divided also according to time of arrival. The older cohort of postwar immigrants saw themselves as distinct and culturally “purer” than the most recent waves of Solidarity-era and later post-socialist immigrants whose lives have been shaped by decades of communist rule in Poland. This disaccord impacted ethnic institutions whose leadership could hardly agree which group’s interests should represent the broader interests of the organization, and of Polonia in general.

By the late 1990s, groups of artists and young professionals began to cross into Greenpoint from the neighboring Williamsburg. This trend intensified with the 2005
Williamsburg-Greenpoint waterfront rezoning which marked a dramatic increase in area’s rent and property values. The next chapter of this dissertation documents how this process affected Greenpoint’s property owners and their co-ethnic tenants.
Chapter 3. Economic Participation, Displacement and Two Ways to Exit

Introduction

This chapter examines a unique vantage point on gentrification as experienced by two groups of Polish immigrants in Greenpoint: property owners, particularly landlords, and low- to moderate-income tenants. Although most urban scholars have sought to understand gentrification as a manifestation of outside economic, demographic, and cultural forces, I focus on how conflict of interest between ethnic landlords and tenants undermines ethnic solidarity and expedites gentrification from within.

Since the redevelopment of the waterfront for luxury housing and completion of the gentrification cycle in Williamsburg, Greenpoint’s Polish landlords played a significant role in the gentrification of the enclave. By selling buildings to non-Poles—including to corporate developers—raising rents, refusing to renew leases to, even evicting, Polish co-ethnics, while at the same time actively courting more affluent gentrifiers, Polish landlords participated in, even accelerated the demographic and economic transformation of Greenpoint. Paradoxically, for many of the aging landlords participation in growth entailed a “happy exit” or a voluntary relocation from Greenpoint to quieter areas. For them, besides the obvious exchange value, the emerging social life of the gentrifying neighborhood has little practical purpose. However, landlords’ decision to increase rents or to sell buildings in Greenpoint exacerbates the shortage of affordable housing and puts their co-ethnic, low-to-moderate income tenants at risk of displacement. In turn, declining numbers of long term Polish residents negatively impact ethnic
businesses, as well as neighborhood’s Polish institutions whose viability is linked to membership, and has ultimately lead to the erosion of the community’s social foundation.

As rents began to rise, the overwhelming majority of low- to moderate-income Polish tenants responded to Greenpoint’s gentrification by exiting to more affordable areas, particularly to nearby northwestern Queens neighborhoods of Ridgewood-Glendale and Maspeth. The large numbers of Polish displacees in Ridgewood, a home to small number of Albanian, Italian, German, and Romanian immigrants, with increasing Latino presence, triggered the formation of a satellite enclave, which now rivals Greenpoint as the center of Polish life in New York. Ironically, by purchasing and converting properties in previously disinvested Ridgewood some of the displacees have also initiated processes of early gentrification, which in combination with Ridgewood’s close proximity to gentrifying Bushwick and to two subway lines connecting it directly with Manhattan may trigger a wholesale class transformation of the area.

The older and younger members of the second-generation, many of them local property owners, view gentrification as a stabilizing force reversing decades of white flight suburbanization, disinvestment, social decay and racial change. The younger, ‘millennial’ children of the recent immigrants are also more likely to feel at home in Greenpoint’s emerging culture, which they might feel as much a part of, sometimes even more, than of their parents’ ethnic culture. Participation in the neighborhood growth, thus, is not strictly limited to property owners who are recent immigrants, but is even more enthusiastically embraced by their US-born children.
Polish Homeownership in Greenpoint

Polish immigrants exhibit a relatively high rate of homeownership often moving from tenants to owners within a single generation. In 2009 Polish-surnamed individuals owned nearly 45 percent of residential properties in Greenpoint (Stabrowski 2011, 65). Majority, or 60 percent of Polish homebuyers purchased two- to three-family homes, 10 percent purchased four- to five-family buildings, and another 32 percent purchased homes of six units or more (2011, 66). Clearly, multi-family buildings are the type of residential properties favored by Polish immigrants in Greenpoint, indicating that right from the beginning Poles saw their property as an investment, not just a home.

For Polish immigrants facing exclusion from professional job market, low rate of English language proficiency, and lack of access to broader social networks, homeownership was considered a guaranteed ‘safe investment’ and the quickest path to financial security as well as to social prestige. Indeed, immigrant groups most likely to experience significant social mobility and to accumulate wealth are the ones that show high homeownership rates (Teixeira 2015, 27). The desire to become homeowners was further magnified by Polish immigrants’ previous experiences of chronic housing shortages and poor living conditions under state-socialism.

Just like their native counter-parts, immigrants seek homeownership for use as well as exchange values. However, a house is not only useful as shelter and literally 'contains' the lives of its occupants, it can be also used for commercial purposes. Entrepreneurial landlords show a tendency to set up retail businesses in their own buildings, which reduces financial risk and protects them against commercial rent increases. Such is the story of the polish-owned “Pyza” restaurant on Nassau Avenue and “The Awakening Spa” on Manhattan Avenue, both operated by the buildings’ owners. Others use their homes to carry out informal economic activity turning
toolsheds and basements into workshops or equipment storage to earn extra income as hired handymen.

But according to the homeowners I interviewed in Greenpoint, the most important reason for purchasing a home is the underlying exchange value. Most of them perceived property ownership, particularly rental property ownership, as an excellent and safe investment strategy. By purchasing multi-unit housing as an investment, and becoming landlords, they distributed the burden of paying off the mortgage among their tenants. If an individual owned a multi-unit rental property in which rent payments were higher than the mortgage payment, then this also provided the owner with a stable stream of income. Extra income made accumulation of additional financial capital to purchase their own, individual home a possibility.

As the chart below indicates, the first major increase in Polish home purchases came in the second half of the 1980s following an influx of Solidarity-era immigrants and an amnesty granted to those who came on a tourist visa during the period of political repression in Poland. The second surge began during the second half of the 1990s and consisted of post-1989 immigrants holding a diversity visa. An increasing number of new arrivals seeking housing from co-ethnic landlords allowed the earlier cohorts to buy properties in relatively short period of time. Polish home purchases reached the all time high during the 1999-2000 period, when the most recent wave of immigrants began purchasing homes. The rate of Polish homeownership began to fall steadily after steep property increases—intensified by the 2005 waterfront rezoning—put Greenpoint beyond the reach of first-time, immigrant home-buyers. This downward trend reached all time low in 2008, the year of the financial meltdown.
Although not well integrated into the economic mainstream, Polish property owners became an elite within their own ethnic community. The multiple migrations created favorable conditions for the enclave expansion as each earlier cohort benefited economically from the next one. The constant flow of new immigrants in need of housing, products and services expanded home and business ownership and allowed for small capital accumulation and the emergence of local ethnic elite.

**Ethnic Growth Machines and Neighborhood Change**

Until recently, few researchers focused attention on local ethnic elites as a factor not
solely in enclave formation, but also in enclave dissolution. The trajectory of an ethnic enclave facing gentrification depends in some measure on the strategic decisions of the property owners, landlords, and real estate entrepreneurs as well as ethnic small business owners and local financial institutions. Although the decisions and actions of such local ethnic elite are too small in scope to either stop or reverse large-scale urban change, they can still shape the neighborhood’s future by representing and protecting ethnic interests. In place of doing that, however, Greenpoint’s Polish elite adapted to the changing structural environment by aligning their private interests with the market-based vision of neighborhood growth promoted by corporate developers, real estate entrepreneurs, city officials, and gentrifiers (Stabrowski 2011). With the elite turned away from community interests, collective voice and political resistance to enclave’s dissolution became harder to consolidate.

Logan and Molotch (1987) argue that local coalitions of elected officials, real estate entrepreneurs, developers, realtors, property owners, small business owners, financial and community institutions, even local media, make up the city’s “growth machine”. Long credited with stabilizing disinvested neighborhoods by purchasing discounted properties and establishing new businesses, immigrant communities—like the larger cities of which they are a part—create their own growth coalitions to boost local economic development, create jobs and promote property ownership (Light 2002).

This process is well-documented in Asian American communities, where an influx of Asian transnational capital is changing the landscape of working-class immigrant neighborhoods. The Reagan-era extensive deregulation of banking industry and the emergence of China as a world economic power encouraged Chinese investment in the U.S real estate market. As a consequence of this development Chinese transnational actors are active participants in the
reshaping of American urban spaces, including Asian immigrant neighborhoods (Hum 2014). For instance, in Los Angeles Chinatown locally established Chinese American and transnational Chinese banks cooperate with local ethnic developers and realtors to promote luxury-condominium construction which remake long-established ethnic enclave into an upscale residential and commercial district (Lin 2008).

A similar dynamic is observed in a rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood of Sunset Park, a site of large concentration of Chinese and Latino immigrants, where the Asian growth machine—transnational Chinese banks and ethnic real estate entrepreneurs in particular—are among key actors facilitating neighborhood change (Hum 2014). Shifting focus away from promoting individual immigrant homeownership, new Chinese banks concentrate their landing in commercial real estate loans, including luxury housing development (Dymski at al. 2010; Hum 2014, 107). Building of shopping plazas and mixed-use residential condominiums, attract a new population of middle-to-upper class professionals and artists leading to displacement of established Chinese residents and ethnic retailers. As a result Chinese enclaves transform into destinations for non-Chinese residents and an ‘ethnic theme park’ for tourists.

The Polish Growth Machine

Polish Greenpoint has also developed its own ethnic growth machine. Although on a smaller scale than in Asian American communities, Polish homeowners, business owners, landlords and real estate developers helped to consolidate the enclave by concentrating properties and services in one place (Stabrowski 2011). Decades later, in the process of adapting to gentrification and neighborhood redevelopment, same local ethnic elite focused on private rather than collective interests and thus contributed to the community’s unraveling.
Stabrowski identifies the Polish & Slavic Federal Credit Union (PSFCU) as one of the main actors of the Polish growth coalition. Since its foundation in 1972 the PSFCU has been instrumental in the development of Polish settlement in Greenpoint. It provided access to much needed financial services—especially mortgage loans—to Polish immigrants, who desired to buy depreciated residential and commercial property in Greenpoint, but lacked access to mainstream banks (Stabrowski 2011, 80). The emergence of Polish owned and operated financial institution that offered mortgage and business loans to Poles resulted in increased rates of homeownership and entrepreneurship, which in turn bolstered area’s ethnic identity and reinforced Greenpoint’s status as a Polish enclave.

Throughout the 1970s nearly the entire neighborhood of Greenpoint suffered from redlining, or the withdrawal of mainstream banks from investing in the area. As a result of this practice, Greenpoint’s residents were largely left without access to financial credit which made home buying nearly impossible. For recent Polish immigrants, the difficulty to obtain home purchase loan, or even a home fire insurance, was compounded by other social and legal disadvantages. During the 1970s Greenpoint’s Polish population consisted of a large number of undocumented economic migrants working with no social security number and no proof of income, as well as those with permanent status, but with no credit history, limited English language skills, and no knowledge—but much distrust—of the American banking practices (Stabrowski 2011). At the same time, most of these immigrants accumulated substantial cash savings and desired to buy a discounted residential and commercial real estate in Greenpoint.

The establishment of PSFCU countered financial exclusion of Polish immigrants—especially those recently arrived—by applying more lenient lending criteria than did mainstream American banks. In order to help immigrants build financial identities essential to become
homeowners, credit cards and small loans were issued to individuals with no prior credit history or even to those lacking a social security number (Żurawicz 1996, 23). Not surprisingly, the credit union has quickly become the primary source of home mortgage loans for Poles and has diversified Greenpoint’s financial infrastructure, previously composed almost exclusively of check cashing and wire transfer centers.

The credit union has also promoted immigrant homeownership by demystifying the process of purchasing a home for the first time home-buyers (Stabrowski 2011, 83). The bank has, for example, brought together a team of financial and real estate experts explaining a wide range of issues related to home-buying and offering assistance to interested individuals during public meetings conducted in Polish language and tailored specifically to immigrants’ needs. Information about the meetings circulated via formal and informal community channels, but primarily through the PSFCU’s bulletin board, Polish American press, and Polish-language masses in local Polish Catholic churches. In this sense, the promotion of upward mobility via homeownership emanated from the institutional structures and values of the enclave itself. To this extent, ethnic community helped foster the very conditions that consolidated residential concentration in the enclave and encouraged immigrants to purchase homes in Greenpoint.

As Table 5 indicates, Poles dominated as home purchasers in the neighborhood between 1981 and 1990, a period when as much as 82 percent of all home mortgages issued to Greenpoint came from the PSFCU. Attracted by PSFCU’s success and encouraged by rising rates of homeownership among Polish immigrants, regional, national, even international banks flooded to Greenpoint (Stabrowski 2011). As more Poles turned to mainstream financial institutions, often to take advantage of better rates, PSFCU home loans took a significant plunge, falling to 52 percent during the years 1991-2000, and down to only 34 percent from 2001 to 2009.
Table 5. Home Loans to Greenpoint (1981-2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERIOD</th>
<th>PSFCU LOANS</th>
<th>OTHER LOANS</th>
<th>% OF LOANS FROM PSFCU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981-1990</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-2000</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2009</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Stabrowski (2011, 90)

After mainstream banks began courting Polish immigrants and interbank competition increased, the PSFCU’s unchallenged monopoly over the ethnic market ended. At the same time, housing market boom triggered by the 2005 waterfront rezoning placed Greenpoint beyond the reach of average immigrant home buyers, who were now looking to purchase homes in more affordable areas, particularly in the northwestern Queens neighborhoods of Maspeth, Ridgewood, Glandale and Middle Village. But Poles also dispersed to locations outside of New York, especially in New Jersey, Long Island, Connecticut and Pennsylvania.

PSFCU adapted to changing settlement patterns and the suburbanization of Polish population by expanding to other neighborhoods and well as to other states (Stabrowski 2011). Currently, the credit union operates eighteen branches: three in Brooklyn (Greenpoint and Borough Park), two in Queens (Maspeth and Ridgewood), one in Staten Island, one on Long Island (Copiague), five in New Jersey, four in Illinois, and two in Florida.

By making residential mortgages available to Polish immigrants, the PSFCU helped rescue previously redlined Greenpoint from prolonged disinvestment and physical, social and economic deterioration. It also established Poles as primary home purchasers in Greenpoint, and helped
them set up new businesses—all of this while also realizing its own financial goals. But as Polish immigration to Greenpoint began to decrease and a frenzy of real estate speculation engulfed the neighborhood, the credit union was forced to expand spatially, thus moving away from serving the local community (Stabrowski 2011). Rather than taking steps to mobilize the community against the encroaching gentrification, the credit union has undermined the community solidarity by promoting homeownership outside of Greenpoint.

Indisputably, ethnic growth machines are agents of neighborhood change in immigrant communities. While powerful political and economic interests are the key drivers of urban change, the strategic decisions of ethnic actors—especially local elites—also hold a stake in the shaping of the future of ethnic neighborhoods.

**Ethnic Landlords: Economic Participation, Retirement and “Happy Exit”**

Polish property owners in Greenpoint saw the rapidly increasing local property values as an economic opportunity. Indeed, the real estate boom immediately preceding and following the waterfront rezoning proved advantageous to property owners who wished to capitalize on the increased equity in their homes. When they sell their houses Poles benefit in the form of increased real estate prices—average listing price for multi-family homes in the most desirable parts of Greenpoint in 2015 reached close to $2 million dollars— and relocate to lower-cost housing in the suburbs or go back to Poland to retire.

Others *participate* in neighborhood change more directly. This includes construction of new, upscale housing, refurbishing of existing apartments and charging market value rents to affluent newcomers. By doing so Polish landlords not merely react to change, but initiate and
magnify the processes of gentrification from inside the ethnic community.

At the same time, the area’s increasing trendiness and the presence of younger crowds makes gentrifying Greenpoint less of an appealing residence to aging landlords, who look forward to retire in quieter areas. Because most of the landlords manage their rental property themselves—often with the help of their children—they choose to retire in the nearby suburban or semi-suburban areas, predominantly in Queens, Long Island, and New Jersey, where they purchase a single family home—a “happy” exit.

Though second generation has largely left the neighborhood, a small number has stayed put. Not due to ethnic reasons, but because of the cultural revalorization of the old ghetto, which has recently been named the best neighborhood in the nation for millennials to live in (Montgomery 2014). The millennial children of immigrants benefit from the rent-free living arrangement in the family-owned buildings and enjoy the cultural amenities offered by the gentrified neighborhood. Older ones, who have already formed families, achieve intergenerational mobility after family real estate is passed down to them in the form of inheritance.

Radek is a retired general building contractor and a small landlord with two buildings in Greenpoint. He has a total of 10 rental units, all of which except two are occupied by non-Polish tenants, predominantly white Americans. The two ‘Polish units’ include his US-born daughter and a Polish web designer who recently moved from Warsaw for a New York-based job in advertising. When asked to describe the changes that occurred in the neighborhood since 1977, the year he arrived to Greenpoint, Radek’s face lit up and he enthusiastically replied: "Very positive! It gets better year by year. Property values and rents are going up. Now is the time to cash in!"
After working five years in construction-related jobs, Radek started his own business as an independent contractor and later a small real estate developer. By 1982, he saved enough to purchase his first property in Greenpoint, a shabby two-family home, which he demolished and replaced with a brand new two-family unit. When the building adjacent to his property went on the market, Radek purchased it in 1990 and rented both properties to Polish tenants.

I bought my first building in Greenpoint in 1982. It was very old and in need of gut renovation, I demolished it and in its place put up a brand new two-family unit. [...] Eight years later in 1990, I bought the building right next to this one. I filled both buildings with Polish tenants, and you know, there were many of them in the 1990s looking for rooms to rent.

For Radek as for most recent Polish immigrants, becoming a homeowner and a landlord in Greenpoint, did not automatically translate into loyalty, or growing deeper roots in the neighborhood. In fact, ethnic co-residence was not an important factor when determining where to raise his family. Instead, other, non-ethnic factors such as “convenience” and “comfortable place to live” motivated Radek to purchase a single-family home in the more suburban neighborhood of Maspeth, Queens. He saw Maspeth as safer and more family-friendly than Greenpoint, which he thought of as little more than a concentration of specialized services and a pool of new arrivals from which to draw new tenants.

In 1982 I bought a single-family home in Maspeth. It was an affordable area and a relatively short distance to Greenpoint where I go to check on my buildings or to shop for [Polish] food [...] I needed a quieter and safer area to raise my children, more space, a garage, a backyard [...] I’d say I moved there out of convenience, not because other Polish people were there. I wasn’t looking for a Polish connection. I was looking for a comfortable place to live.

Interestingly, Radek left before gentrification has even become a threat to the residential integrity of Greenpoint’s Polish community. For Radek, leaving Greenpoint was a “happy” exit, which had little to do with neighborhood change, and more with finding a better quality of life he sought for...
his family. Even when Greenpoint’s physical appearance improved, violent crime rates dropped and middle class whites began moving in, Radek still preferred to live in Maspeth. Despite the distance barrier separating him from the old enclave, he maintained close ties to Greenpoint through property ownership, by attending Polish church, visiting family and shopping at polish stores. He cited demographic change and the inflow of much younger non-Polish residents as the main reason that kept him from wanting to move back.

[…] Too many loud bars and restaurants here. Polish shops and businesses are hanging on by a hair. Just a matter of time before they all shut down like Wedel did [Polish chocolatier] or Podlasie [Polish meat market]. There are no Poles here anymore, I hardly run into acquaintances in the street like I used to. Everyone left. Its all young Americans with tattoos. Doesn’t feel like I belong here, now or then […].

In 2010, five years after the waterfront rezoning and two years after the 2008 financial meltdown, Greenpoint entered a period of post-recession building boom. Property values and rents went skyrocketing and to the disbelief of many long-time residents, glitzy new construction spilled beyond the waterfront areas and penetrated even the most remote and industrialized sections of the neighborhood. That year Radek made an important economic decision. He razed the second building he bought and in its place built an upscale unit to appeal to the area’s newcomers, the “young Americans” who were willing to pay high prices for a short commute to Midtown Manhattan and to live close to other “hip” Brooklyn neighborhoods like Williamsburg or Bushwick.

In 2010, I demolished the second building and in its place put up a modern four-family unit. With glass and balconies, it looks same as the new condos you see all around the neighborhood. In early 2000s when rents first went up Poles moved out, they were saving money to buy their own homes, you know. I knew it was high time to rent to young Americans. The only thing was, they want nice apartments […] to be honest my building was in a bad shape, didn’t make sense to renovate it. So I just started from scratch […]
By constructing luxury housing and renting upscale apartments to non-Poles, ethnic landlords and small developers like Radek are themselves the actors driving gentrification in Greenpoint. Because he saw it as a great financial move and an investment for the future, Radek decided not to sell his dilapidated walk-up, but to tear it down and replace it with a luxury condo instead. Through his conscious effort to construct housing for the more affluent newcomers, Radek, and other Polish landlords, engage in economic participation in the process of gentrification, which is remaking ethnic Greenpoint into an upscale residential/commercial district.

By ending leases of his Polish tenants and tearing down the old building Radek has also contributed to the erosion of real and symbolic presence of Greenpoint’s Polish residents. Most of the Polish tenants whom he cleared out relocated to areas outside of Greenpoint. And before the demolition, the wooden-frame, vinyl siding walk-up symbolized the working-class, immigrant character of the neighborhood often associated with Greenpoint’s Polish community. By contrast, the new four story condo, with large balconies, and high-tech security system symbolizes area’s changing character.

Such demographic shifts in Greenpoint have significantly altered the nature of ethnic tenant-landlord relations, now established between Polish landlords and non-Polish tenants. As Greenpoint made the transformation from New York’s marginal to prime residential location, previously informal and direct strategies of tenant recruitment have shifted to more formalized ways of acquiring new non-ethnic tenants. This involves a new intermediary, which emerged as a byproduct of housing market boom and gentrification, the Polish real estate agent, now fulfilling the niche of finding "American" tenants for Polish landlords.

Polish-speaking real estate agents first came onto the housing scene in the years prior to
gentrification, when Solidarity-era and post-socialist Polish immigrants began looking for homes to purchase in Greenpoint (Stabrowski 2011, 94). Since the sellers were mostly retiring Americans speaking only English, the need for Polish and English speaking intermediaries and transaction facilitators was filled by owners of multi-service agencies (airline tickets, shipping, translation, insurance and tax accounting) who gradually transitioned into real estate.

Over time as gentrification in North Brooklyn expanded beyond Williamsburg borders and Americans began looking for apartments in Greenpoint, Polish speaking real estate agents connected them with Polish landlords and helped negotiate between the two parties. This initiates a process that “opened up” the enclave to affluent non-immigrants (Stabrowski 2011, 95). Janusz, who owns a three family building in Greenpoint and whose tenants are currently all Americans explains how gentrification and neighborhood growth rendered the process of acquiring tenants more formal.

Back in the day, if you needed tenants you just went to Bazarynka [Polish American equivalent of Craigslist] or Nowy Dziennik [Polish Daily News] and put in an ad. Or just word of mouth: “Hey, we have an apartment! You need a place? Anyone you know needs a place?” […] The big difference with Americans is that they are all coming through a [real estate] agency.

Traditionally informal verbal agreements often premised on the Polish immigrants' limited knowledge of tenant rights or community tenant resources and strong preference to avoid legal contracts were replaced with formal procedures including credit history check, proof of income and a fixed-term lease. Polish landlords preferred month-to-month agreements because of the flexibility it allowed in removing non-paying tenants. It also made it easier for the landlord to increase rent without having to wait until the long-term lease expires before applying the new charges.
Lower-income Polish tenants, whose ability to pay rent depended on the availability of fluctuating employment, also valued the flexibility of a month-to-month agreement. Most importantly, not signing a lease meant no legal bind to place of residence, which was key especially to those lacking permanent immigration status. By contrast, American tenants were dealt with formally, the real estate agency checked their financial status, including credit history and required steady employment and a proof of income. According to Janusz, Polish landlords like himself were also more willing to sign a long-term lease with Americans, because they were more aware of tenant rights and housing law, than were Polish tenants,

I never required [Polish] tenants to sign a lease, everyone was month to month. It worked for them because so many of them were here illegally. And it worked for me, because if your Polish tenants don’t pay, you just tell them “Get the hell out!” And they would. That’s it.

The above statement makes it clear that Polish landlords like Janusz took advantage of their co-ethnic tenants’ lack of immigration status, limited knowledge of English and an extremely limited knowledge of their legal rights as tenants. This, most Polish tenants, especially those with lower incomes, were bound to their landlords and their rental apartments by informal verbal agreements.

*Retirement as “Happy Exit”*

Even though they have been protected against the new economic pressures created by gentrification, having reached retirement age many Polish property owners chose not to stay in the neighborhood. According to the NYC Department of City Planning as much as 33 percent of all Polish-born immigrants in NYC are between 45 and 64 years of age, and another 20 percent is 65 years of age and older. With the median age of 47, Poles are considerably older than other
residents of Greenpoint-Williamsburg area where the median age is 31, one of the lowest in the city (NYC Department of City Planning 2013).

Retirement of Polish immigrants is one of the main reasons why old-timers are selling properties in Greenpoint. This can be looked at as “voluntary displacement” or an economically rational choice to take advantage of rising home values (Brown-Saracino 2009, 226). Even though they exit the neighborhood where many lived for decades, Polish landlords do so “happily” having achieved an extraordinary intragenerational mobility and as some claim having “obtained the American Dream”.

Stefan Tychanski, the owner of Steve's Meat Market, the oldest Polish butcher in Greenpoint and also owner of the building announced the shutting down of his store, which since its opening in 1972 has served Greenpoint community for forty three years. Despite steep decline in Polish customer traffic, Steve's remained very successful thanks to customers returning from other neighborhoods, even states, to shop on weekends. Doubling and tripling commercial rents, which displaced many other Polish retail stores in the neighborhood, has not been the reason behind the closure either; Tychanski owns the building—and several other buildings on the block—and is not affected by escalating rents. In a recent interview for Nowy Dziennik [Polish Daily News] he explained his decision: “[…] After forty three years of nonstop work its time to retire. I want to rest, take care of my health problems and move closer to where my son and grandchildren live. […] There is no one here to continue the business, my son is not interested in this type of job” (Maślanka 2015).

Martyna is 66 years old, together with her husband she lived in Greenpoint for more than 20 years. They have a daughter who lives in Long Island, and another one who married and started family in Poland. After they began receiving retirement benefits, they decided to sell their
two-family building in Greenpoint and return to Poland, where they invested in the construction of a new home.

Retiring in Poland has always been the plan. Poland is home. Now that we are old, and we don’t work […] we don’t need to be here […] We built a house close to Bialystok [small city in Northeastern Poland], where my husband is from […] Our second daughter and our grandchildren live there too.

While aging property owners enjoy more financial flexibility when it comes to residential choice, the majority decides to leave Greenpoint out of preference for quieter areas with lesser density. For lower-to-moderate income tenants, however, gentrification and redevelopment threatens their access to affordable housing. Unable to keep up with rising rents, or unwilling to draw from their savings, tenants are forced to leave the enclave even when they prefer to stay.

**Ethnic Tenants: Displacement as Forced Neighborhood Exit**

Urban scholarship identifies residential displacement as the major negative consequence of gentrification (Schill&Nathan 1983; Newman&Wyly 2006; Murdie&Teixeira 2011; Goworowska 2008; Stabrowski 2011). Residential displacement occurs when the rapid inflation of housing prices forces low-to-moderate income residents to leave gentrifying neighborhoods and relocate to other, more affordable areas. Economically this results in a class transformation, or a replacement of low-to-moderate income users with middle-to-upper class users. On the cultural and symbolic plane, residential displacement contributes to the erasure of cultural authenticity associated with previous residents and changes the way the neighborhood is perceived. Thus, along with public and private investment, the in-migrating professionals and creative types usher in a symbolic transformation by fashioning, shaping and investing space with their own social activities and cultural meanings.
Residential displacement is particularly problematic in immigrant neighborhoods because it impacts on the loss of ethnic community and ethnic identity (Waters 1990; Krase 2005, 207; Murdie&Teixeira 2011, 64). When immigrants leave their neighborhoods, the physical base of their communities is fractured, and the weakened social ties reduce the salience of ethnicity (Alba 1976 1990; Waters, 1990). Though the out-migration and suburbanization of European immigrants is not a new process, inner-city gentrification dissolves ethnic worlds in less predictable patterns, often displacing and dislocating immigrants previously dependent on the enclave.

Researchers studying displacement are faced with serious challenges. Quantitative evidence is hard, if not impossible, to obtain because no government or independent agency keeps track of the displacees, especially if they leave the state, move abroad or lack immigration status. In terms of urban research this makes them an "invisible" population, because once they leave they disperse to different areas often to another city or state (Atkinson 2000). Newman and Wyly (2006), draw attention to this limitation, "[…] It is difficult to find people who have been displaced, particularly if these people are poor […]. By definition, displaced residents have disappeared from the very places where researchers and census takers go to look for them" (p.27).

Because of the difficulty in locating and keeping track of individuals and households displaced by gentrification, the research on displacement has remained incomplete and often inconsistent. Freeman and Braconi (2004), for example, have shown that gentrification-related displacement is minimal, partially because of rent regulation, and that benefits that gentrification brings to low-income populations in disadvantaged neighborhoods far outweighs negative consequences of urban renewal. The authors did warn, however, that if not mitigated by public
policy, gentrification may also create adverse effects, especially for the poor and minority populations (2004, 51). Using the same data set, Newman and Wyly (2006), provide more nuanced evidence on displacement in New York City. Although they agree with Freeman and Braconi’s finding that not all low-income residents are displaced by gentrification, they contend that during the 1991-2002 period between 6.6 and 9.9 percent of all local moves among renter households in NYC were due to gentrification (2006, 51).

It is particularly difficult to estimate the number of Poles who left Greenpoint directly as a result of gentrification-led displacement, because of the presence of other factors impacting community’s demographics such as aging, suburbanization or reverse migration. Demographic data shows that during the 2000-2010 period, NYC Polish-born population dropped from 65,999 to 57,726, a 12.5 percent decrease (NYC Department of City Planning 2013). The steepest drop occurred in Brooklyn, which saw a 35 percent decline during the 2000-2010 period. The rate of this decline varies across Brooklyn, generally, it tends to be higher in gentrifying areas, particularly in Greenpoint and Williamsburg, but it remains high even in non-gentrifying areas such as Bay Ridge.

As Table 6 indicates, during the 2000-2010 period the drop in Polish-born population in the rapidly gentrifying Williamsburg-Greenpoint area was much higher than in non-gentrifying western Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bensonhurst and Borough Park. In Greenpoint Polish-born population declined by a staggering 42 percent. In 2000, 13,660 Poles called Greenpoint their home, by 2010 only 7,873 remained in the enclave. The number of Poles in other Brooklyn areas previously home to substantial Polish populations has also dropped. In 2010, almost 50 percent less Poles lived in Williamsburg than in 2000. And more than 52 percent less in Bay Ridge. Bensonhurst and Borough Park, both with significant Polish-born populations, each lost
percent of Poles. In comparison, Greenpoint and Williamsburg lost 42 percent and 50 percent respectively.

Table 6. Polish-born Population Change by Selected Brooklyn Neighborhood 2000-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>%change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greenpoint</td>
<td>13,660</td>
<td>7,873</td>
<td>(-5787) -42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamsburg</td>
<td>2,079</td>
<td>1,037</td>
<td>(-1042) -50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bensonhurst West</td>
<td>1,429</td>
<td>1,177</td>
<td>(-252) -18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borough Park</td>
<td>2,708</td>
<td>2,228</td>
<td>(-480) -18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bay Ridge</td>
<td>2,769</td>
<td>1,320</td>
<td>(-1449) -52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of City Planning–Population Division, American Community Survey 5-Year 2006-2010 Estimates (NTAs)

Moreover, as the number of Poles in North Brooklyn halved, the percentage of Poles in Queens rose by 20 percent (see Table 7). During the same period (2000-2011), Polish presence in Staten Island increased by a staggering 83 percent. While Manhattan, where rents have soared, has lost 11 percent of Poles. Although Staten Island experienced the highest percentage gain, Queens received the largest number (4,305) of individual Poles. In comparison, during the 1990-1994 period, Brooklyn attracted 65 percent of the Polish flow to the city, and the borough of Queens absorbed only 26 percent. Today, 44 percent of NYC total Polish born population resides in Queens and 39 percent in Brooklyn.

Table 7. Polish-born Population Change by NYC Borough, 2000-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NYC Borough</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>%change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>35,382</td>
<td>22,860</td>
<td>(-12,522) - 35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queens</td>
<td>21,205</td>
<td>25,510</td>
<td>(+4,305) +20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manhattan</td>
<td>5221</td>
<td>4641</td>
<td>(-580) -11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staten Island</td>
<td>2058</td>
<td>3778</td>
<td>(+1,720) +83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Queens upsurge has been most intense in neighborhoods in close proximity to gentrifying Greenpoint and Williamsburg, particularly Ridgewood-Glendale area, where during
the 2000-2011 period Polish presence increased by 43 percent (see Table 9 below).

Table 8. Polish-born Population change in Ridgewood, Queens, 2000-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>%change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ridgewood-Glendale</td>
<td>3,774</td>
<td>5,389</td>
<td>(+1615) +43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to NYC Department of City Planning (2013), by 2007-2011, Poles were the top (17 percent) immigrant group in Ridgewood. Prior to Polish in-migration, Ridgewood was home to smaller European populations, including Albanians, Italians, and Romanians; more Romanians lived in Ridgewood than in any other NYC neighborhood. After Poles, the largest groups are Ecuadorians (16 percent), Dominicans (8 percent), and Mexicans (6 percent), many of whom moved across the border from Bushwick in Brooklyn.

By Given the current slowdown in Polish immigration to the US, the recent Polish in-flux into Queens cannot be attributed to new arrivals (although some new immigrants do settle directly in Ridgewood and Maspeth). Instead, as a direct result of the continuing gentrification and displacement pressures in North Brooklyn, Polish community’s center of gravity has clearly shifted from Greenpoint, Brooklyn, toward Ridgewood. Although to some extent, this new settlement pattern represents a spillover from Maspeth, where Poles have maintained a residential presence starting at the end of the 19th century, the majority of Poles who recently settled in Ridgewood did so because they were priced out of North Brooklyn (Goworowska 2008). This particular migrational pattern is not unique to Poles, historically, many immigrant groups have moved from northern Brooklyn into Queens and then onto Nassau and Suffolk (NYC Department of City Planning 2013).

Because I conducted fieldwork almost a decade after the onset of gentrification in
Greenpoint, I understood that those most vulnerable to displacement had been already displaced and I would have to venture outside of Greenpoint to find Poles with personal stories of displacement. But this is complicated, after leaving Greenpoint, Poles dispersed across various areas on the East Coast and other parts of the country, and some even returned back to Poland. However, the recent spike in the number of Polish immigrants entering Ridgewood, and the formation of a new satellite enclave in such close geographical proximity to the core Polish neighborhood, suggested that it was a major destination for Poles displaced from Greenpoint.

Indeed, the interview data I collected in Ridgewood confirms that gentrification-related economic pressures pushed a significant number of low-to-moderate income Polish tenants to relocate to northwestern Queens. After Greenpoint, this area is now the second largest concentration of Poles in New York. All of my Ridgewood interviewees had previously resided in Greenpoint, where they first settled during the 1980s and the 1990s. Starting in early 2000s, real estate speculation, escalating rents and in some cases landlord harassment—all associated with the 2005 rezoning and neighborhood reinvestment—forced Polish renters to seek affordable housing in the nearby Ridgewood. Queens residence enabled them to remain close to their social networks left behind in Greenpoint, as well as community institutions, and in some cases employment.

Witold, a 57-year old male, who works as an electrician for a company that operates mostly in Manhattan has been personally impacted by gentrification. He first came to Greenpoint alone in 1999, leaving his wife and two kids in Poland. His wife joined him a couple of years later, but soon after that decided to return to Poland to take care of their two grandchildren. At first he lived with the same two people he worked with sharing a dingy walk-through apartment on Nassau Avenue. The rent was low especially when divided among three
roommates, and the apartment was only a few blocks away from the G train. It was also conveniently located close to Polish stores, restaurants, and travel agencies. At the time, living in Greenpoint was affordable and convenient in terms of daily commute to Manhattan. But after four years the rent went up and Witold decided to move to another, less expensive apartment in Greenpoint. In 2006, after his rent went up again, Witold moved to Ridgewood, Queens.

In 1999, I was sharing a railroad type apartment in Greenpoint with 2 people for a total rent of $950 a month. Four years later the rent increased to $1300 and a year later to $1600. I got another apartment, also in Greenpoint, […] but in just three years the rent went up to over $2000 a month. It was relentless!

By 2006, housing costs in Greenpoint escalated so high that most Polish renters, like Witold, were priced out of their own ethnic community where they resided and built networks for many years. According to Susser and Stabrowski (2015), from 2002 to 2011, median market-rate rents in Greenpoint and Williamsburg increased by 82 percent, higher than in Brooklyn as a whole (50 percent) and even Manhattan (76 percent) (2). In addition, the median rent burden (the percentage of income spent on rent) for low-income tenants increased from 38.7 percent to 46.5 percent, which puts Greenpoint above the 30 percent line above which housing is considered “unaffordable” (2015, 3).

Facing growing economic pressures in the form of rising rents, low-income Polish tenants in Greenpoint, particularly those unprotected by rent regulation, had no choice but to move out. While some made the decision to go back to Poland, or leave for the suburbs, others like Witold who commuted to work in Manhattan, dispersed to more affordable inner-city areas, particularly Queens:

Ridgewood was a logical choice for me. First, its close to Greenpoint […] and a relatively short commute to Manhattan […] Second, even though rents are catching up to Brooklyn, Ridgewood is still very affordable […] In a sense, its
like Greenpoint 15 years ago.

Lower rents and home values in Ridgewood, became a magnet for Poles, but close proximity to Greenpoint was also an important factor in making the decision to move to Queens. Ridgewood is only a short drive away from Greenpoint, and the recently upgraded M subway line, which serves the neighborhood, runs directly into Lower East Side via the Williamsburg Bridge. The M line also connects with the L train at Myrtle-Wyckoff stop, which makes it possible to reach Williamsburg and Greenpoint in under 20 minutes. In the early 2000s, many Polish displacees returned to Greenpoint on a regular basis to shop, bank, visit a Polish doctor or to attend church, but over the course of the last 15 years, Polish community in Ridgewood developed its own institutional completeness and now rivals Greenpoint as the second “Little Poland” in New York.

Lydia, a female in her mid-50s, who operates a small clothing store in Greenpoint, recounts similar experiences of displacement and relocation to Ridgewood. After 10 year tenancy in Greenpoint, she was forced to leave her apartment, because the building owned by an Italian-American was being sold, “I was sharing a spacious 3-bedroom with my sister on Eckford Street […] it was a very convenient location, a 5-minute walk to my store […] The rent kept increasing gradually, but it was still ok. Then in 2007, they sold the building and I had to move out.”.

Because Lydia owned business in Greenpoint, it was important for her to stay in the neighborhood, even if that meant paying higher rent than what she considered a normal price. When searching for a new place, her preference was to rent from a Polish landlord. This choice was based on a conviction that unlike her former Italian-American landlord, a Pole would not be as likely to rent to Americans and the rent would most likely stay the same.
At first it was Americans who rented to all these new people coming to Greenpoint. Polish landlords were hesitant [...] preferred Polish-speaking tenants. They felt safer, you know [...] But later, I’d say around 2008, when the market rate went up and demand didn’t subside, the Polish got more confident and warmed up to Americans [...] That’s why our rent increased twice in one year [...] I realized he [the landlord] wanted us out, because he could charge $2500 instead of $1000. So that’s how I lost my second apartment.

After realizing that renting from Polish landlords in Greenpoint is no guarantee against rent hikes, and that Poles are just as likely as other landlords to raise rents and to pressure their Polish tenants to move out, Lydia looked for an apartment outside of, but close to, Greenpoint, because she preferred not to live far away from her business. Although she has never been to Ridgewood before, she was aware that Poles priced out of Greenpoint concentrated there because of affordable rents and proximity to Greenpoint. It was also the area with the most “Apartments for Rent” ads listed in the classified section of the Polish Daily News: “When searching for a new apartment, I checked “rooms for rent” ads in the Dziennik [Polish Daily News] […] most of the rooms were available here [in Ridgewood]. Nothing in Greenpoint!”. Indeed, the shift of the ethnic housing market from its center in Greenpoint to a more peripheral—and more affordable—location in Ridgewood was one of the main impacts of gentrification on the Polish community.

Lydia shares her apartment with Kasia, a female in her mid-30’s who works at a hair salon in Lower Manhattan, like Lydia, Kasia has been priced out of Greenpoint, where she lived for 9 years “Greenpoint is so expensive now! Even when sharing you pay a $1000. I cant afford that.” Although she expressed distress over the high rents in Greenpoint and referred to the landlords there as “greedy”, she thought of gentrification and displacement as something “imminent” in a “big city like this”, but also admitted that the in-migration of “Americans” to Greenpoint led to the disruption of Polish community and an “uprooting” of an historical enclave.
Displacees: The Unlikely Agents of Gentrification

Although most of my interviewees were renters, some of those displaced from Greenpoint relocated to Ridgewood to become homeowners. This is contrary to the presumptions made in most gentrification literature, which construct all displacees as poor, struggling and marginalized (Goworowska 2008; Stabrowski 2011). Although economic hardship is tied to the experience of residential displacement, and the emotional impact of being uprooted can be profound, not all displacees fit the frame of, nor should be categorized as, victims. Even though constrained by structural contexts, some of the Polish displacees are social actors capable of responding to the challenges and uncertainties of displacement.

For instance, after the price of their Greenpoint apartment, where they resided for 15 years, increased beyond what they could afford, and reached an amount almost equal to a home mortgage payment, Andrzej and his wife Eugenia purchased a two-family home in Ridgewood. As Andrzej explains, “In the early 1990s, our goal was to buy a house in Greenpoint, which was very Polish then. But by the time we saved enough money and were approved for a loan, home prices climbed so high, there was no way we could afford it”. Staying in Greenpoint as long-term renters became equally unaffordable: “[…] Renting would have cost us half of our salaries, almost the same as paying off a mortgage somewhere else. Financially speaking it made no sense.” To this extent, homeownership in a more affordable neighborhood was a more viable option than renting in Greenpoint. As both a displaced aspiring homebuyer and a displaced renter, Andrzej followed other displaced Poles to Ridgewood and decided to purchase a house before the prices went up:

Demand for houses in Ridgewood was already very high in 2008, Polish buyers from Maspeth and Greenpoint flooded the market so the property values increased, but it was still affordable. When a house became available we made a
quick decision, […] I’m glad we did, now the prices are even higher and you see hardly any houses for sale.

When asked what factors other than price influenced his decision to relocate specifically to Ridgewood, he immediately answered “proximity to Greenpoint” where most of his social network was still intact, and “growing Polish community in Ridgewood”, including Polish parish, Polish bank and Polish stores.

A female in her early 50s, who works in a multi-service agency serving Ridgewood’s Polish community echoes Andrzej’s story,

For many years my husband and I thought of buying a house in Greenpoint, but after real estate prices increased so much, we realized we couldn’t even keep up with paying the rent […] After our rent went up to almost $2000 for one-bedroom, we moved to Ridgewood and shortly after purchased a two-family house and rented out one floor to ease the mortgage payments.

According to a local real estate agent, and a lifelong Ridgewood resident who describes his ethnic background as German–Slovenian, the pattern of Poles fleeing high rents in Greenpoint and purchasing homes in Ridgewood peaked in mid-2000s, “Many Poles moving away from Greenpoint were renters, but came specifically here to buy a house. This pattern increased in mid-2000s. They couldn’t afford Maspeth, you know, it has a lot more one-family homes. Poles like two- and three-family homes and use it as rental.” This suggests Ridgewood is not only a new residential destination for displacees seeking affordable rental apartments, but also for aspiring homebuyers priced out of the housing market in Greenpoint.

Another non-Polish Ridgewood resident, who claims to have lived sixty two years on the same block, highlights how the recent increase of Polish homebuyers impacted the neighborhood in positive ways, “I credit a lot of the improvements in Ridgewood to the Polish moving here from Greenpoint and converting properties […] They scrape away all
the old stuff […] The minute a Polish family moves in, the old sheetrock and dirty carpets, all start flying out the window.”

These interviews further affirmed that a significant portion of Polish displacees from Greenpoint invests in properties in Ridgewood, an area that has long suffered from disinvestment, economic decay and social disorder. Over the past decade, the infusion of Polish immigrant capital has changed that image; today Ridgewood is becoming more desirable to gentrifiers and real estate investors looking to venture beyond Brooklyn. By purchasing discounted properties, renovating them and often renting out to new tenants, as well as opening new retail businesses, Greenpoint displacees are setting the processes of gentrification into motion. Ironically, as a result of this reinvestment Polish tenants displaced from Greenpoint, as well as Latino immigrants—many displaced from Bushwick—are at risk of being priced out once again.

Recently, Ridgewood emerged not only as NYC’s second “Little Poland”, but also as the next “cool” neighborhood. The New York Times has been writing about the gentrification potential in Ridgewood since 2011, back then it was considered an interesting, if “little-known neighborhood”. Three years later, another Times article noted how the area has changed, “Cafes with vegan muffins, yoga studios and destination pizzerias have (naturally) sprouted. Bars with names like Milo’s Yard and Bierleichen are slated to open. Guitar cases, tote bags and shearling coats are increasingly frequent accessories on pedestrians,” (Detrick 2014). Much of this “hip-ification” is due to the spillover of artists and creative–types priced out of Bushwick and East Williamsburg who arrived on the heels of an earlier in-flux of Polish immigrants from Greenpoint. Just like them, the younger and hipper crowd crossed to Queens to escape soaring rents in Brooklyn, especially Bushwick, and because of the proximity to the L train. According
to Streeteasy.com the rent for a three-bedroom in Ridgewood is nearly 20 percent lower than in the neighboring Bushwick. But things are changing quickly, for instance, in July 2014 Ridgewood’s 11385 zipcode was the most active one for commercial property sales in the city (Velsey 2014). Residential properties as well as rents are also on the upswing (Stahl 2014).

Without denying the hardships and detrimental effects of displacement, especially among the low-income households, my research shows that displacement for some Polish displacees did have positive effects on material well-being. After they left the old enclave as priced out renters, they became first-time homeowners and landlords in the new satellite enclave in Ridgewood.

*Neighborhood Exit Without Relocation*

Although the increasing housing costs have already led most Polish tenants to exit the neighborhood, some, especially the elderly, have secured rent-regulated apartments as a form of protection against the rising cost of housing. However, even for tenants with rental protection, housing security is not a guarantee and displacement constantly looms as a real threat. In New York City, rent regulation can be terminated through vacancy decontrol, meaning that when a tenant moves the unit is deregulated and the landlord can charge market rent (Freeman 2006, 76). This happens through a “vacancy increase” of 17 to 20 percent for the next tenant, but landlords can also increase the amount based on “individual apartment improvements” equal to 1/40th of the total cost of renovation. Given the large discrepancy between the market rent and regulated rent which is the case in gentrifying neighborhoods, many landlords seek to vacate—often through illegal tactics—their rent regulated units. Once vacated, apartments are immediately renovated, rent increases applied and apartments are advertised through exclusive real estate brokers to attract affluent clientele.
According to Stabrowski (2011), in Greenpoint the landlord harassment of Polish immigrant tenants in rent-regulated units takes many different forms: “From verbal abuse, to refusal to permit immediate family members or additional occupants, to refusal to renew the lease, to a reduction of services previously provided […]” (56). In addition, Goworowska (2008) states “Very often in the case of Polish tenants in Greenpoint, threats of being reported to immigration authorities are deployed, a serious concern for residents who are undocumented immigrants” (p. 62).

Limited in terms of mobility and resources, elderly immigrants are among the residents who depend on the enclave the most. But amidst rampant gentrification, the tenants struggling to remain in the neighborhood experience what Stabrowski (2014) coins “everyday displacement”, or “the ongoing loss of the agency, freedom, and security to make place” (p. 3). This radical reduction of place-making ability is experienced in multifold ways and sheds light on how the processes of gentrification produce “displacement without relocation” (2014, 7). Although displacement is most often thought of as forced spatial relocation, tenants who physically remain in the neighborhood, but are uprooted by other means, can also be thought of as displaced. As gentrification transforms the physical and social conditions in and through which ethnic space is produced and experienced, and as ethnic community gradually dissolves, the lives of low-income immigrants, especially the elderly, are dominated by economic insecurity and social and cultural estrangement, not much unlike those of traditional displacees.

In conclusion, Greenpoint’s gentrification exerted immense economic pressure on the low-to-moderate income tenants. As a result, many of them exited to cheaper areas of New York, particularly Ridgewood, Queens; to other states such as New Jersey; or even returned back to
Poland. Many of the displacees from Greenpoint invested in buying and renovating discounted properties in Queens; a process that triggers inflation of real estate values, even initiates gentrification. But others, particularly seniors, cling to rent-controlled apartments in Greenpoint where the context of ethnic community’s dissolution generate the condition of “displacement without relocation”, a type of neighborhood exit.

Changing Neighborhood and the Second Generation

When conducting interviews in Greenpoint, I had difficulty locating second generation subjects who seemed to be absent from the neighborhood. Many of them had left for college and never returned or had children of their own and relocated to more comfortable homes in the suburbs.

When I did make a connection the second generation age groupings varied from the elderly to infants; a result of the layering of multiple migrational cohorts in the same neighborhood. This empirical messiness led to an important question regarding what social processes and structural factors constitute a ‘generation’. According to Karl Mannheim, a specific generational location is determined by “certain definite mode of behavior, feeling and thought” (1952, 291). In addition, a generation is a group of people who have experienced the same significant events at the same time. Taking this socio-historical dimension into account, I have subdivided the second generation subjects into two groups of adults, a younger one that consists of individuals in their 20s and early 30s and an older one that includes only retirees (65 and over). Each age unit fits the definition of second generation immigrant, born in the United States to immigrant parents, yet given the different decades during which younger and older individuals experienced the social life and economic structure of the neighborhood, I treated
them as two separate age groups and based on this divide I expected to measure different interpretations and different reactions to gentrification and neighborhood change.

Younger Members of the Second Generation

Radek’s thirty years old, US-born daughter Daria lives in one of the two buildings owned by her parents in Greenpoint. Unlike them, she prefers Greenpoint over Maspeth, because Greenpoint serves the needs of her lifestyle better than the quieter and more suburban Maspeth: "Greenpoint is very trendy. There is the convenience of being close to all the cafes and bars that are opening here. And there is a lot of things to do day or night”. In contrast to her father, Daria places a positive valuation on Greenpoint as a desirable place to live. Greenpoint is close to both Long Island City, Queens where she works, and to Manhattan, where she frequently socializes with friends. But it is the new cultural dynamism and Greenpoint’s younger and hipper demographic that appeal to her the most. In opposition to her father, whose participation in gentrification is primarily economically-based and marked out by property ownership, by frequenting new bars, cafés, restaurants, concerts and private parties Daria’s participation is primarily cultural, although tightly intertwined with her parents’ status as homeowners.

Greenpoint’s transformation from an urban ethnic village to a trendy hub of cutting-edge entertainment, gourmet restaurants and luxury housing, resulted in a cultural revalorization or the assignment of a new value, in this case a ‘neo-bohemian’ middle-class identity, to a previously working-class immigrant enclave. By dissolving negative images and stereotypes attached to place, cultural revalorization enhances the symbolic status of ethnic residents who managed to stay and participate directly in the neighborhood change. The status of Daria’s family as property owners allowed her to stay in Greenpoint without having to pay rent: "We
own the building, so I have an opportunity to live here rent-free […] [I] wouldn’t be able to afford this place otherwise.” In this sense Radek’s status as property owner and his economic participation in gentrification, allows Daria, his daughter, to experience and participate in the neighborhood change on the cultural level. The empowerment that comes from this process is embedded in Daria’s adoption of cultural images and practices associated with the urban middle class. Yet, the privilege to experience the new cultural life of Greenpoint is limited to those Poles who benefited economically from the neighborhood reinvestment. Working-class Poles are economically excluded from the new residential and retail spaces, and at the same time the ability to create new immigrant places in the neighborhood has been obliterated by skyrocketing real estate values.

Among the second generation, integration into middle class lifestyle is a parallel process to the weakening and diluting of ethnic identification (Waters 1990; Alba & Nee 2003). When describing her childhood Daria stressed her Polish identity based on her use of the Polish language: "When I was a child we only spoke Polish at home. I didn’t learn English until I started going to school […] I was also attending Polish school every Saturday and Polish-language masses every Sunday." In her adult years, however, the ability to speak the language decreased to a point where she was not comfortable using it outside of home and family, “[…] I wouldn’t say I’m fluent. Definitely not. Its kind of a struggle, […] so I only try and speak at home”. Although, in Daria’s case the language has not completely disappeared, it has become a “private affair” or a “secret language” spoken only among the family (Waters 1990, 116). In this sense, the linguistic link that would otherwise have brought Daria closer to the larger ethnic community (through friends and social network) and contributed to maintaining ethnic solidarity and integration had ceased to exist.
Disengagement from other significant cultural practices, beyond language loss, also weakens ethnic affiliation and makes direct participation in the ethnic culture of the neighborhood less frequent.

I don’t really interact much with the Polish community here. Sometimes I go to church. I’m not religious, but there are close connections with major events in our family: baptisms, communions, weddings, funerals, etc. […] I don’t shop at Polish groceries, because its not the healthiest food and [I] eat at Polish restaurants only when I have an out-of-town visitor.

Daria described herself as “not religious”, detachment from religion and religious practice represents a severance of important ethnic ties that symbolically and physically connect individuals to neighborhood and community via the institution of church. Religion as a culturally engrained ethnic ritual provides important foundation for identity, meaning and community and reinforces the sense of belonging to an ethnic culture. As immigrants enter mainstream status, religious practice may be modified or persist in different forms, but rarely completely dissolves.

Consumption of ethnic food, another cultural attribute that plays an important role in maintaining ethnic identification (Waters 1990, 118), is absent from Daria’s repertoire of ethnic practices. Although she lives within walking distance of Polish grocery stores, bakeries and restaurants, she views such Polish food as “not the healthiest” in comparison to other foods available in Greenpoint, especially those labeled as organic or artisanal. As an educated consumer and a member of the middle class Daria consciously chooses healthy lifestyle over low-status Polish food, often associated with the working class. In this sense, new organic grocery stores that cater directly to the gentrifiers appeal to Daria’s middle class status more, than the neighborhood’s Polish stores appeal to her ethnicity.

As Daria’s changing values suggest, the upwardly mobile second generation, collective definition of ethnicity is reconstructed not only by the erosion of the ethnic community, but also
through structural assimilation and middle-class status acquisition (Waters 1990). In this sense, members of the second generation like Daria, are more likely to embrace gentrification than their parents’ generation, because their self-definitions increasingly rely on class or status characteristics rather than ethnic ones. Of course, cultural participation in gentrification and revalorization impact the second generation only when they are actually present in the neighborhood. Thus, second generation’s cultural participation in gentrification is premised on class identifications.

Other members of the younger group within the second generation maintain closer ties to Polish culture and identity. However, even those who expressed strong ethnic identification, did not necessarily interpret gentrification as a negative change, nor did they see a direct link between neighborhood reinvestment and the loss of ethnic community. Aleksandra, a second generation female in her thirties, born and raised in Greenpoint, described gentrification as “density” and “intensity” which feel completely new in the neighborhood she has thought of all her life as “relaxed”.

It feels like there is more intensity, which I don’t especially like, you know? I mean […] even going back 10-15 years ago, there was a real distinct feeling of you know you come into Manhattan and it can be really crazy, […] lots of people, and it can be intense. And then you […] get off the G train and […] you know, there is just more space, like physical space and mental space. […] very relaxed. You didn’t need to prepare yourself going out of the house, you weren’t trying to impress anyone. Now its like […] you might run into a curator or a professor […] which is like a very different uhhh, social experience of the place.

Aleksandra’s words express emotional discomfort over the loss of intimacy which had previously defined the feeling of being at home. In the past, physical crossing from Manhattan to Greenpoint over the East River was also a symbolic passing from the formal and impersonal world of work and school, to informal settings of family, ethnic community and to a certain
extent also tradition. According to this view, Greenpoint used to be predominantly blue-collar and ethnically-marked, but the increasing visibility of non-immigrant, middle-class residents portends that the neighborhood’s character is changing and its uncertain future as a home to working-class Polish immigrants. In contrast to predominantly black neighborhoods, where long-time residents perceive gentrification primarily as a racial transformation (“increased visibility of whites” (Freeman 2006; 2008))—in predominantly white Greenpoint, gentrification is mainly viewed as a class transformation. The area’s change and especially the skyrocketing rent and property values are associated with the increasing in-migration of middle- and upper-middle class newcomers.

As the cosmopolitan core is pushed further into the urban periphery, and working-class neighborhoods such as Greenpoint are recast into a luxury district for the professional class, the sense of local intimacy and physical isolation from the hustle and bustle of the city center is lost. For Aleksandra, the possibility of encountering, and interacting with, a work supervisor, an employer, or a university professor as residents in the same neighborhood, and sometimes even next-door neighbors, erases the physical and symbolic boundaries separating professional and private worlds, and deprives her of the sense of feeling "down home".

Even though Aleksandra perceives some aspects of the neighborhood change negatively, the dissolution of Greenpoint’s Polish community is not identified as one of them. In fact, feelings of dissatisfaction over the loss of local ethnic character may not be as significant as those over the loss of neighborhood intimacy and casualness.

There are several reasons that explain this attitude. In general, gentrification affected Aleksandra more socially and emotionally, than economically; she lives rent-free in a family-owned brownstone in the heart of Greenpoint’s historic district. Although high rents prevented
her from living on her own, her family’s status as homeowners protects her against the danger of being displaced and against economic strain due to rising rents. In fact, the value of their property has almost doubled since the onset of gentrification, and the family anticipates it will continue to rise. Thus, Aleksandra perceives gentrification as a lucky twist that secured hers and her family’s economic future.

A daughter of an earlier cohort of immigrants who settled in Greenpoint after WWII, she had only a limited contact with more recent immigrants due to language barrier, different lifestyle and different social networks. In fact she describes her experience of growing up in Greenpoint as mixed-ethnic, rather than strictly Polish or Polish American: "Most of my friends living on the block were not Polish […] One was Irish, one was Jewish,[…] and at [local Catholic school] there were new Polish immigrants and a lot of new Latino immigrants […] So I always remember hearing a combination of Polish, English and Spanish spoken in the neighborhood". In addition, as an artist, Aleksandra identifies more with the values of the artistic and academic community, which dominate her work environment and friendships rather than ethnic culture.

But this is not to say that she maintains no ties to ethnic heritage outside of the family relationships. For many years she has been an active member in a Greenpoint-based Polish folk dance company, a group that meets regularly at the Polish National Home. Although dance instruction is delivered almost entirely in Polish, membership is not limited to individuals of Polish ancestry, but open to anyone interested in learning traditional Polish dances such as Krakowiak, Kujawiak, Mazurek or Polonez. For Aleksandra, Polish folk dancing is a leisure-time activity she consciously chooses, because it: "serves as a place and time to share this communal experience of music, of dance, of [Polish] culture". Although Greenpoint is the
meeting place, majority of the members come from other places: "[the group] really brings together a wider Polonia, some [of the members] live in Greenpoint, some people travel from New Jersey, and Long Island, you know, people will drive and make an effort to come […].

Despite residential dispersal, the presence of neighborhood-based Polish institutions and organizations, including the dance group, continues to anchor Polish identity in gentrifying Greenpoint. Since the onset of gentrification, Aleksandra has actually noticed a slight upswing in group’s membership, as more second-generation immigrants who never did, or no longer reside in Greenpoint seek to forge a new ethnic connection. However, as the oldest Polish-born dance instructors reach retirement age and move out of Greenpoint they leave a cultural vacuum behind that cannot be filled with new recruits. In face of Greenpoint’s declining Polish population, the solution to this dilemma lies in revived connections with and stronger ties to cultural institutions in Poland which promote Polish culture abroad. Such transnational arrangements may successfully ensure the group’s survival. Young members of the second-generation like Aleksandra, may not perceive gentrification and area’s Polish identity as necessarily mutually exclusive. In their minds, Greenpoint may not keep its ‘immigrant enclave’ status for much longer and may become visually less ethnic, but as long as core Polish institutions remain intact and continue to attract second generation Poles from other corners of New York and beyond, the neighborhood will retain some level of Polish identity.

Second Generation Old-timers

When interviewing the “old-timer” group of the second generation residents who were born and lived in Greenpoint for several decades, I expected individuals who possess a high
degree of place attachment or loyalty. Having lived many years in an ethnic neighborhood that provided context to personal experiences, relationships and social networks, I suspected they would idealize and romanticize Greenpoint’s working-class past and construct narratives of nostalgia that convey a clear sense of loss of place.

In the literature on gentrification, feelings of longing for the lost era are not uncommon among longtime residents witnessing a rapidly changing neighborhood. Several ethnographies of gentrification depict local residents as nurturing romanticized images of the past in which the neighborhood is portrayed as more authentic and real (Brown-Saracino 2009; Ocejo 2014).

But the long-time residents I interviewed in Greenpoint, most of them homeowners, did not express nostalgia for the earlier, pre-gentrification times. Neither did they view the trendy bohemianism of present day gentrified Greenpoint, as the symbolic end of the “urban ethnic village” which epitomized Greenpoint’s tight-knit community almost continuously since the 19th century. Instead, many interpreted gentrification as the long-anticipated reversal of decades of economic and social decline brought about by larger structural changes and lack of investment. According to Barbara, a second generation female in her late sixties,

Some things change for the better some for the worst […] but you know, well […] I like what is happening in this neighborhood. Sure, rents are going up and houses are selling for an insane buck […] but new people moving in have money; they take care of properties […] they open new businesses and invest in the community.

Feelings of ambiguity as an emotional response to economic and symbolic reconfiguration of the neighborhood often cropped up in the interviews with second-generation Polish Americans. Most saw gentrification as having both positive and negative effects, a notion that echoes in Barbara’s own words “some things change for the better some for the worst”. Escalating rents and the lack of affordable housing topped the list of negative outcomes and was regarded as a
problem, but not a major threat. A rash of daytime home and car burglaries and street muggings, often targeting the elderly, was also of major concern. None of them, however, expressed the need for a collective, community-wide action to address the negative sides of gentrification affecting the community, especially rising rents.

To the contrary, despite the awareness of negative aspects it entails, second-generation old-timers maintained a positive view of neighborhood redevelopment and saw it as a stabilizing force reversing long decades of disinvestment, political marginalization, and racial change, which the community struggled with in the past. Like several other old-timers Barbara stressed how the ongoing transformation of Greenpoint involves an in-migration of people who “have money” and “invest” in the community by “taking care of properties” and “opening new businesses”. In short, native born old-timers perceive gentrification as an urban mechanism of Greenpoint’s economic, social and cultural stabilization. In this sense, the new cosmopolitanism of the long-marginalized area is accepted, even desired by second generation property owners who are not directly exposed to the risk of displacement.

Second-generation old-timers’ gentrification narratives, contrast the present period of growth with economic decline and social disorder that define the neighborhood’s past. Having witnessed the impact of deindustrialization and having lived through the worst fiscal crisis in the city’s history, old-timers accumulated experiences and memories of the neighborhood engulfed by economic and social crisis. Frank, a retired second-generation Polish American and a life-long Greenpoint resident, describes what the neighborhood was like during the 1970s and 1980s, the decades immediately preceding gentrification,

I remember, you know, when it was dangerous walking at night. You wouldn’t believe it. McCarren [Park] was like a combat zone for the area’s competing gangs. I mean, you could hear guns firing off every week […] City didn’t do nothing. The cops were the ones selling drugs! […] They were closing firehouses,
other community services went too. Didn’t care what the community wanted or what was needed. Sometimes the garbage on the sidewalk piled six feet high, you know, they didn’t send in the garbage trucks […]

Economic decline, physical and social decay, and abandonment were the common themes in the narratives second-generation old-timers told about Greenpoint’s past. Though more stable on many counts than the neighboring communities, Greenpoint was nevertheless described as constantly on a verge of becoming a slum.

Beyond the detrimental effects of deindustrialization, widespread unemployment and withdrawal of municipal services, neighborhood decline was also articulated in relation to changing racial composition. During the postwar decades, poor Latinos, mostly Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, and, to a lesser degree, African Americans began moving into Greenpoint from the Southside of Williamsburg, as well as from the nearby Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bushwick and Bed-Stuy. Increased presence of minorities and falling property values triggered white flight, which resulted in further withdrawal of resources and accelerated racial and economic turnover.

Deteriorating social conditions and growing racial anxiety generated feelings of distress among white ethnics who worried about economic stability and preservation of the neighborhood’s European character. John, a second generation retiree, whom I met at McCarren Park, justified his positive view of gentrification based on his experience of economic and social instability that the Greenpoint community struggled against in the past,

[During the 70s and 80s] residents here began to feel outnumbered. The Hispanics were moving in in large numbers, bringing a different culture […] they were poor, you know, so there was poverty and drugs […] Landlords just walked away from buildings. They wave their hand and let them [Hispanics] do whatever. And so the rest of us who stayed got worried.

By contrast, the narratives of the present centered on reinvestment, growth, and rising property values; all three clearly associated with waterfront rezoning and gentrification. As
another female second-generation old-timer explains, “Sure, I might not personally like the high-rises, or some of the ultra-rich moving in, but, look, we got access to the waterfront like we wanted, we got new parks, properties are going higher than ever before and we got the city looking at us differently. We got this great neighborhood to live in [...]” According to this narrative although gentrification changed the neighborhood’s character, it also led to a vast improvement in the quality of life for its current residents, which in this person’s view counterbalances negative aspects of change such as lack of affordable housing and displacement. The privileged position of the property owners allows them to overlook the interests of working-class tenants at risk of displacement, and to interpret neighborhood change through the lens of their own private interests.

More importantly, aging second-generation landlords, look at the change in Greenpoint as an economic opportunity; a structural advantage long absent in the previously economically depressed and politically marginalized neighborhood. As shifting structural forces recalibrate Greenpoint into a “great neighborhood”, on par with other “great” Brooklyn neighborhoods such as Park Slope, Brooklyn Heights or Dumbo, property owners are the ones who benefit the most.

**Conclusion**

The onset of gentrification in Greenpoint resulted in dramatic changes in the housing market. These changes affected different members of the Polish community in different ways and produced different responses. Most Polish property owners, both recent and second-generation immigrants, perceived redevelopment as an economic opportunity. Keen on pursuing their own material interests and aware of higher incomes they can earn on their rapidly appreciating properties, Polish homeowners and landlords emerged as gentrification’s most
enthusiastic proponents. Rather than merely responding to change, they actively participated in growth by selling properties to private developers, demolishing old buildings, constructing new ones, as well as increasing rents, ending leases to, and even evicting their working-class Polish tenants. This prioritization of private interest explains why local ethnic elite supported rather than resisted neighborhood change, and why community leadership failed to mobilize collective action to preserve Greenpoint’s Polish identity.

Polish landlords’ embrace of gentrification impacted low-to-moderate income tenants for whom neighborhood change became synonymous with rising rents and displacement. Majority of Polish tenants responded to neighborhood growth with exit. After leaving Greenpoint, thousands relocated to satellite enclaves in northwestern Queens, or dispersed across different suburban areas. Exit proved the most economically rational and practical response, as most tenants were not willing to engage politically or to voice their discontent over the loss of ethnic community.

Beyond housing, gentrification-led commercial and retail business development is also impacting Greenpoint’s Polish community. Retail improvements in gentrifying neighborhoods are welcomed by new middle-class residents and by property owners who interpret them as signs of neighborhood’s economic stability. However, the presence of middle-class consumers drives the demand for expensive stores, including chain stores, which in turn drives up commercial rents. This creates a problem for ethnic business owners now subjected to the scissors effect of commercial rent increases and declining numbers of co-ethnic customers. But as the next chapter documents, not all Polish retail businesses succumbed to displacement. By engaging in innovative business practices, some Polish shopkeepers adapted to the new retail landscape of gentrifying Greenpoint.
Chapter 4. Commercial Innovation and Ethnic Retail Adaptation

Introduction

The rapid escalation in Greenpoint’s property values generated a conflict of interests between Polish landlords and their co-ethnic tenants. Motivated by private interests, ethnic landlords expressed positive attitude towards neighborhood change and participated in residential gentrification by evicting low-rent Polish tenants and replacing them with American ones, as well as by selling property to non-Poles. By doing so property owners participated in the economic changes that in the past two decades redefined ethnic Greenpoint as an upscale residential destination. Paradoxically, economic participation resulted in property owners’ voluntary relocation or “happy” exit, as beyond exchange value, the neighborhood’s emerging social life offered no practical purpose or use-value to aging ethnic landlords seeking peaceful retirement in quieter areas. Exposed to new economic pressures, Polish tenants responded overwhelmingly by exiting the enclave in search of more affordable housing, or by clinging to Greenpoint’s shrinking stock of rent-controlled housing.

The present chapter focuses on yet another key group affected by demographic and economic changes unfolding in Greenpoint: ethnic shopkeepers. Set against declining numbers of ethnic customers, skyrocketing commercial rents, and an aggressive reshaping of the neighborhood’s retail landscape, ethnic shopkeepers are struggling to keep their stores and their livelihoods. As gentrification increasingly upsets the two necessary conditions for the survival of ethnic commerce—high concentration of co-ethnic population and low commercial rents—immigrant shopkeepers face uncertain future. This chapter explores the impact of gentrification
on ethnic retail by centering on the following research questions: How do changing shopping streets and retail spaces reshape neighborhood identity? What forms of agency are available to ethnic shopkeepers facing neighborhood change? What enables some ethnic retailers to innovate and adapt but not others? And lastly, how is the definition and practice of ethnicity modified when ethnic actors embrace neighborhood change?

Recently, commercialization and retail change has come into the spotlight of gentrification research. Earlier studies dealing with the subject emphasized the characteristics of consumers as gentrifiers and the reasons why they gentrify (see Bridge & Dowling 2001; Butler 1997; Crewe & Lowe 1995; Ley 1996; Zukin & Kosta 2006), more recently, a growing number of urban scholars stressed the relationship between retail change and the production of new types of social spaces. But in contrast to those studies, which address the market-driven detrimental effects of rapid commercial gentrification on existing–often ethnic– retail (Lloyd 2006; Zukin 2010; Deener 2012; Ocejo 2014), I focus on white immigrant shopkeepers’ adaptation to commercial gentrification, a process which involves disconnecting from working-class definitions of ethnicity.

Analyzing changing ethnic retail reveals an alternative course of action available to ethnic actors struggling to survive in an ethnically declining neighborhood. Unlike tenants priced out of the enclave, or aging landlords selling their homes, some ethnic shopkeepers can, and do, change their trajectory through adaptation and innovation.

Adaptation is a type of response and a form of agency that some Polish shopkeepers in

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6 These two terms are borrowed from sociologist Jill Ann Harrison’s concept of “innovative adaptation”, which she introduced in her book “Buoyancy on the Bayou: Shrimpers Face the Rising Tide of Globalization” (2012). Although her use of the term differs slightly from the one I use in this dissertation, the meaning remains essentially the same. Adaptive innovation represents a unique form of action from either voice, exit or loyalty. It reconstructs Hirschman’s theory to include adaptation and innovation as a type of response to change and decline.
Greenpoint use when confronted with gentrification-driven neighborhood change. Steep decline in ethnic customers and upscale consumption preferences of the new residents situate ethnic retailers in a precarious position. Diminishing profit margins and rising rents threaten the livelihoods of ethnic sellers who depend on low commercial rents and co-ethnic population for survival. Furthermore, innovation refers to a set of strategies and practices that allows ethnic retailers to maintain their businesses in the rapidly changing neighborhood by catering to more affluent newcomers. Adaptive shopkeepers change store profile to reflect the tastes of incoming residents and alter business practices to accommodate their needs, by doing so they facilitate gentrification-led commercial change.

By making the strategic decision to cater to the needs and wants of the gentrifiers rather than co-ethnics, some Polish shopkeepers in Greenpoint adapt to the new commercial culture of organic, artisanal or designer products, which, following current language of business and lifestyle journalism, I refer to as curated retail. By appealing to the needs and desires of the gentrifiers, adaptive innovators off set losses incurred by declining number of co-ethnic customers and ward off economic pressures linked to gentrification such as commercial rent increases.

Paradoxically, staying in the neighborhood requires shopkeepers to rework ethnic practices, and to construct new commercial identities that bridge the social and cultural distance ordinarily separating the ‘gentrifier’ customer and the ‘ethnic’ seller. The work of innovation is carried out by younger, college-educated, internet-savvy, and entrepreneurially-minded Poles, who increasingly identify with the urban lifestyle of the new middle class rather than with traditional Polish values. Shopkeepers unable to embrace new retail culture and lacking financial capital to withstand new market pressures are forced to shut down or to exit and reestablish in
other areas.

While classic gentrification narratives emphasize structural forces that effect change, the analysis in this chapter is focused on Polish shopkeepers’ responses to changing retail landscape. Very often research on gentrification depicts local actors as passive bystanders affected by destabilizing structural forces over which they have very little control. Although helplessness and frustration with neighborhood change are real emotions experienced by local actors, my research shows that the range of responses to gentrification is more diverse. While some traditional ethnic businesses are displaced or forced to relocate in response to mounting economic pressures, others adapt, survive, and even thrive. By entering the mainstream market, innovative Polish shopkeepers not only adapt to, but also author and enhance commercial gentrification of Greenpoint’s shopping streets.

Retail Landscape and Symbolic Ownership

The disappearance of traditional Polish stores from Greenpoint’s shopping streets figures prominently in the narrative my informants construct about gentrifying Greenpoint. According to this narrative, the disappearance of Polish storefront businesses makes the neighborhood less Polish, and as the closures cut off access to ethnic products and services, they also erode ethnic ways of life. The new, “American” stores that replace Polish shops do not reproduce the ethnic worlds where immigrants meet, exchange news, and gossip in their native language. Ethnic commerce contracts when the same happens to the public space where ethnicity can be performed and reproduced.

This is a reversal of a historical process of ethnic business concentration that for many decades reinforced Greenpoint’s identity as a Polish neighborhood. Since the early 1980s, a new
cohort of Polish immigrants appropriated the social space of Greenpoint by maintaining spatial boundaries and competing against other ethnic groups, especially Hispanics, over symbolic control of the area. Polish storefront businesses played an important role in this struggle not only by fulfilling the most immediate needs of immigrants and helping them build and expand social networks, but also by consolidating the ethnic enclave, reinforcing the sense of Polish identity against that of other ethnic groups, and symbolizing the materiality and permanence of the Polish community in Greenpoint.

Zukin (2012a) refers to all local shopping streets, including small retail businesses, as “social spaces where cultural identities are formed, learned, and reproduced” (p. 282). Thus, ethnicity can be looked at as something embedded in the material substance of and social transactions and interactions performed in public spaces. As immigrants shop for groceries in Polish stores, eat in Polish restaurants, and buy airline tickets in Polish travel agencies, they do more than simply draw the “us-them boundary” (Barth 1969)—they form social attachments and claim belonging within the larger physical and social environment of the city.

In contrast, when ethnic retail spaces disappear or change, the physical and symbolic bond between ethnic identity and place weakens. Shopping streets no longer promote interaction between co-ethnics or bolster identifications with the members of the same ethnic group.

The recent influx of non-Polish residents and new retail vendors into Greenpoint not only redefines the physical and social structure of the immigrant neighborhood, but also changes the area’s symbolic and moral character. By opening new stores, restaurants, and bars based on consumption preferences and tastes different from those of Polish immigrants, the non-Polish entrepreneurs claim symbolic ownership over the shopping streets and give rise to a competing vision of the neighborhood. Deener (2007) defines symbolic ownership as a control over
aesthetic presentation, public perception, and social and economic utility of social space. Similarly, Zukin, Kasinitz, and Chen (2016) discuss “moral ownership” in term of where a group feels they belong, or feels comfortable, especially when they are excluded from similar spaces dominated by other groups. As the authors state, “moral ownership [...] goes beyond legal property rights, and is based on a deep identification with the culture of space” (p. 24). New storefronts, business signs written in English, unfamiliar products, and high price tags signify that symbolic and moral ownership of the neighborhood is being transferred to a new group.

At the same time, the traditional definition of white ethnicity in Greenpoint has undergone dramatic changes over the past 30 years. In the past, the category Polish conjured the image of a Greenpoint resident, a conservative Catholic, a male construction worker, or a polish cleaning lady. Today, these previously overlapping categories no longer reinforce each other so clearly. Instead of concentrating in Greenpoint, most Poles today are residentially dispersed in different parts of Brooklyn and Queens as well as in suburban communities, but they may own real estate or businesses in the old enclave. Most are religious, but many are secular. Although most are employed in predominantly blue-collar jobs, 2010 U.S census data shows an expanding polish-born professional and managerial class. As a result, white ethnicity diffuses over divergent meanings, and rather than a set of fixed social characteristics, it is increasingly understood as fluid and dynamic (Kosta 2012; Smajda & Gerteis 2012; Wimmer 2013).

These dramatic shifts in ethnic identifications become tangible in Greenpoint’s changing retail landscape, where a younger, more entrepreneurial generation of Polish retailers let go of ethnic symbols—no longer meaningful in the changing context—and construct new commercial ‘selves’ shaped by the emerging consumption trends. Such actions reinforce the notion that white ethnicity makes for a multidimensional and flexible category that can endure precisely because it
can be renegotiated in the face of community change (Smajda & Gerteis 2012).

**Selling Poland in Gentrifying Brooklyn**

Walking down Greenpoint’s two main commercial arteries—Manhattan and Nassau Avenues— the high concentration of business names and signage in Polish immediately stands out. There is the highly-rated Kiszka Meat Market, Rzeszowska Bakery, Chopin Pharmacy, and the popular Polish restaurant Łomżynianka. There is also a string of other businesses that help immigrants take care of their needs in their native language: translators, overseas shipping companies, international money transfer and financial services, attorneys, and medical offices.

Greenpoint’s ethnic retail landscape offers products and services that involve a direct connection between the immigrants’ homeland and an intimate knowledge of culturally-coded consumption. Generally, ethnic stores sell imported culinary and cultural products—foodstuffs, newspapers, magazines, books, DVDs, music, clothes, jewelry— not available in the mainstream market. Service businesses conduct transactions in Polish and offer information and assistance ranging from paying utility bills to filling out mortgage applications.

As shown in Table 10 (below), retail business ownership among Polish immigrants remained low in the 1970s, picked up slightly in the 1980s, then increased sharply in the 1990s and continued to rise through 2013. A unique interplay of socioeconomic conditions both in Poland and the United States contributed to this expansion.

First, two major waves of Polish immigration reached the United States during this period and concomitantly replenished the aging ethnic population in fading Polish neighborhoods. Increasing numbers of new post-Solidarity arrivals settled in the enclave and drove demand for ethnic products and services. This increased the need for the creation of new ethnic businesses
including Polish bookstores previously missing in the neighborhood. Ethnic commerce experienced further expansion with the arrival of the 1990s wave, which created a new pool of customers guaranteeing continued success of the ethnic businesses established during the earlier decades.

Like Cubans arriving in Miami in the 1970s and 1980s (Mohl 1983), new Polish immigrants arriving in Greenpoint in the 1990s, provided a cheap, co-ethnic labor force

Table 9. Polish Businesses in Greenpoint (1975-2013)

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<td>12</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multi-Service Agency</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clothing Retail</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alcohol Retail</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Cosmetic Services</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Services</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookstores</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Retail</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Services</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
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<td>67</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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\(^a\) 2013 data is based on a street survey carried out during fieldwork.

and allowed existing food and retail entrepreneurs to branch out into other industries, especially general construction, which then generated surplus that trickled down to local merchants and led to further proliferation of retail businesses.
Second, the prospect of business ownership appealed to Polish immigrants because they were barred from entrepreneurial opportunities in Poland where the communist party in power restricted private enterprise. In addition, during the 1980s slow economic growth and a high unemployment rate in the United States made business ownership the fastest option for immigrants to achieve upward mobility (Waldinger, Aldrich & Warde 1990). Language difficulties, inadequate qualifications, and discrimination are among the reasons why immigrants are drawn to self-employment in the first place, and this is especially true during a period of economic slowdown when the job market depresses (Waldinger 1986). Although immigration scholars still debate this claim, generally, immigrants are more likely to succeed as storeowners than employees in the formal labor market, because the intimate knowledge of their own ethnic community gives them a cultural advantage over native-owned businesses.

Finally, the opening up of borders and the easing of trade relations after the collapse of communism in Poland made the process of importing polish products into the United States faster and more efficient (Glenn 1992). This new advantage further proliferated ethnic businesses in Polish neighborhoods abroad, including Greenpoint.

Ultimately, slower immigration rate and considerable decline in ethnic population halted enclave’s commercial expansion. By 2010, Greenpoint’s Polish-born population had been almost halved. Poland’s 2004 entry into the European Union nearly stalled Polish immigration to the United States and prompted many immigrants to return to Poland. The young eager to take advantage of the improving socioeconomic conditions, the elderly seeking a quiet and more affordable retirement. At the same time, New York City’s rezoning law of 2005 led to a precipitous increase in property values and rents across North Brooklyn, setting a new tone for previously solidly working-class neighborhood and inevitably leading to residential dispersal of
the immigrant population.

As was the case with most white ethnic neighborhoods in the postwar period, many long-established, ethnic businesses retain their customer base even after residential dispersal occurs because of the ability to cater to the regional, rather than just local, co-ethnic population. One example of this is the Arthur Avenue neighborhood, or Little Italy in the Bronx, where residential de-Italianization has led to commercial re-Italianization (Kosta 2012). Even though Italian residents moved out, they returned on weekends to shop at Italian stores and eat at Italian restaurants. This relatively high concentration of Italian-themed businesses permitted the area to retain its strong Italian identity despite the lack of majority-Italian population.

In Greenpoint, this process involves co-ethnics from the outer boroughs as well as from out-of-state—New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts—who converge on the old neighborhood to attend church, go grocery shopping, or have lunch at a Polish restaurant. In this sense, the function of Greenpoint for Poles is rapidly changing from a residential to a commercial ethnic space. The presence of the Polish parish, Polish credit union and ethnic organizations reinforce that function. However, as gentrification pressures increase, and the number of ethnic customers and ethnic stores continues to dwindle, Greenpoint’s ethnic commercial identity is gradually being remade to reflect neighborhood change.

Indeed, many of Greenpoint’s Polish-owned stores permanently closed as a result of increasing rents, an inability to renew leases, low ethnic customer traffic, or aging owner’s desire to retire (Maślanka 2015a). Neighborhood’s Polish fixtures such as Wedel candy store, Polonaise Terrace banquet hall, Steve’s Meat Market, Warsaw Bakery, Polonia restaurant, and Europa Club are just some examples of iconic Polish businesses that closed down over the last ten years.
Even so, ethnic commerce proves more resilient and complex than the earlier gentrification scholarship suggests. In fact, younger Polish retail entrepreneurs are able to maintain their status as neighborhood stakeholders even in the face of community change.

On the surface, Greenpoint follows the standard gentrification narrative in which rapidly rising rents and changing demographics push residents to seek more affordable housing elsewhere and force local ethnic businesses to either shoulder higher rents or be displaced. A deeper analysis reveals that younger Polish shopkeepers respond by actively adapting to neighborhood change, and in the process renegotiate their own identity. As Greenpoint transforms from a tightly knit, but aging, ethnic enclave to an upscale residential and commercial district indistinguishable from Williamsburg, Polish entrepreneurs in possession of sufficient economic and social capital see a profitable opportunity in starting a new business in the old neighborhood. Urban scholars have long linked neighborhood commercial revival with processes of gentrification (Bridge & Dowling 2001; Zukin et al 2009; Ocejo 2014). Brand new retail corridors have been created in areas of Greenpoint that previously had little to no business, and new types of businesses crop up along the established shopping streets catering to new clientele (Greenberger 2013). Some Polish retailers adapt to these changes by shedding ethnic affiliations and symbols and embracing neighborhood change.

**Chain Stores, Boutiques, and Ethnicity**

Prior to gentrification, Polish businesses catered almost exclusively to the ethnic population, hired exclusively Polish staff, and established Polish as the *lingua franca* of local business transactions. A Polish deli owner in his mid-50s describes certain areas of Greenpoint at the height of Polish immigration as a place where Poles constituted the largest purchasing power: “In the 1990s there were so many Poles here that stores owned by immigrants from other
countries had to hire Polish-speaking staff if they wanted any business at all.” At the time, it was not uncommon to walk into a deli or grocery store owned by Pakistani or Bangladeshi immigrants, some of whom also settled in Greenpoint and other parts of Brooklyn in the 1980s and 1990s, and hear them speak Polish phrases to Polish customers. The shelves were likely to be stacked with brands of Polish beer and the front counter was likely lined with newspapers and magazines in Polish. Similarly, Chinese take-out restaurants often displayed a menu posted on walls and written in Polish.

Chain stores and commercial banks that opened in Greenpoint in the mid-2000s followed other non-Polish businesses and hired Polish-speaking staff to attract Polish customers. In 2007 Starbucks opened at a former Polish movie theater, at 910 Manhattan Avenue. Although it did not cater directly to Polish immigrants, many of the staff members were local residents who spoke Polish. More interestingly, occupying the site of a former Chopin Theater, Starbucks became a local hub for Polish émigré artists—many of them Solidarity-era exiles—who regularly display their work and hold cultural events in the popular, but not independently owned, café. Today Greenpoint Starbucks continues to display the work of local Polish American artists as well as of visiting artists from Poland.

Starting in the late 1990s, Greenpoint saw a remarkable growth in financial and lending services as large, national, and international banks opened local branches and hired Polish-speaking staff to gain the patronage of Polish clients. In 2006, Hong Kong-based HSBC invited Bogdan Chmielewski, at the time the CEO of the Polish & Slavic Federal Credit Union, to open and manage its first branch in Greenpoint (Stabrowski 2011, 89). The opening gala, attended by former Polish President and Nobel Laureate Lech Walesa, was the largest branch opening in HSBC history. Other commercial banks, like Citibank, Bank of America, Sovereign, and
JPMorgan Chase, are now present in Greenpoint and hire Polish-speaking staff.

The Associated supermarket, on Manhattan Avenue, is a further example of how Polish immigrants succeeded in “Polonizing” a mainstream American brand by modifying it to fulfill the shopping needs and wants of the local ethnic population. Polish-operated franchise, Manhattan Avenue Associated hires mostly Polish-speaking employees and specializes in Polish products, the kind one would normally find in a Polish deli. The regular staples are also tweaked to please a Polish rather than an American palate. Thus, it is harder to find basil or macaroni and cheese than it is to choose from four brands of European-style butter or five kinds of cottage cheese—the staples of Polish cooking.

The store also carries Polish-language newspapers, magazines, and Polish pharmacy and body care products, which might not please an ordinary American customer who does not read Polish and is unaccustomed to shop for eastern European brands. Unlike a typical Polish deli, however, Associated is a known mainstream grocery store familiar to most Brooklynites, some of whom do their everyday shopping there. Yet the Associated branch on Manhattan Avenue is known among non-Polish interviewees as “the drab-looking, big, Polish store” with “poor selection,” “low-quality produce,” and unfriendly service. Poor selection and low-quality produce most likely refers to the lack of organic or local products, which figure prominently in the neighborhood’s non-Polish grocery stores and reflect the health-conscious lifestyle espoused by Greenpoint’s new residents.

Because they accommodate higher rents than most independent stores, the arrival of chain stores in a gentrifying neighborhood is a sign of ‘super-gentrification’ (Lees 2003), or when an already gentrified area is further gentrified. Chain stores also display strong preference towards co-tenancy, once a single big brand ‘risks’ coming into a neighborhood, other big retail
brands will follow in its footsteps instantly establishing the area as a viable commercial district, which in turn attracts even more commercial investment.

This rings especially true on the Northside of Williamsburg where Dunkin Donuts, which opened door on Bedford Avenue in 2013, triggered a string of chain store openings in 2014 including Urban Outfitters, Starbucks, Madewell, J. Crew, Diesel, and Whole Foods. Preceding these openings several popular, independently owned Bedford Avenue stores, the Earwax Record Store, Verb café, Ugly Luggage, Spikehill Bar & Grill, The Bagel Store and several others—themselves gentrifiers of the earlier days—shut down due to building owners doubling the rent.

My research in Greenpoint, however, suggests that lower-end chain stores, although a serious competition to small, independently-owned stores, may not erode the neighborhood’s ethnic character as rapidly as do other forms of commercial gentrification. In predominantly ethnic and immigrant neighborhoods, standardization of retail promoted by lower-end chain stores is not necessarily as rigid as commonly assumed and may be ethnically negotiated and custom-fitted to serve some needs of immigrant populations (Talwar 2003).

In contrast, small, independently owned boutiques—another sign of urban revitalization—sell upscale goods that exclusively reflect the wants and desires of the highly educated, middle- and upper-class newcomers and tourists, with little or no regard for the area’s poorer residents whose basic needs are often ignored by upscale retail vendors (Zukin et al 2009; Zukin 2010). Working-poor Latino immigrants feel both culturally and economically excluded from the boutique and gourmet restaurant scene in gentrifying neighborhoods where they live (Valli 2015). Not only do prices go beyond what immigrant families can afford, the type of product sold does not fulfill immigrant needs. Similarly, Polish immigrants show little interest in
shopping Greenpoint’s trendy stores, which one Polish interviewee labeled as “expensive” and “impractical.” This sentiment is reinforced by the lack of Polish-speaking staff, an influential factor for most Polish shoppers.

**Commercial Gentrification: A Tale of Two Streets**

Commercial change in gentrifying neighborhoods is interdependent with changing housing markets, real estate development and an in-migration of middle class consumers. In fact, areas with rapid real estate appreciation and a growing professional population are also experiencing rapid commercial transformation (Greenberger 2013; Ocejo 2014).

Brooklyn’s new residential and commercial development and a spike in borough’s population, makes it an attractive location for new retailers including national retail chains, which had previously ignored the area. According to RealtyTrac, a nationwide real estate information company, Brooklyn is currently the least affordable home market in the country, ahead even of San Francisco and Manhattan\(^7\). At the same time, Brooklyn is the site of some of the most rapid retail growth in the nation. Since 2003, the number of retail businesses in Brooklyn has grown by 21 percent, a much faster rate of growth than in the rest of the city or the country (NYS Comptroller Office 2014).

Moreover, the number of major retail arteries in Brooklyn has more than doubled in the last five years (*CPEX Brooklyn Retail Report* 2014). During this period, 43 additional shopping corridors emerged and raised the borough’s total number of important thoroughfares to 88. A significant portion of this new growth occurs in the mixed ethnic and immigrant neighborhoods of Crown Heights, Bushwick, Williamsburg, and Greenpoint, yet the impact of commercial

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transformation on ethnic shopkeepers and the resulting changing social relations between shopkeepers and gentrifying customers have not been sufficiently documented.

Commercial streets are important components of urban life, while informing and shaping neighborhood’s social interactions, they also communicate important messages about the occupants and users of particular social space (Zukin, Kasinitz, Chen 2016). Famously characterized by Jane Jacobs (1961) as the “sidewalk ballet,” the local character of the street is a concrete, “lived” reflection of larger processes defining the urban experience, including global flows of capital, international migration, and shifting cultural meanings.

As a result of the post-2005 commercial resurgence, retail landscape in Greenpoint entered a period of transition. I selected two commercial strips: Franklin Street, a gritty, industrial area with only a few retail stores until recently, and Manhattan Avenue, a long-established shopping artery with predominantly ethnic-identified businesses. Comparing them and comparing each to what they were in the recent past shows the dramatic commercial change that occurred in North Brooklyn over the past two decades, during which Greenpoint made the dramatic transformation from an industrial waterfront community to an upscale residential and commercial district.

*From Industrial Wasteland to Urban Cool: Franklin Street*

Situated near the waterfront and running south to north from Greenpoint’s southern border to Commercial Street in the neighborhood’s northwestern tip, Franklin Street is the newest addition to North Brooklyn’s retail landscape.

Between the end of the 19th century and the present, Franklin Street underwent several major transformations. During the height of the industrial era, from roughly the 1840s to the
1920s, the street was one of Greenpoint’s main shopping thoroughfares. An ever-increasing pool of port and industrial workers, concentration of local industrial elites, as well as ferryboat connection to Manhattan, allowed North Brooklyn’s residential and commercial life to expand and flourish, Franklin street was where it all unfolded.

Figure 3. Franklin Street and Manhattan Avenue. Source: Map data © 2014 Google.

As the end of the industrial era approached and one wave of factory shutdowns after another swept across Greenpoint, however, the northern end of the neighborhood lost its commercial vitality. Jobs disappeared, workers and elites left, the Manhattan ferry service was discontinued, and the nearby Vernon Avenue Bridge, linking Greenpoint to Long Island City, Queens, was torn down. As a result of these changes, the area became cut off from the rest of the city as well as from the neighborhood’s social center, which now shifted to Manhattan and Nassau Avenues, where the G subway line was put in service in the 1930s.
Finally, the rise of oceangoing container ships and the decision of the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey to relocate all maritime commerce to the newly built Marine Terminal in New Jersey rendered the Brooklyn waterfront obsolete. For Greenpoint and other Brooklyn neighborhoods, this marked the acceleration of ongoing economic and social decline. By the 1980s, Franklin Street, like other parts of northern Greenpoint, was vanquished to urban blight, environmental contamination, and crime.

By 2005, change in local policy to rezone Greenpoint-Williamsburg waterfront from manufacturing to residential and commercial uses and an infusion of investment capital triggered a boom in real estate development—which originated in Williamsburg then travelled north to Greenpoint—recast Franklin Street from industrial wasteland into one of northern Brooklyn’s trendiest shopping corridors. Figure 4 on the next page shows the changing composition of small businesses on Franklin Street during three distinct points in recent history: 1990, 2000, and 2013. Each represents a change in the character of the street measured by the number and type of businesses that served the area during the past twenty three years.

In 1990, a total of 39 small businesses operated on Franklin Street. The majority of those establishments (38 percent), was categorized as light manufacturing and consisted of small workshops specializing in glass and metal work, chemical manufacturing, or milling lumber. Another 33 percent comprised of business and customer services related to home improvement, construction, and building maintenance (plumbing, heating, roofing, scaffolding, asbestos removal, etc.), as well as trucking and warehousing. There were only two restaurants (5 percent), three grocery stores (8 percent) and three retail shops (8 percent) on the entire length of the street. The scarcity of the basic neighborhood amenities reflected the low population density and Franklin Street’s reputation as a crime-ridden area bordering a decaying manufacturing district.
Ten years later in 2000, the number of businesses on Franklin Street declined by more than 50 percent. The sharpest drop occurred in light manufacturing, which plunged from 38 percent in 1990 to 29 percent in 2000. At the same time, customer and business services emerged as the dominant form of commercial life on Franklin Street, accounting for 57 percent of all businesses and consisting mostly of TV and film production studios, as well as construction and building maintenance companies.

The sharp increase in the latter was directly related to a boom in real estate development, which swept across New York in late 1980s and 1990s and inflated the number of construction and building maintenance firms operating in the New York metropolitan area. Cheap office and warehouse space and close proximity to Manhattan made northern Greenpoint an ideal place to run small construction as well as general contracting businesses, many of which were established by Polish immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s. During this time, a surge in Polish immigration provided a local pool of skilled labor necessary to handle the growing demand for construction workers.

Aside from construction, creative industries also emerged as the middle point in the transition from manufacturing to consumption. The decaying warehouses, rotting piers, and gritty, film-noir feel of Greenpoint’s waterfront attracted film and TV production companies. Rappers LL Cool J and Keith Murray shot a music video in the abandoned Greenpoint Terminal and the 2000 Miramax film *The Yards* claimed several locations along West Street. Recent shoots also include the 2010 film *The Bounty Hunter*, starring Jennifer Aniston, and the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*, which was shot in a parking lot near Franklin Street (Kirby 1998; Gregor 2010). Also, affected by the economic downturn and soaring rents in Manhattan, many production studios and post-production operations relocated to more affordable Greenpoint.
(Gregor 2010). Despite the growing interest from the construction and film industries, however, the area continued down the slope of social decay for the remaining decade of the 20th century.

By 2000, restaurants disappeared altogether and the remaining two grocery and two retail stores served the small pocket of Latino population. With only half of the businesses than a decade earlier and a growing number of empty storefronts and abandoned warehouses, Franklin Street felt more decayed than ever before, but that was about to change.

By the end of 2010, the street—much like the rest of northern Brooklyn—had undergone a complete transformation. The 2005 waterfront rezoning and proximity to the Northside of Williamsburg, triggered an explosion in real estate development, land value increases, and a revival of local commerce. During the years 2000-13, the total number of small businesses on Franklin Street increased by a staggering 150 percent (!). The most change occurred in the food and drink sector, and previously nonexistent restaurants, bars, and cafés now make up 26 percent of the total number of businesses. The retail sector expanded from 9 percent in 2000 to 21 percent in 2013, mostly due to the opening of a number of boutiques. Together, food, drink and retail amounted to 47 percent of the total commercial mix on Franklin Street.

At the same time, light manufacturing plunged from 29 percent in 2000 to only 6 percent in 2013. Similarly, customer and business services dropped from 57 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2013. Here again, the driving force was the change in local policy, which pushed Greenpoint’s residential and commercial rents upwards making industrial operations more costly. Currently, commercial rents on Franklin Street average $50 to $64 per square foot, which is still affordable in comparison to Manhattan Avenue, where prices reach $65 to $79/ square foot, or Williamsburg’s popular Bedford Avenue, where rates are closer to $200/square foot (CPEX Brooklyn Retail Report 2014).
The shift from a production to a consumption-based economy, and especially to small-scale, independent commerce, transformed the economic and symbolic structure of Greenpoint’s streets. Once considered a desolate industrial wasteland, Franklin Street has now become the epitome for “Brooklyn” brand (Stern 2010), an internationally recognizable symbol that stands for cultural distinction, creativity, independence, and urban authenticity.

Brooklyn brand, however, is an image that appeals to a specific class of clientele new to the neighborhood and often excludes the area’s historical stakeholders, the long-term residents whose lower socioeconomic status and lack of cultural capital makes it difficult, if at all possible, to adjust to the neighborhood’s changing identity.

New residents, mostly young professionals and middle-class families, rely on and show a strong preference for a different, more upscale type of retail than immigrant residents. Thus, by bringing economic resources that attract such upscale retailers, they also change the symbolic character of the shopping streets, which now reflect their own needs and desires and erase the commercial presence of the longtime residents.

*Theater of curated consumption*

The new commerce on Franklin Street consists mostly of small, independent stores that sell small collections of artisanal items—handmade jewelry, haute-couture clothing, art, organic body products, and vintage home decor—at high prices. In Brklyn Curated, a small store that doubles as an interior design studio, one can purchase antiques, vintage Native American jewelry, textiles, and portraits as well as vintage camping equipment, home furnishings, and used books. Across the street from Brklyn Curated, another small shop, Ana Chronos, sells vintage-inspired clothing, which according to the store’s website, “encompasses […] tendencies toward
the rebellious and timeless” (www.anachronosnyc.com). The website further highlights the store’s unique approach to clothing as follows:

Ana Chronos sources the utmost quality vintage classic to couture pieces and sustainable, all natural products available. We curate and edit at the highest level and pride ourselves on our client relationships, who often become friends, in order for you, our clients, to relax and enjoy your shopping experience with trust in our authentic selections. (www.anachronosnyc.com)

Similar themes of authenticity, creativity, sustainability, and ethical production dominate at another boutique a few blocks down the street. Wolves Within describes itself as “filled with carefully curated and thoughtfully made apparel, accessories, and artwork” (www.wolveswithin.com). The store also assures that the “emphasis is always placed on Made in USA and Fair Trade practices, in addition to supporting local designers and artists […]” (www.wolveswithin.com).

In an interview for Racked NY, a shopping and style blog, Liz Hull, the marketing director of Dala, one of the first boutiques that opened on Franklin Street, highlighted the small-town feel and creative atmosphere as the most important reason for picking Greenpoint as the dream location for the company’s second store:

It really is kind of like this micro neighborhood. Williamsburg is feeling pretty big now, and Greenpoint still has this small, tight-knit community. . . . You walk down the street and you’re greeted by your neighbors, and all of the local businesses and the owners are really friendly and supportive. . . . It creates this warm and welcoming atmosphere that I think is very unique to Greenpoint. (Yannetta 2012)

As in other gentrifying areas, the ABCs of gentrification (art galleries, bars, cafés) (Zukin, Kasinitz, Chen 2016), as well as farm-to-table restaurants focused on local, seasonal and sustainable foods and drinks—have also made an appearance on Franklin Street. Clearly, the underlying vision of the area’s revitalization is the creation of an upscale, yet seemingly unpretentious residential and commercial space which, despite obvious cosmopolitan vibe,
retains the feeling of a small town. Similar model of neighborhood change has been already deployed in other gentrified Brooklyn neighborhoods such as Park Slope, Fort Greene, or the East Village in Manhattan (Kosta & Zukin 2004).

With the exception of The House of Vans, a 25,000-square-foot skateboard park and event space operated by Vans, a trendy shoes and apparel manufacturer, chain stores and nationwide brands are entirely absent on Franklin Street. This is not surprising, the area’s relatively recent emergence as a shopping destination and relatively low population density renders corporate operation, which requires large initial capital investment, unprofitable. But cultural factors centered on consumer preference also play a significant role. Proclaiming anti-corporate attitude gentrifiers are more inclined to shop at small, independently owned stores rather than at corporate outlets and are more likely to move into neighborhoods known for small shops.

Social scientists have recently linked small, independently owned stores to the processes of commercial gentrification. Zukin et al (2009) refers to boutiques as the “new entrepreneurs” in order to distinguish them from traditional, neighborhood retail stores, and Deener (2012) underscores the artistic and bohemian ethos behind what he terms the “creative entrepreneurs.” Both authors agree this type of business fulfills the material and symbolic needs of urban gentrifiers seeking to assert their social rank in inconspicuous ways.

Unlike big-box, corporate-owned stores, which sell to a wide range of incomes, or ethnic stores bracketing narrower cultural demographic, creative entrepreneurs target a multi-ethnic but often white clientele with higher education and cultural capital to match.

Ley (1996) categorizes such individuals as the “new middle class,” while Brooks (2000) came up with the concept of “bourgeois bohemians”, to highlight the contrast between middle
and upper class origins, as well as the laidback lifestyle typical of the incoming population. Florida (2003) theorizes the emergence of the “creative class,” a new type of professionals and creative people who invent urban living at the intersection of authenticity, individuality, creativity, and increasingly sustainability—themes originally associated with the young counter-culture of the 1960s. The new middle class is characterized by the rejection of material signifiers of wealth traditionally associated with higher status and social conformity, such as large suburban house, or a luxury SUV and the development of new symbols of status that create social distance, but in a less pretentious way: $2,000 fixed-gear bikes, a $300 pair of custom-designed jeans, food grown on rooftop farms or cold-brewed coffee served in mason-jars.

Such new, middle-class identities both create demand for and are reinforced by a cutting-edge retail culture that I refer to as *curated consumption*, a new type of urban consumption that involves creative entrepreneurs as the behind-the-scenes, cultural managers of taste who possess and rely on cultural knowledge to pre-select the most valuable content and to teach the public what to eat, drink, wear, read, or decorate their homes with (Williams 2009). In other words, creative entrepreneurs are to retail consumption what curators are to museums and libraries. Creative entrepreneurs sell and sometimes craft material objects, including food and drinks, based on their ability to spot things that appeal to the new middle class for whom quantity or functionality is less meaningful than the real point of purchase—a critical reassessment of conventional values.

Thomas (1997) suggests that in the present the old counter-cultural rhetoric meshes with the hyper-realities of the post-Fordist economy to create the “rebel consumer,” a person who adopts the themes and lifestyle, but not the politics of the counter-culture. The recent concentration of affluent ‘rebel consumers’ in the resource-poor and commercially underserved,
urban communities, creates a new type of economic and symbolic contrasts particularly visible in the changing retail landscapes in gentrifying cities.

*From Ethnic Shops to Curated Retail: Manhattan Avenue*

Manhattan Avenue is the largest shopping thoroughfare in Greenpoint. It starts out as a quiet residential street in the southeastern corner of Williamsburg, but then turns into a central commercial artery as it continues north until it reaches the neighborhood’s northern border.

Unlike the redevelopment of Franklin Street, which demanded tearing down abandoned warehouses, renovating buildings, and refurbishing empty storefronts, the commercial gentrification of Manhattan Avenue is a more intricate infill process of inserting new restaurants, cafés, and retail stores in between Polish-owned restaurants, bakeries, meat markets, auto body shops, and 99-cent stores. Many of the neighborhood’s chain stores—Starbucks, McDonald’s, Dunkin’ Donuts, Rite Aid, Duane Reade, and several commercial banks—are prominently located close to the subway entrance. Despite Polish retail dominance, commercial activity of other ethnic groups is visible in the Italian pizzerias, Latino bodegas, Bangladeshi grocery stores, Chinese take-out restaurants and Laundromats. And services such as auto parts shops, electric supplies stores, plumbing and heating services, and discount stores testify to the area’s enduring working-class character.

More recently, however, the Greenpoint section of Manhattan Avenue became the landing ground of creative entrepreneurs who followed the affluent and culture-conscious clientele from Williamsburg to the northern tip of Brooklyn. Today it is not uncommon to see espresso bars, upscale restaurants, and design clothing stores patronized by young, mostly white, creative professionals, artists, and, increasingly, young middle-class families, woven into this
eclectic, if ambiguous, landscape of urban change.

The interplay between residential and retail change pushes land and rent values to go up. The resulting threat of displacement affects not only local residents, but also long-established ethnic shops that serve lower-income, immigrant populations. While on average a retailer paid $35 to $50 per square foot of commercial space on Manhattan Avenue in 2010, in 2014 the price in the same location nearly doubled to $65 to $79 per square (CPEX Brooklyn Retail Report, 2010 & 2014).

Figure 5 below shows how the number of new food and drink establishments fluctuated on Manhattan Avenue over the last two decades, while the number of customer and business services that serve low-income populations—such as auto repair shops; second-hand, household appliance shops; or plumbing and heating services—sharply declined.

In 1990, 50 percent of the 282 businesses operating on Manhattan Avenue consisted of family-oriented retail stores selling shoes, clothing, furniture, home improvement goods, and electronics. Business and customer services, mainly cabinetmaking, woodworking, and repair shops, made up an additional 25 percent. In contrast, food and drink establishments were not a defining element of the business landscape and amounted only to 9% of all businesses. Although still present, light manufacturing was in sharp decline and facing an uncertain future in the city’s changing economy.

By 2000, Greenpoint’s business landscape had dramatically changed. The number of businesses on Manhattan Avenue dropped from 282 in 1990 to 240 in 2000, a decrease of almost 15 percent. The biggest decline occurred in the retail sector, which dropped from 50% in 1990 to 30% in 2000. Light manufacturing has almost entirely disappeared, but the percent of delis and grocery stores remained steady.
But despite the overall shrinking of business activity, not all sectors experienced a decline. Interestingly, business and customer services grew to 44 percent and reflected the Polish-immigrant-led expansion of construction companies and building maintenance services in the 1990s. The percent of restaurants, bars, and cafés rose from 9 percent in 1990 to 14 percent in 2000.

In 2013 the total number of retail businesses rose from 240 to 317. Most of this growth occurred in food/drink establishment and reflected the demographic changes which transformed North Brooklyn into an arts and culture center. Cultural activity requires more space for social interaction such as neighborhood cafes and bars. After a long period of decline, Greenpoint saw a slight increase in small-scale, light manufacturing. This type of activity went up from 1 percent in 2000 to 7 percent in 2013. The manufacturing upswing correlates with the creation of 16 Industrial Business Zones (IBZs) across New York City, including one in Northern Greenpoint—to protect industrial businesses. Many of the remaining manufacturers in Greenpoint cater to the area’s expanding arts, entertainment and film industries. The number of deli/grocery stores, as well as business and customer service shops declined in comparison to 2000. The outmigration of Polish immigrants contributed to a drop in this type of businesses most of which served working-class, ethnic population. Many of the store owners have also reached retirement age and discontinued commercial activity independently of neighborhood change.
Polish Shopkeepers: Exit or Adaptation?

Based on retail survey and in-depth interviews with Polish shopkeepers in Greenpoint conducted between 2013-2015, as well as participant observation in Greenpoint’s Polish stores and restaurants, I categorize Polish retail entrepreneurship into three different categories: enclave entrepreneur, identity entrepreneur, and ethnic gentrifier. Each category is determined by the owner’s cohort, the time period business was first developed, marketing aspect of the business and the type of response to commercial gentrification.

Enclave entrepreneurs cater specifically to co-ethnics and consist in traditional immigrant businesses (Zhou 1992). In Greenpoint such businesses are in the hands of old timers who arrived in the neighborhood during the height of Polish immigration roughly between mid-1980s and late 1990s. All business signs, including business name, hours of operation, product description and pricing are written exclusively in Polish, the language spoken by staff is Polish and the typical customer is a Polish immigrant. Enclave entrepreneurs are most vulnerable to displacement because increasing commercial rents and dwindling number of Polish shoppers reduce profit margins below the costs of maintaining the business. Advanced age and lack of economic and cultural capital makes innovation and adaptation very difficult—if at all possible—which in turns results in an exit or closing of the business.

In contrast, identity entrepreneurs cater to Polish and non-Polish customers. In order to survive in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, Greenpoint’s younger Polish storeowners make the strategic decision to appeal to the affluent newcomers whose increasing presence in the neighborhood could constitute a much needed new customer base. Identity entrepreneurs capitalize specifically on their Polish roots and use ethnicity as a marketing tool. This form of adaptation is based on satisfying customers’ immediate needs and at the same time providing
them with an ethnic experience that goes along with the products and services offered. Identity entrepreneurs are the type of adaptive innovators almost exclusively represented in the food industry. Ethnic food establishments are more resilient to urban change due to immigrants’ enduring adherence to their own food (Waldinger, Aldrih, & Ward, 1990). In addition, commodification of ethnic cuisine as a unique cultural product has proven a successful marketing strategy aimed at non-co-ethnics who, regardless of their own ethnic identification, associate certain neighborhoods with ethnic food. Identity entrepreneurs appeared on Greenpoint’s retail scene at the onset of gentrification in late 1990s and early 2000s as a result of demographic changes.

Another type of adaptive innovators are the ethnic gentrifiers, whom I identify as the newest and youngest type of polish retail entrepreneurs who appeared since the waterfront rezoning as a response to the influx of non-Polish residents and a decline in the neighborhood’s ethnic population.

Ethnic gentrifiers constitute a distinctive group of younger and often better-educated entrepreneurs whose innovating business practices reflect the recent transformation of Greenpoint from a tightly knit, ethnic enclave to an upscale residential and entertainment district. I define ethnic gentrifiers as immigrant business owners in gentrifying neighborhoods who consciously reject ethnic-specific identifiers and instead take the position of gentrifiers—and therefore become active actors in the process of gentrification—catering specifically to professionals and middle-class residents whose expanding presence and demand for non-ethnic retail is changing the area’s symbolic character.
Table 10. Types of Polish Retail Entrepreneurship in Gentrifying Greenpoint.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entrepreneur Type</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Owner’s Age</th>
<th>Customer Base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enclave Entrepreneur</td>
<td>1980s to 1990s</td>
<td>60 and older</td>
<td>Co-ethnics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Entrepreneur</td>
<td>1990s to present</td>
<td>40 and older</td>
<td>Co-ethnics and non-co-ethnics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Gentrifier</td>
<td>2005 to present</td>
<td>Mid-30s</td>
<td>middle class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In an effort to attract affluent newcomers and avoid being perceived as Polish, and therefore too specialized for general consumers, ethnic gentrifiers in Greenpoint actively choose non-Polish business names, have preference for non-Polish-speaking staff, and sell products that generally attract well-educated, middle class clientele.

Because new residents constitute a larger purchasing power than Polish immigrants, their presence has contributed greatly to the recent regeneration of the local dining and shopping scene. Those Polish storeowners who possess economic and social capital necessary to reinvent their stores as more international and upscale often have the advantage of pre-established ethnic social networks and business contacts to operate in the familiarity of the old neighborhood. They do so on a scale unimaginable 10 years ago, when Greenpoint was still predominantly Polish.

Greenpoint’s identity entrepreneurs promote Polish cuisine directly by repositioning it from what is often labeled cheap or worker fare to ‘taste’ of Europe. By inscribing old world identity onto food products, Polish-identified shopkeepers add cultural prestige, highlight product quality and authenticity and hope such cultural signifiers will turn on the new residents to frequent their stores. Higher customer traffic in turn enhances the profitability of the business, and encourages ethnic owners to pay even closer attention to the tastes and wants of the new residents and to adjust Polish cuisine in terms of using healthier ingredients, especially organic meats, and to provide more vegetarian options. Ethnic gentrifiers, on the other hand, disassociate
themselves completely from Polish signifiers and instead opt for western European rather than Polish branding. More often than not, European, particularly French or Italian theme reinforces their commitment to serving the non-Polish residents of Greenpoint and beyond (see Figure 5). Thus an ordinary Polish naleśnik is reborn as a French crêpe, and a traditional pączek assumes the identity of a European doughnut. Others let go of an attachment to any nationality and select artistic, artisanal, or otherwise ethnically neutral identities instead.

The coexistence of these three forms of ethnic entrepreneurship, often on the same street, puts into question the standard gentrification narrative which assumes a clear, empirical divide between gentrifiers and non-gentrifiers. Such positioning of long-time residents as passive subjects and newcomers as active agents of gentrification is challenged by the emergence of adaptive innovators who blur and sometimes dissolve dichotomous gentrifier/non-gentrifier distinction.
During the height of Polish immigration, from the mid-1980s to late 1990s, Greenpoint witnessed an increase in Polish-born residents as well as a neighborhood-wide rise in Polish-owned businesses, which mushroomed along the two main shopping streets: Manhattan and Nassau Avenues. This period of growing demand for ethnic products in Greenpoint is well captured in the words of a Polish deli owner who opened his business on Manhattan Avenue in 1988, four years after his arrival to the United States,

We used to stay open seven days a week from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. In the morning people—mostly men—waited in front of the store to buy the newspaper, a small breakfast, coffee, and cigarettes. Minivans waited just across the street taking three jobs [...] and they worked on weekends and sometimes overnight. So they came to shop at different times, early in the morning, around 5 p.m., then, again around 8-9 p.m., the store stayed busy practically until the closing time.

The Polish sklep is the neighborhood’s Polish-owned deli-grocery that carries a wide variety of Polish products, including specialty foods that cannot be easily found outside of Greenpoint. The sales staff is often drawn from a pool of newly arrived immigrants or seasonal migrants who lack English language proficiency and are largely unfamiliar with American-style customer service. They often work off the books and depend heavily on the enclave economy for regular employment, rarely looking for jobs outside the Polish-speaking environment of Greenpoint.

Conducting business mostly in Polish and offering food menus synchronized with Catholic holidays, Greenpoint’s Polish shops help create a sense of “home away from home” for Polish immigrants. They make Greenpoint look, feel, and smell more like home. Balancing the lack of formal belonging to the host community, Polish stores reproduce the familiarity of the old country by recreating polish-specific social spaces where immigrants engage in social interaction framed by familiar cultural codes. During important religious holidays, especially Christmas and
Easter, the sklep becomes a transmitter of ethnic culture, providing the community with all the tools necessary to reproduce the intimate culinary experience of Polish holidays at home abroad. This experience lies at the core of polish immigrants’ desire to connect to ‘polishness’ through an elaborate cultural ritual. This adherence to traditional Polish customs continues to bring Poles back to shop at Greenpoint’s Polish stores even after residential dispersal occurs.

But demographic change, triggered by the 2005 waterfront rezoning as well as Poland’s 2004 entry into the European Union, more than halved Greenpoint’s Polish population and brought a new type of non-Polish, middle-class residents whose consumption practices differed greatly from those of the traditional Polish immigrant. Janusz, an aging male owner of a local meat market comments on the declining number of Polish customers and describes the difficulty of selling Polish products to non-Polish customers due to their unfamiliarity with polish food products,
There are fewer and fewer Poles in Greenpoint, Americans are not shopping in Polish stores. When I see one come in, they usually take a quick look around and leave. Other than the Tropicana orange juice, they have no idea what’s on the shelves.

Thinner polish customer traffic hurts the profit margin of Greenpoint’s ethnic stores. As more Poles move out the demand for Polish products and services declines. At the same time commercial rents are increasing—even doubling—making lower-end ethnic stores’ survival in the gentrifying enclave very difficult.

Janusz identified rising rents and his advanced age as the main reasons behind his own thoughts about terminating commercial activity.

The rents are going up fast. I cannot believe it! Some places on Manhattan Avenue pay $6,000 to $10,000, I can’t afford that! There are fewer and fewer Poles in Greenpoint, and lately I noticed less of them come to shop from places like New Jersey or Pennsylvania. I guess now there are Polish stores in the suburbs, too. If things keep going this way, I will not last much longer. My lease is up next year—maybe that will be the end. I’m tired, did this for so many years, my kids are not interested in taking over the business. It doesn’t make enough money.

Figure 8. Polish meat market. Manhattan Avenue, Greenpoint, Brooklyn.
Another male storeowner who recently closed a Polish delicatessen after running it for 23 years experienced a different set of challenges associated with gentrification. Because he owns the building where he operates his business, rising rents are not the main threat. However, declining numbers of Polish customers and the inability to understand the needs and consumption practices of the new “American” residents are forcing him to shut down.

I own the building, so I don’t have to worry about the rising rent, but I have no customers. I was successful when Greenpoint was Polish only because I knew exactly what Poles eat on every day of the year. If you know the people, you know the market, you know the cultural customs and what food goes with what holidays, and that’s what makes you successful—otherwise, it’s a risk. After I close, I plan to rent this space to Americans.

He further explains how the repositioning of his business to reflect the tastes and preferences of new residents entails changing the character of the store—an act that, in his opinion, requires a new cultural knowledge he feels he has no access to because of his age:

I had the option to switch to just a standard American deli, but I don’t exactly know what a Polish-American store in Greenpoint means. Can I sell soy milk next to freshly smoked Polish kielbasa? That would probably confuse both Poles and Americans. I don’t know much about the vegetarian products American customers ask for, and I’m getting too old to try to relearn how to run a store.

Retail innovation is a complicated economic and cultural process. The costs of learning specific tastes and buying preferences of new residents, whose consumption practices are extremely selective, discourage traditional Polish storeowners, especially the aging ones, from trying to adapt. Entering an uncharted market territory may be too risky given the tight competition from native vendors who not only have access to greater social capital, but are also themselves members of the group to which they cater.

Adaptation is also a time consuming process. Caught in the scissor effect of declining numbers of co-ethnic customers and doubling commercial rents in Greenpoint,
enclave entrepreneurs are under pressure to make changes as quickly as possible. But most of them are left with too little time and not enough resources to adapt to change.

Stefania, a 60 years old shopkeeper, came to the US in 1988 and six years later in 1994 opened a children’s clothing store on Manhattan Avenue. Her customer base consisted mostly of Polish immigrants, especially mothers and grandmothers shipping clothes to their children and grandchildren in Poland. Because the store specialized in first communion and baptismal gowns, the neighborhood’s other Catholic groups, especially Italians and Latinos, were also among the regular customers. Although everyone knew she was Polish, the name of the store, written in English, signaled a welcoming environment to non-Polish speakers. A conscious appeal to a wider market helped keep a steady flow of non-Polish, but still largely ethnic and immigrant customers.

In the early 1990s, Greenpoint was the backwaters of New York. A place for working-class families. A lot of them Polish. Most of the businesses here on Manhattan Avenue serviced those families. That’s what it was, family businesses, not noisy bars and exclusive restaurants like it is now. My customers were mostly Catholics, Poles, but also Italians, Mexicans, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. They shopped here because they all go to church and they like to dress their children up on Sundays. […] At that time there used to be eight children’s clothing stores here [Manhattan Avenue], now I’m the only one.

Rather than an ethnic place, Stefania characterized pre-gentrification Greenpoint as a “place for working-class families”. Family-oriented lifestyle dominated the commercial makeup of the neighborhood and most of the local businesses serviced the needs of families. In contrast, the new, gentrifying Greenpoint evokes images of young, single men and women without children whose neighborhood presence revolves around “noisy bars”. As newcomers come to live in an immigrant neighborhood they rework the moral codes of neighborhood’s social life (Zukin, Kasinitz & Chen 2016) and disrupt locals’ sense of cultural belonging.

For the 21 years she owned her business, Stefania rented space from a Polish landlord.
Even though the rent increased steadily over the years she has always managed to adjust. But after her long-term lease expired in May, 2015, the rent not only increased, it doubled. Not able to afford the new price tag she was faced with displacement.

Greenpoint is becoming very popular now. Its changed from provincial to trendy. Many art galleries, bars and exclusive restaurants have opened. I’m not saying those changes are bad, its good to see those improvements, but the original small businesses are really suffering. More than just rising, residential and commercial rents in Greenpoint are doubling! That’s exactly what happened to me, the owners doubled the rent and I have to close.

Recent residential turnover in Greenpoint significantly reduced the number of white ethnics and immigrants; what used to be commercial landscape servicing working-class families has now become a site of upscale consumption and leisure targeting Brooklyn’s young newcomers. Although Stefania wanted to win over Greenpoint’s new residents, the profile of her business simply did not fit Greenpoint’s new image.

My business was never strictly for Poles. I have customers from different countries, but they all have certain things in common. They are immigrant families, which means they regularly send parcels with clothes to relatives back home. But the Americans who are moving in to Greenpoint, they are different. Mostly young and single, without families. I never saw a single one of them come into my store.

Greenpoint stores that rose up on the wave of Polish immigration and continue to cling to the old neighborhood are the leftovers from the neighborhood’s recent past; what Greenpoint used to be back when it was a working-class community, composed mainly of immigrant families. The revalorization from marginal to prime urban location and the resulting demographic change erases the social world developed by previous residents, it also destroys the old retail landscape and in its place creates a new one. As the neighborhood transformation proceeds to more advanced stages, it is the old-timers, not the newcomers, who increasingly feel like the outsiders. Traditional Polish shopkeepers no longer fulfill a vital function in the social organism of the
Despite the economic and cultural hurdles that make adaptation difficult, some enclave entrepreneurs—especially restaurant owners—manage to attract non-Polish customers by employing simple strategies that require minimal economic or social capital.

In many cases, ethnic restaurants are in a better position than ethnic stores, because demand for prepared ethnic food consumed on premises is much greater than for packaged ethnic products. Due to the increased global flow of ideas, people, and commodities, ethnic cuisines have been popularized in western societies, leading to an explosion in ethnic restaurants (Warde 2000). In Western cities, consumption of ethnic foods has been linked to a well-educated, urban, middle class for whom eating out at ethnic restaurants is a form of social capital. As Warde (2000) says, “ethnic cuisine could be equivalent to a claim to social rank and thus a means of expressing inequalities of power through consumption behavior” (p. 309).

The growing trend of eating ethnic food has made a positive impact on some of Greenpoint’s Polish restaurants, which have the advantage of local authenticity over other cuisines not directly linked with the ethnic identity and history of the neighborhood. For instance, after years of teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, one owner-operated Polish restaurant became popular after a “bring your own bottle (BYOB)” policy was adopted in 2000. The place became crowded with non-Polish customers. That same year a Chicago-based Polish-American graphic design firm launched the restaurant’s first website using English-language content and bohemian graphic themes to appeal to the gentrifiers. The seemingly cosmetic changes paid off when long lines of predominantly non-polish customers formed outside the restaurant on weekend nights. Traditional flavors and kitsch interior, in combination with online menu and the introduction of the BYOB policy successfully reworked the previously lower-end greasy spoon
to a popular neighborhood joint enjoyed by all residents.

A *New York Times* reviewer described the place as follows: “The small dining room has the look of authenticity that comes only from artificiality: brick wallpaper, plastic tablecloths, fake plants and a stag’s head with tinsel-draped antlers” (Asimov 2002). Local residents consider the restaurant one of those neighborhood places where customers feel like they are “eating in their own grandma’s kitchen” (personal communication).

In fact, the aging Polish owner does all the cooking herself. She describes the change in the customer base as the turning point for her business:

The change occurred in early 2000s. That’s when I noticed more Americans than Polish in the restaurant. Yeah, it really changed. I’d say 95% Americans and 5% Polish. We have all kinds of different people—Chinese, Israelis, Australians, everyone likes the food. Poles only come on weekends when they visit from other places. Polish families that live in Greenpoint, they cook at home. And the workers, they go to the canteens where the food is pre-made and you don’t have to wait. Here, Americans keep the business going, they like to take their time when they eat, it’s how they spend free time. I would have closed a long time ago if it wasn’t for the new American customers.

With the significant exception of the BYOB policy and an English-language website, the growing popularity of this particular restaurant is not a result of a specific set of strategies directed specifically at the non-Polish customers,

I haven’t changed anything. The decor is not the best, but I don’t know how to improve it. I put some plastic flowers, some photos of [my hometown in Poland], that’s about it. The menu hasn’t changed since I opened in 1994.

Publicity—especially a *New York Times* review, but also a few mentions in local, independent press and blogs—and marketing strategies, such as the BYOB policy, help build a positive image, gain popularity, and attract a wide range of customers. The anti-corporate sentiment shared by Greenpoint’s new residents reinforces the desirability for small, independent businesses over corporate ones and privileges locally-owned establishments. This is a part of the
romantic search by gentrifiers for a close-knit, urban community where locals run neighborhood stores and restaurants and everyone greets each other. While some small ethnic businesses may be beneficiaries of this romantic effort to preserve a neighborhood’s small-town feeling, however, an equal effort is not applied when it comes to protecting the right of long-time residents to stay put in the old neighborhood.

But despite the relative success of some polish restaurants in Greenpoint, typical places catering specifically to Polish immigrants and offering a low-price, no-frills menu fail to attract new, culturally sophisticated customers. Significant decline in neighborhood’s working class population and diminished co-ethnic customer traffic, as well as sharp competition from new food and drink venues, make enclave entrepreneurs less resilient to market pressures, especially sharp rent increases.

Throughout the communist era bar mleczny or “milk bar”—a government-subsidized dairy-based restaurant where food is served on plastic plates and cafeteria-style trays—dominated the dining scene in Poland. The menu, often written on a big chalkboard hung above the counter, listed several homemade polish dishes offered at extremely low prices. Patrons sat together at communal tables, ate hurriedly and cleared their own dishes to make room for the next round of customers. When following the collapse of communism, food was no longer rationed, Western fast-food chains penetrated polish market and eliminated the need for milk bars. Cuts in state funding left only a handful of privately-run bar mleczny still operating in some polish cities.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Polish immigrants brought dining habits and practices formed under communism into Polish American communities. Milk bar-style restaurants served an important function in immigrant neighborhoods where the availability of affordable, homemade
polish food relieved the burden of cooking at home, thus maximizing the number of hours available for work, commute and leisure.

Until recently Greenpoint’s “Polonia”, located on the bustling Manhattan Avenue was one such restaurant. Opened in 1997, Polonia looked like a throwback to communist-era Poland, cafeteria-style interior featured a steam table, vertical vinyl blinds, a few tables with plastic chairs and cable TV tuned to a Polish station. The front featured a red awning with a white eagle, the colors and symbols of the polish national flag and the restaurant’s name “Polonia”, or the polish community abroad, was a strong ethnic identification. All the signs on the front windows and the menus inside were written in Polish, a clear indication that the business catered mostly to Polish customers.

Figure 9. Polonia Restaurant, Manhattan Avenue, Greenpoint, Brooklyn, 2013.

After serving Polish blue-collar workers for seventeen years, the middle-age, female, owner was forced to discontinue commercial activity and close down the business. In an
interview⁸ for Nowy Dziennik [Polish Daily News], her husband and business co-owner explains that the closure decision came after the rent has doubled.

“The main reason why we decided to shut down is the drastic […] increase in rent. We couldn’t afford to pay $8000 a month, which is what the owner asked. It meant we had to increase the price of food to at least $15/per dish, just to cover the rent […] but we service mostly low-income population, which means we can’t really raise our prices.”

[Interview, Nowy Dziennik, 12/24/14]

Enclave entrepreneurs are the most dependent on Greenpoint’s status as an immigrant enclave. Their stores and restaurants established in the late 1980s and early 1990s cater directly to Poles, and their entire business experience has been shaped by incoming waves of Polish immigrants to Greenpoint. Commercial changes associated with gentrification, require adaptation and innovation, but many traditional shopkeepers lack economic, social and cultural capital to meet demands of the new customers.

Identity Entrepreneurs

Facing dwindling numbers of Polish customers, some younger food entrepreneurs make the decision to adapt by inventing a different type of Polish-identified business that caters mostly to non-co-ethnics but rely on culture-centered ethnic themes—including Polish folklore—to differentiate themselves from the shabby, worker, canteen-style Polish restaurants that dominated the Greenpoint restaurant scene for the past 20 years.

One emblematic adaptive innovator is Krzysztof Drzewiecki, the owner of five Polish restaurants: two in Greenpoint, two in Williamsburg, and one in Ridgewood, Queens. Drzewiecki arrived to New York in 1998 and started working at a restaurant in Greenwich Village. He quickly moved up the occupational ladder and ended up as the restaurant’s chef.

⁸ Nowy Dziennik, 12/24/14 “Polonia Zniknęła z Greenpoint” [Polonia Disappears from Greenpoint], http://www.dziennik.com/wiadomosci/artykul/polonia-zniknela-z-greenpointu
From there he moved on to Nobu Next Door, an extension of the internationally recognized Japanese restaurant Nobu, where he worked as a chef for two years.

After gaining experience at various other restaurants in Manhattan, he eventually opened his own restaurant, Królewskie Jadło—*King’s Feast* in English—on Greenpoint’s busy Manhattan Avenue. Medieval manor motifs—portraits of Polish kings, swords, and knights’ armor—constitute the main decorative theme. The menu, although traditionally Polish, features historical dishes and drinks that had long gone out of circulation even in Poland\(^9\), including wild boar, stuffed duck legs, and mead, an alcoholic beverage created by fermenting honey, water, and spices.

In a recent interview in *Nowy Dziennik*\(^{10}\)—*Polish Daily News* in English—Drzewiecki talked about his ambition to open a “high-grade” Polish restaurant in Greenpoint where Poles could bring their American friends to share the best of what Polish cuisine has to offer. He stressed how in the past Greenpoint’s Polish restaurants served a purely utilitarian purpose: to feed the masses of hungry construction workers whose wives and families were left behind in Poland. Younger Poles, and especially professionals, however, had no place to go. He also observed that non-Polish food enthusiasts often asked where to go to taste good Polish food. He

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\(^9\) Although 50 years of food shortages and government rationing reduced Polish cooking to simple, bland dishes, like potato pierogies or breaded pork chops, today Polish cuisine is experiencing a culinary renaissance. Chefs in cities across the country are rediscovering the lost flavors of pre-communist Poland and bringing them back to the tables of Polish families. By updating the traditional fare, they are not only modernizing the way Poles are eating at home, but also improving perceptions of Eastern European cooking abroad.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in cities like New York, 19th-century Eastern European food until now was missing from the urban dining scene. It is being reinvented by young Jewish-American chefs who embrace the disappearing food of their grandparents (see http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/28/dining/everything-new-is-old-again.html?src=dayp&_r=1).

These new trends in Poland and abroad may be the first signs of the arrival of Eastern European food—and its many reincarnations—on the urban dining scene. We may see more Polish restaurants open in Greenpoint in the future.

saw a new niche opening in Greenpoint for upscale Polish restaurants and took the chance to create one.

After the idea proved successful, he opened another Królewskie Jadło in Ridgewood and then partnered with another Polish entrepreneur to create the second Polish restaurant on Greenpoint Avenue: Karczma, or a *Roadside Tavern* in English.

Karczma is the classic “ethnic theme park,” a term coined by Krase (2006) to describe Manhattan’s Little Italy, the natives of which are mostly gone, but the spectacle of Italian ethnicity—Italian flags, restaurants, and outdoor cafés—remains embedded in the neighborhood’s streetscape and serves as a tourist attraction. Similarly, Karczma’s interior decoration plays on the theme of the Polish countryside: Waitresses dress in folk costumes, antique agricultural tools hang on walls, and bathrooms look like stables. At the same time, dishes are more elaborate and presented in a more traditional way than at regular Polish restaurants.

In Greenpoint, such commodification of ethnicity represents the owner’s conscious strategy to make his or her store more distinctive. It attracts non-Polish customers who seek a particular experience through the consumption of ethnic foods but are not in possession of membership by birth or marriage.

For non-Polish customers, such access is built through the medium of English-speaking staff, English-language menus, and “authentic” flavors that have nonetheless been altered to suit an international palate. In addition to the traditional polish fare of pierogi, borscht, bigos, or herring in cream, there are also dishes inspired by modern American cuisine such as grilled salmon, organic chicken sandwich or Caesar’s salad. The dessert menu features apple pie and the drink list offers an eclectic selection of wines, beer, and even a polish mojito.
For Polish-born customers, ethnically themed Polish restaurants provide a nostalgic taste of their homeland, which itself has radically changed in the past 20 years. During the communist era eating out in restaurants as a form of entertainment did not exist—rather, it was perceived as a functional task carried out either in the privacy of one’s own kitchen or at the collective level at one’s workplace, where worker canteens served cheap but filling meals. After 20 years under free-market economy, Western-style consumerism, and exposure to lifestyle media, Polish middle-class families today embrace the habit of dining out as enjoyment and entertainment.

These changing national habits now reflect on and reimagine transnational spaces such as Polish Greenpoint, where more middle-class Poles redefine their identity based on the images of “New Poles” disseminated by Polish mass media and place those changes in the physical structure of the neighborhood, especially restaurants and shops. As a result, they directly
participate in the broader change that is transforming the neighborhood.

Figure 11. Polka Dot, Polish delicatessen on Manhattan Avenue catering to Greenpoint’s Polish and non-Polish residents.

At the local level, ethnically themed Polish restaurants become visual symbols of the rootedness of the Polish identity in changing Greenpoint. Polish restaurants like the ones operated by Drzewiecki continue to anchor Polish character of the neighborhood by remaining entrenched in ethnic symbols. This is also a point of attraction for the second- and third-generation ethnics who may seek such ethnically marked spaces to reconnect and identify with common cultural ancestors, but who were previously discouraged from frequenting Polish restaurants due to language barrier.

For other adaptive innovators, however, surviving in the changing neighborhood means having to blur ethnic boundaries while still retaining Polish identity at the core. One middle-aged bakery owner, who came to the United States in 1985, describes how changing the name of his bakery altered his business identity and helped expand his customer base to all neighborhood residents:
My bakery used to be named [Poland Bakery], but now I changed it to [North Brooklyn Bakery]. I want everyone to feel welcomed. There is a lot of diversity in New York, and here in Williamsburg, too, I want to open to all of that, to the whole neighborhood, not just the Poles or other Eastern Europeans. The name North Brooklyn Bakery is a summary, for all of those who come, so they feel like they are all under the same roof, like this is their place, too. Poland Bakery suggested that we offer only Polish products to Polish customers, but that’s not true.

Rather than departing completely from ethnic distinctiveness and emphasizing non-ethnic products, some identity entrepreneurs keep ethnicity as an asset or a resource to help promote their businesses. In addition to offering Polish baked goods, North Brooklyn Bakery had also added steam tables featuring hot polish food at affordable prices:

When we first opened, our customers were mostly Polish, Ukrainians, Russians, Czechs—whomever had Eastern European taste shopped here for bread. When hipsters started moving in, they kept their distance, didn’t really come in. I guess a Polish place was not that appealing to them. But after we started selling hot food, they started coming because they realized our prices were pretty low in comparison to anything that was around and the food tasted good. If you come at lunch, you will see a line of mostly American customers buying Polish food.

Indeed, diversifying the stock and constantly adapting to the tastes of new customers is the gentrification survival strategy. In Greenpoint, the cultural knowledge behind this success may come from the entrepreneurially-minded second generation, which is often more literate in contemporary cultural trends, including food trends, than their first-generation parents. The baker at North Brooklyn added,

American customers are very selective in what they like to eat. My sons help me a lot with that. They read magazines and stuff on the Internet to learn more about the products that are more popular nowadays. They hired bakers who know how to bake artisanal and other kinds of bread that the customers ask for. Before that, we were limited to just Polish bread—that’s what I knew how to make and that’s what the Polish customers wanted. But in the U.S. there are many different kinds of bread, like ciabatta or focaccia. So I had to start making them, and actually it wasn’t just the Americans—the Polish are also very interested in trying new stuff.

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11 Names have been changed.
Selecting high-quality ingredients and altering the production process to reflect the newest trends also matters. The Northside baker noted that:

We don’t use preservatives or other additives. I import flour from Poland, especially rye flour, because the taste is better, but also because Polish flour, like other E.U. foods is non-GMO [genetically modified organisms]. I’m thinking of going all-organic in the future. I even thought of buying a farm upstate to grow my own grain.

Thus, ethnic innovators negotiate across differences by partially adapting the language and practices—non-GMO, organic, locally sourced—that fit into the vision of the “good life” and a great neighborhood held by gentrifiers.

But new products also appeal to the more affluent segments of the immigrant group whose new tastes—a result of acculturation and upward mobility—begin to resemble those of the urban middle class. Ethnic consumer culture is neither monolithic nor bound by a pre-conceived script that is reproduced in its original form generation after generation. Cultural frames of ethnicity are flexible. They change not only across cohorts and generations, but also within the first generation. “It’s not just that I want to attract American customers—many Poles are asking for organic products as well,” stressed the bakery owner. “Especially those who are middle class and who have the money to buy a better-quality food.”

Ethnic innovators thus capitalize on the steady influx of middle-class residents with distinctive cultural tastes as well as on the increasingly middle-class characteristics of Polish immigrants interested in maintaining healthy lifestyle without disconnecting from ethnic food.

*Ethnic Gentrifiers*

The most dominant form of retail adaptation includes innovative business practices which blur, even erase, cultural boundaries between immigrants and gentrifiers. Despite the cultural
stake Poles still claim in Greenpoint, new Polish entrepreneurs—especially food retailers—both younger and more recent immigrants than the majority of traditional ethnic shopkeepers, intentionally omit references to Polish roots. New business identities are built around the lifestyle and neighborhood vision aligned with those of the gentrifiers. As a result of structural assimilation and corresponding cultural repositioning, some Polish immigrants are now upscale consumers themselves, paradoxically, participating in the very lifestyle that erodes the ethnic character of the neighborhood. Shedding working class definitions of ethnicity and operating stores which satisfy the desires of the in-coming middle class, rather than fulfill immigrants’ needs, new Polish entrepreneurs become key drivers of gentrification in Greenpoint.

One such entrepreneur is Magda, a woman in her 40s who holds a university degree from Poland and runs a successful wellness center (yoga studio/spa/café complex) on Manhattan Avenue. In 1997, six years after her arrival in Greenpoint, she opened a real estate business and shortly after partnered with a local Polish developer to demolish old buildings and erect new condominiums. One of the projects is a four-story LEED certified\textsuperscript{12}, green building on Manhattan Avenue which now houses the wellness center. Opened in 2012, the yoga studio and holistic center was inspired by both Magda’s personal interests and rising demand for this type of services in the neighborhood. Despite being a Polish immigrant operating a local business in the heart of Polish Greenpoint, Magda decided not to frame her new establishment in ethnic terms. In fact, her business bears no Polish signifiers and makes no reference to her Polish identity.

My assumption from the very beginning was not to make the distinction between Polish or American. I wanted something for everyone. There are these two separate groups in Greenpoint, Poles and hipsters, my idea was to connect them together and use wellness as a bridge.

\textsuperscript{12} Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) is a rating system devised by the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) to evaluate the environmental performance of a building and encourage market transformation towards sustainable design.
As a real estate agent and a developer, starting in the early 2000s Magda benefited directly from the sharp increase in property values in Greenpoint. Riding the wave of real estate boom, she very quickly accumulated necessary financial capital to expand into retail and service. Revitalization and gentrification of Greenpoint provided not only an appealing exchange value, but also a use-value, where she finds the right social environment to run a holistic wellness center. For these reasons Magda perceives neighborhood growth and reinvestment as a positive, even desired change.

I feel the transformation has been positive. Time stood still in Greenpoint for too long. Some of the Polish grocery stores here have the same look as stores in Poland 30 to 40 years ago. They pretty much sell [the] same stuff, too. No wonder they’re shutting down. Time is moving forward, places are changing, people are changing. The habits are different, what people eat is different. Healthy food is becoming more popular. That’s what customers want and that’s what vendors have to provide even if that means changing.

In her interview statements Magda characterized Polish Greenpoint, including Polish retail businesses, as stuck in time and out of sync with the new economic and cultural trends reshaping contemporary cities. As part of adaptation, ethnic gentrifiers like Magda redefine the meaning of Greenpoint, from “Little Poland” to a middle-class neighborhood. While in the past common ethnicity connected most Greenpoint residents together, now it is a common lifestyle. Rather than speaking of one group succeeding the other, Magda talks about sharing the space and calls on Poles to look beyond ethnic differences and open up to a new, ‘pluricultural’ Greenpoint.

Greenpoint is very alive. Poles, especially shopkeepers, should turn the popularity of this neighborhood into their advantage. If you have a new business idea, this is the place to put it to test. No one says Poles have to leave. We have the same opportunity as anyone else to become successful. Its an open field. We can learn new things and participate in the neighborhood life even though its changing. We’ll always have our churches here, and banks, and some of the traditional stores, but we can also try something new.

Upward mobile Poles like Magda perceive neighborhood change as a positive development. In
this scenario, neighborhood growth is interpreted as an economic opportunity that opens door to new commercial possibilities, such as expanding business operation beyond the ethnically-framed local and regional Polish American market. Because her own individual success is tightly bound with Greenpoint’s transformation into an upscale residential and commercial zone, Magda took the rational step to participate in gentrification economically by running a real estate business and culturally by assimilating ‘hipster’ lifestyle and promoting it through her newly opened wellness center. As a result of changing neighborhood demographics, and competing neighborhood visions, collective definitions of ethnic community are no longer taken for granted and become subjects to negotiation and change (Smajda & Gerteis 2012).

Anna, a Polish female in her 30s who owns and operates a French-themed pastry and coffee shop on Manhattan Avenue shares Magda’s views. When creating the right image for her business, Anna decided against references to Polishness or Poland. Instead, she espoused the ‘Parisian patisserie’ theme, based on personal interest in French culture and cuisine she shares with her brother: “The French theme comes from my personal interest in everything French, especially French cuisine. My brother studied French cooking and baking, and we went several times to visit France”.

The motor behind the move to innovate, however, is the combination of personal preference and economic benefits that come with selling high quality product in a neighborhood with a growing population of highly educated, middle-class residents. By adapting a sophisticated French-theme, Anna distanced her business not only from Polish identity, but from lower-quality stigma associated with Greenpoint’s Polish bakeries. Like Magda, new Polish entrepreneurs operating in gentrifying Greenpoint reposition their businesses from low to high-end, and emphasize quality rather than affordability. Personal preferences, although seemingly
individual are in fact socially constructed and reflect both level of educational attainment and
social class (Bourdieu 1984). As a college graduate and affluent Greenpoint resident, Anna’s
lifestyle, and her wants and desires as a consumer are almost identical with those of the new,
middle-class newcomers.

Its not really that important if you do a traditional Polish store or an American one. The key to success in Greenpoint is the product. New residents demand high quality. It doesn’t matter if its pierogi, pork chop, a croissant or a cup of coffee! As long as you have a high quality stuff made with best ingredients available it will sell.

Anna has also commented on the shortcomings of traditional Polish businesses, especially in the area of customer service. As was the case in communist Poland, rude or inattentive sales persons are a common experience in Greenpoint’s polish stores. Anna believes this is one of the reasons those businesses fail to attract non-polish customers who demand—and are willing to pay for—excellent service. Knowing this stereotype might drive Americans away she works hard on developing good relations with customers, even if it means discriminating against Poles for “front of the house” positions.

Americans come to traditional Polish stores or restaurants because they like the food. They never come because they like the service. Each time I go to [name of local Polish bakery], I feel like crying, the service is so bad and the counter girls look so glum. In running my business I quickly learned how much attention Americans pay to customer service. I always go beyond myself to befriend the customers and make them feel welcomed. This is so important to me I prefer not to hire Poles as baristas.

Kasia, another ethnic gentrifier who sells organic body care products in her new store on Nassau Avenue shares basic social characteristics with both Magda and Anna. She is in her late 30s, came to the US in 2001 and holds two university degrees, one from Poland and one from the US. She self-identifies as a member of the middle-class and when opening the store in 2012, she
decided not to cater specifically to Poles, but to everyone. From the first day she offered trendy products that fit the frame of organic, natural, environmentally conscious, sustainable lifestyle adhered to by so many of Brooklyn’s new residents. Just like Magda and Anna, Kasia used lifestyle not ethnicity as the main symbolic framework for her business. Sharing similar lifestyle with the incoming gentrifiers allowed her to comfortably adapt to their needs, predominantly because they are the same as hers.

Greenpoint is growing, there are more people moving in and more stores opening, everything is expanding and the neighborhood is becoming very attractive to live in. The new residents like healthy lifestyle, which is so different from a typical polish immigrant. Americans who are moving in here want to stay fit, eat organic and use natural products as often as possible. In that sense I feel I have something in common with them. I like the eco-friendly lifestyle, I believe in sustainability.

Using words similar to those of Magda and Anna, Kasia pointed out that her store is not about ethnicity; it is not by definition meant for a group who speaks same language, or shares same origins and cultural customs, instead people who shop in her store are connected by age, education, social class and corresponding lifestyle.

My store is as much for Poles as it is for anyone else. Of course my customers are mostly Americans, but that’s because more of them live in Greenpoint, not because Poles are not interested in organic cosmetics. […] It’s not about ethnicity. It’s about education, culture, and individual lifestyle. There are Poles who are very open to change and novelty, and there are the ones who are not able to step outside of what is already familiar to them.

Adaptive innovators such as Magda, Anna and Kasia, are younger, better-educated and more recent immigrants than the traditional enclave entrepreneurs prevalent in Greenpoint. High proficiency in the English language and familiarity with urban trends, which they absorbed living in large Polish cities, allow them to move away from the traditional “ethnic” model of entrepreneurship and adapt to the wider market based on selling high quality products popular among Greenpoint’s newcomers. The stores they
open erode Greenpoint’s Polish character same way other commercial gentrifiers do. But rather than Polish identity, what is mainly being eroded is the working-class definition of ethnicity, which along with the changing physical space of the neighborhood undergoes a social and cultural transformation.

**Conclusion**

As the polish community in Greenpoint began to unravel due to residential dispersal, declining rate of immigration, and gentrification, a handful of polish shopkeepers took the initiative to change their business practices in order to adapt to the changing neighborhood. By catering to Greenpoint’s new residents as well as to the middle-class Poles with tastes similar to those as the newcomers and by letting go of the traditional way of running ethnic businesses the innovators attracted more customers and succeeded in an increasingly competitive environment. Doing so, however, required them to shed working-class definitions of ethnicity and to reposition their identity as “European” or “hipster” rather than Polish, which is associated with low-end ethnic products sold to working-class population.

My findings are in sync with research on Italian Americans, which shows that white ethnicity remains salient but is renegotiated in the face of market demand and community change (Smajda & Gerteis, 2012). Retail business owners face this option more than either landlords or tenants, and some business owners find it more accessible than others.

Furthermore, white ethnics maintain a privileged status in gentrifying neighborhoods because, unlike low-income African Americans or Latinos, they rework identity by marking or unmarking ethnic identifications and blurring and even erasing socio-ethnic boundaries between themselves and the white gentrifying group.
Of course, urban gentrifiers are not always white, low-income minority neighborhoods in Chicago and New York City have experienced gentrification led by the black middle class as well as whites (Taylor 1992, 2002; Boyd 2000, 2005; Freeman 2006; Patillo 2007; Zukin, 2012b). In this sense Polish American commercial gentrifiers are similar to other gentrifiers in ethnically and racially marked neighborhoods. For example, recently Harlem experienced immigration of black middle class entrepreneurs whose stores and food/drink establishments cater to Harlem’s new middle class residents, both black and white (Zukin 2010, 84-85). By emphasizing references to the Harlem Renaissance, and downplaying area’s recent past as the “dark ghetto”, middle-class black entrepreneurs claim “authentic” belonging, even though they contradict the old ghetto culture (2010, 87). In a similar manner, new Polish entrepreneurs in Greenpoint cater to middle class residents, both Polish and non-Polish, but lacking powerful cultural identity in the neighborhood, they instead claim ‘authentic belonging’ by repositioning their businesses as “European” or simply “hipster”.

Divergent meanings of ethnicity, especially when reinforced by class divisions, undermine community solidarity and make political mobilization against neighborhood change difficult. As neighborhood demographics change the connection between ethnic identity and ethnic community weakens. The next chapter deals with voice, a form of agency that Hirschman reserves for individuals who engage politically to advocate for improvements. Although attempted by some Polish community leaders, voice or political resistance to gentrification was not one of the response embraced by Greenpoint’s Poles. The following chapter describes how divided Polish community failed to form a collective response to neighborhood change and prioritized private interests over ethnicity and community.
Chapter 5. Intra-Ethnic Divisions, Institutional Decline and the Failure to Voice

Introduction

In Hirschman’s theoretical scheme voice is a type of action available to social actors unable or unwilling to exit. To Greenpoint’s working-class Polish tenants exit means moving out to more affordable areas, but also away from established ethnic networks, services and neighborhood-based ethnic institutions. As the neighborhood opens to outsiders, aging property owners sell properties and exit happily to quieter areas in the US or in Poland. In terms of retail change, exit means closing down of ethnic stores which have catered the specialized needs of the community and visually symbolized the ethnic character of Greenpoint for decades. In both residential and commercial aspects, exit contributes to decline in Polish presence in the neighborhood and results in the loss of ethnic community. Hirschman argues that voice is contingent on loyalty, or in this case the extent to which immigrant actors are willing to fight to maintain a spatially-defined ethnic community.

As mounting structural pressures in the form of rising rents threaten the survival of polish community in Greenpoint, the question that immediately arises is whether Poles made attempts to mitigate the exclusionary effects of gentrification and exercised voice? Community studies and gentrification literature indeed confirm that ethnic grass roots organizations have the potential for becoming platforms for social justice organizing in the context of gentrifying neighborhoods (Newman & Wyly 2006; Marlow 2007; Hum 2014). But what happens when ethnic population is decreasing, social divisions challenge, even override ethnic solidarity and the physical neighborhood is being rapidly reshaped by large-scale corporate developers?
Although their organizing efforts are often hindered by limited financial resources, historically immigrants have been successful in using voice to challenge undesirable neighborhood change. Asian-American communities, for example, have a particularly robust history of defending the enclave from dispersal and destruction. In the 1970s, in what became one of the longest housing conflicts in postwar America, Filipino community in San Francisco stopped evictions of hundreds of elderly Filipino tenants caught in the midst of SF’s major downtown renewal project (Solomon 1998). Chinese and Japanese immigrants in Los Angeles, New York, Boston and San Francisco have also engaged in political struggles to protect the integrity of their neighborhoods against redevelopment pressures (Lin 1995; Liu 1999; Liu & Geron 2008).

Besides Asian-Americans, other inner city ethnic groups, particularly Latinos, have fought extensively to protect their communities against urban redevelopment. In the 1990s, Puerto Rican community on the Lower East Side resisted middle-class housing development in place of community gardens, an essential part of the neighborhood’s social life (Martinez 2010). Success of such groups suggests that local movements can and do influence urban governance and the spatial form of global cities, even if the context of their activism is defined by powerful economic and political interests.

Rising rents and residential displacement has long been considered one of the primary dangers of market-led and state-facilitated gentrification (Newman & Wyly 2006). The areas most affected by these changes are low-income communities often lacking resources to respond to lack of affordable housing and to protect the most vulnerable residents against the threat of displacement. In the context of declining federal support for low-income renters in New York City, and around the country, as well as decline of urban resistance movements, neighborhood-
based organizations, including ethnic organizations become the key local agencies connecting low-income residents with critical resources such as affordable housing (Marlow 2007).

Negotiating urban change proves especially challenging in culturally diverse and multi-ethnic neighborhoods, where ethnic territoriality, cultural differences and long-standing conflicts can and do hinder joint political action. Yet, in some instances inter-ethnic alliances bring activists of different backgrounds in dialogue and successfully organize unified political action to protect their shared neighborhood (Hum 2014). In North Brooklyn, both Greenpoint and Williamsburg are in Community Board 1, a local political body which represents several different groups including Hassidic Jews, Latinos, Poles, Italian Americans and more recently middle-class whites. Each of these groups maintains social and political control over a specific section of the area and tends to get involved chiefly in matters that affect their own group rather than the whole community. Because of this fragmentation, bringing them to negotiate neighborhood change together presumes a challenge and often gets in the way of building a stronger, more effective political front.

How did Polish community organizations react to neighborhood reinvestment and gentrification-led displacement in Greenpoint? To what extent did polish-neighborhood based organizations participate in the coalition of neighborhood groups opposed to the terms of the 2005 Rezoning? Did polish community leaders follow in the footsteps of the Latino and Hasidim groups in South Williamsburg and engage in efforts to campaign for affordable housing? And lastly, can a traditionally understood ethnic solidarity be a useful resource to confront threats to immigrant neighborhoods?

I argue that polish community in Greenpoint was not able to overcome divisions on the issues of neighborhood change and the resulting loss of ethnic community. While polish
community facing gentrification made use of three distinct forms of social action — participation, exit, and adaptation—voice was not one of them.

Essentially, a form of political action, voice is an alternative to exit. If social actors are convinced that voice may be effective in bringing about change than the exit option may be postponed or entirely rejected. As Hirschman argues, “once you have exited, you have lost the opportunity to use voice, but not vice versa” (p. 37). When voice is unsuccessful, however, or never formulated or articulated, exit becomes the dominant option. Greenpoint’s Poles neglected voice as a tool of protest against neighborhood change, and instead took the easier and more predictable option to exit. With the exception of a handful of older-cohort Polish American community leaders who actively advocated against aggressive waterfront development, Polish community as a whole did not form a unified opposition to neighborhood reinvestment, gentrification, and the disintegration of their own ethnic community. As those processes unfolded in Greenpoint, Polish voice was largely non-existent.

Hirschman introduces the concept of loyalty to provide a more solid understanding of the conditions favoring exit and driving out voice. Although fuzzily defined, loyalty represents the role of emotional and informal attachments in decision-making process. In the context of gentrifying Greenpoint loyalty stands for ethnic solidarity understood as neighborhood attachment including feelings of concern over the loss of ethnic space and breakdown of ethnic community. When levels of loyalty increase, the conditions become ripe to suppress exit and activate voice. The propensity to resort to the voice option depends also on the collective readiness of the actors to engage in political action, and on the community institutions to channel and facilitate communication.

This study revealed that the combination of weak loyalty, lack of unity and institutional
decline led majority of Greenpoint’s Poles to the wide-open option of exit rather than of fighting and protecting the ethnic community. Polish property owners embraced gentrification as a mechanism of increasing exchange values of their properties. Economic benefits in the form of higher incomes from rental properties and increased home equity diminished loyalty and increased the tendency to exit “happily”. The emergence of ethnic shopkeepers who negotiated gentrification through innovation and adaptation helped dampen the need for voice and instead led to economic, social and cultural reworking of ethnic meanings and practices. Although Polish tenants at risk of displacement felt discontent and anger over losing affordable housing, they lacked the aspiration of collective action and rarely sought political recourse. Instead of loudly voicing protest against gentrification and displacement they took the option of exiting in silence.

Lastly, Polish neighborhood-based institutions were severely weakened by declining membership and lack of effective leadership. Some of the leaders were, in fact, property owners themselves and therefore hesitant to act against their own class interest. In addition, unlike in other neighborhoods where building ownership is corporate and represents abstract forces of capitalism, Polish landlords in Greenpoint are a visible part of the community often perceived as hardworking, church-going, family-oriented people. This aspect of neighborhood structure further discouraged community-wide action against neighborhood change.

**Community Resistance: Past and Present**

Greenpoint-Williamsburg community has a long history of local organizing and defending the neighborhood against external threats. Community activism in North Brooklyn has been shaped by decades of struggles against the destabilizing forces fed by deindustrialization, municipal service cuts, disinvestment, environmental hazards, and solid waste industry. In fact,
some of the organizations instrumental in challenging the 2005 rezoning plans have been operating—often under different names—since the 1970s.

Women were particularly central to community organizing in Greenpoint-Williamsburg area. In 1974, drawing on tactics of the civil rights, anti-Vietnam War and feminist movements, many educated, middle-class women came to organize working-class women and men against the destruction of local low-income housing (Susser 2014). In 1975, a branch of the National Congress of Neighborhood Women was co-founded in Brooklyn and developed a neighborhood college where working-class women, many of whom did not hold a high school diploma, could attend classes. Many of those Italian-American, Polish-American and African-American women became neighborhood organizers themselves and developed tactics to work across ethnic lines to improve their communities. Williamsburg-Greenpoint women also played an important role in the 1970s defense of local firehouse ordered by the city for closure amidst the 1975 fiscal crisis (Susser 1982) as well as the 1982 women-led opposition to convert Greenpoint Hospital into a homeless shelter—a facility many feared would accelerate neighborhood marginalization (GREC 2013).

In the 1980s, artists pushed out of gentrifying Lower East Side and Soho moved to Williamsburg and established working studios in the area’s derelict warehouses and empty factory lofts. Having experienced displacement themselves, they became ardent fighters against the threats of gentrification, at the same time recognizing their role as ‘pioneers’ of the process (Smith 1996; Lloyd 2010; Zukin 2011). Artists joined working class residents and women activists by founding neighborhood organizations such as Neighbors Allied for Good Growth (NAG) (formerly known as Neighbors Allied Against Garbage) which has been instrumental in stopping the planned Brooklyn Navy Yard Incinerator in the 1990s and the prevention of the
building of private transfer stations along the waterfront (Susser 2014). NAG continues to serve the Williamsburg-Greenpoint area today by focusing on issues of environmental justice as well as providing tenant services.

Ethnic solidarity became particularly salient during the postwar decades, when North Brooklyn’s white ethnic residents formed a common front against the in-migrating racial minorities from the adjacent Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bushwick and Bedford-Stuyvesant. Driven by fear of declining property values, neighborhood instability, and their own prejudice and racist sentiments, Polish Americans, Italian Americans, and other white ethnics who considered North Brooklyn their ‘turf’ waged a war against the in-coming, low-income African Americans and Hispanics. By excluding minorities from the local housing and rental market, white ethnics acted as neighborhood gatekeepers and stayed in charge of who moves in and out (DeSena 2005).

Growing racial tensions climaxed in 1984, when the battle to close the McCarren Park Swimming Pool and to keep African American and Puerto Rican youth from coming into the neighborhood engulfed the community (Chronopoulos 2013). One of the 11 gigantic public pools built by Robert Moses throughout the city, McCarren Park pool first opened in 1936. Nicknamed the “Coney Island of the North”, the outdoor pool accommodated 6,800 swimmers and provided a recreational space to area’s landlocked residents (Short 2012). As municipal funds dwindled in the 1970s, however, the facility fell into a state of disrepair and local white population stopped using the pool. Attracted by plenty of space and a lack of security, youth from nearby neighborhoods of Williamsburg, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bushwick and Fort Greene began marking the facility as their own by placing graffiti and even staying on premises overnight. This new development angered Greenpoint’s residents who deemed the pool “too
large to handle” and called on the city to close it (Short 2012). Ultimately, the City Hall determined the facility required substantial renovation and the pool closed at the end of the summer of 1984.

In 2005, the year of the Williamsburg-Greenpoint waterfront rezoning, the empty pool basin opened as a temporary concert, dance and movies venue. Two years later, after the area experienced an influx of affluent whites and crime rates continued to drop, mayor Bloomberg announced that the city would fund a full restoration of the pool as part of the PlaNYC initiative (Short 2012). The $50 million restoration was completed in 2012.

Finally, a proposal to build a large power plant on the Greenpoint-Williamsburg waterfront ignited community-based groups to form a massive coalition and to stand together as a single, united voice against the external threat. In 2000, residents of North Brooklyn learned that an energy company TransGas Energy Systems (TGES) proposed a 1,100-megawatt natural gas cogeneration power plant, large enough to provide 10 percent of New York City’s peak energy needs to be built in their neighborhood (http://gwapp.org/about/history). In response, approximately forty community groups came together to form a powerful coalition Greenpoint and Williamsburg Against Power Plant (GWAPP), that aimed to fight industrial development and to preserve the “urban village” character of the neighborhood. A few years later, GWAPP, reincarnated as Greenpoint Williamsburg Association for Parks and Planning became instrumental in challenging the terms of the 2005 Williamsburg-Greenpoint waterfront rezoning plan, a major part of Bloomberg’s corporatist and estate-driven approach to community development.

Eugene, a retired financier and a local activist who came over from postwar Poland as a child and lived in Greenpoint all his life, recalls appearing in front of the City Planning
Commission and voicing community protest against the M3 zoning, which allowed for power plants and other industrial facilities to be built on the North Brooklyn waterfront.

I went in front of the City Planning Commission and said: Your zoning is wrong. You’ve got the waterfront zoned as M3, which means we can build nuclear power plant there and you have waste transfer stations and very onerous activity. I said you have no vision. They said, look, we need the M3 zoning for city services. I said have you ever visited that waterfront, have you ever seen the view? I said, you have no vision, both literally and figuratively, because you’ve never seen it, nor you have a vision what that waterfront should be.

As a community representative, Eugene expressed North Brooklyn’s need for waterfront rezoning, which most residents felt was the necessary step to prevent the city from housing undesirable city facilities in the neighborhood. The power plant presented a sudden threat to North Brooklyn’s quality of life, and prompted property owners in both Williamsburg and Greenpoint to press city authorities for rezoning. Because the planned construction was located slightly to the north of the Greenpoint-Williamsburg border, the residents most involved in the fight came from the Northside of Williamsburg and from Greenpoint, but less so from Los Sures, the predominantly Latino and Hassidic area of south Williamsburg, which confirms area’s political fragmentation.

Because of the geography of the conflict, Eugene stressed that the opposition against the TGES power plant involved Greenpoint’s Polish community. A large number of homeowners in Greenpoint are Polish. Their common interests as property owners provided the meaningful reason to join the community protests against the power plant.

A number of us here in Greenpoint, who happen to be Polish also happen to be very aware of what’s going on in the community […] Out of the population of about 35,000 in Greenpoint, you had 200 people who were active and those are the people whom you’d see at the community meetings. There were maybe 20 or 30 Poles who came out to meetings regularly. The rest of the people live their daily lives and only come out of the woodwork when there is some kind of common enemy. We got them to come out when they wanted to build the power plant because they felt that would affect the property values. Many homeowners
Undesirable land uses, including industrial facilities such as power plants, lower neighborhood’s appeal to the middle class and translate economically into falling property values (Farber 1998). The coalition built by Greenpoint’s local residents, including Polish homeowners, have successfully fought the battle against the TGES power plant and promoted North Brooklyn as a quiet, residential area of working class, immigrant families. Fighting the stationing of industrial facilities in the neighborhood became a unifying theme for local homeowners, including Poles, who came together to protect their shared neighborhood and their own interests as property owners.

Neighbors Allied Against Garbage (NAG), a community organization located on the Northside of Williamsburg and serving North Brooklyn since the 1980s has been an important part of this coalition. Unlike some community organizations in Williamsburg and Greenpoint, NAG does not identify with one single ethnic group, but represents the interests of all the residents regardless how they choose to identify themselves. Originally formed by artists displaced from the Lower East Side, NAG, nonetheless, serves predominantly the Northside residents who are mostly white, well-educated, and native speakers of English. Although no Polish immigrants are active NAG members, their most important “ally” is a Polish immigrant Marek Nagawiecki, who first came to Greenpoint in 1976 and after a few years of working in construction saved enough money to start his own business. Mr. Nagawiecki bought his first building at 101 Kent Avenue in 1980 and leased an old factory warehouse on the Williamsburg waterfront directly across from his home to store his construction equipment. At the time, both
properties lay in close proximity to a seven-acre industrial lot utilized as an illegal waste transfer station.

In the early 1990s, Mr. Nagawiecki came in contact with NAG and other community groups eager to shut down the waste transfer station and to turn the seven-acre lot into a state park instead. As the owner of properties adjacent to the industrial lot, and several other properties in Greenpoint, Nagawiecki supported the idea of having a community park and offered NAG a low-cost office space in one of his buildings on Kent Avenue. When interviewed, Ashley, a former tenant organizer for NAG who had moved from a mid-western town to Greenpoint in 2003, and now works for Mr. Nagawiecki as his assistant, described his role as NAG’s “ally” and “silent benefactor”.

NAG’s original mission was to turn this land which was being used as an illegal waste transfer into a park. Mark owned this building [101 Kent Avenue] and that building [directly across the street at 110 Kent Avenue]. Mark was a natural ally, so he invited NAG to move into one of his buildings. […] he was one of the original people to help fight even before the rezoning, this [pointing to East River State Park] became a park early on. NAG’s been fighting all through the 1990s for this to be a park and Mark was one of the main people. […] we’ve been at 110 Kent Avenue [NAG’s present location] since 2009, before that we were just across the street at 101 Kent [a building also owned by Nagawiecki]. It’s always been here. In the 1990s Mark used to have an office here for his construction company, then he moved and he gave us this space. So, yeah, he’s been NAG’s silent benefactor since the 1990s, he’s always given them a way below market rate rent, way below!!

Nagawiecki does not represent Polish community as a whole, but with the local community as well as his private interests in mind, he was able to reinforce neighborhood-level organizing by providing office space and making small donations to support NAG, one of the neighborhood groups most active in the opposition to TGES plant and later in the fight for reasonable waterfront rezoning. While Nagawiecki declined to be interviewed for this project, Ashley, who currently works as his office assistant and manages his properties said property values and neighborhood attachment are two main factors driving Nagawiecki’s willingness to improve the
He definitely has a view of commercial interest and money, but he’s also been living here, raising a family, his kids were here. He always thought this area should have more parks and greenery. [...] so this sort of vision that this should be a park was around. Mark agrees that people should make money, but we can also keep nice public spaces, it works together.

Nagawiecki acted individually without engaging polish neighborhood-based groups into organizing a Polish front in a fight against the waste transfer station, the TGES power plant, the rezoning or other pressing neighborhood issues. Instead his unique position as a long-time resident, multiple property owner, local landlord and a successful developer, shaped him as an influential local actor. In this sense, individuals with superior social and financial resources proved a more effective way to stage community opposition than neighborhood based Polish organization and ethnic institutions.

To sum up, Polish involvement in the opposition to TGES hinged on a handful of local stakeholders such as Eugene and Marek Nagawiecki—both older-generation Polish Americans—who possessed superior resources, proficiency in the English language, extensive community networks and familiarity with local political processes. Polish homeowners and landlords who were more recent immigrants, supported the struggle by participating in community meetings with the help of English-Polish translators sponsored through local Polish parishes, Polish Credit Union and Polish National Home. But none of Greenpoint’s Polish organizations built a distinctly Polish coalition to support community struggle against the power plant or later against the terms of the rezoning plan. If Poles participated, they did so through non-polish neighborhood groups that came and reached out to them as members of the community.

The fight against the TGES plant was a paramount example of different neighborhood groups coming together as a unified neighborhood defense. The community consensus,
however, splintered into fractions when North Brooklyn residents faced the Bloomberg-initiated Williamsburg-Greenpoint waterfront rezoning. Unlike a power plant, which stigmatizes a neighborhood and may lead to declining property values, the rezoning, which opened large swaths of unused industrial land for residential and commercial development did not pose an immediate concern to local homeowners and landlords. To the contrary, changing the zoning law resulted in revalorization of previously disinvested and unstable areas which were now on their way to become commercial and residential destinations. This was desirable to area’s property owners who benefitted from the dramatic increase in property and rent values. Participating in the community fight against the terms of the rezoning would have been the same as acting against their own economic interests.

Community Planning and 2005 Waterfront Rezoning

For decades, Greenpoint-Williamsburg community has been envisioning an upgraded waterfront as a means to spur economic growth in North Brooklyn and to reverse the effects of deindustrialization and municipal disinvestment.

In New York City, the balance between the lack of effective regulation of urban development and the pressing needs of local communities is reached through comprehensive community-based planning, usually carried out by local political bodies such as community boards, as well as neighborhood-based non-profits. Community groups and local planners draft neighborhood development proposals, officially known as 197a plans (named after NYC Charter section 197a) with the aim to inform and influence local urban policy.

The neighborhoods of Williamsburg and Greenpoint share the same community district represented by Community Board 1. In total, there are 59 community districts in New York, each
with its own community board appointed to review and oversee neighborhood development processes. Community board public meetings—where local residents air concerns to developers and city officials—are intended to democratize and decentralize urban governance by bringing voices of local actors into the urban decision-making. However, the decisions of community boards are advisory only, and city government may or may not take them into consideration (Angotti 2011).

Although Community Board decisions are integrated into the public review process concerning land uses, they rarely exert real political influence over policymakers. Any land use action in New York City must pass through a public review process called Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP). As part of this process, the Department of City Planning must forward land use applications to Community Board in the affected district for approval and recommendations. ULURP participation is considered the most effective way that community boards shape their local neighborhoods (Hum 2014; Pecorella 1989). Closely tied to borough presidents and City Council, however, community boards lack the ability to act independently and are frequently subject to institutional override.

Like most other Brooklyn districts, CB1 is socially and ethnically diverse and serves different populations including Latinos, Hassidim, Polish immigrants, white ethnics, and more recently gentrifiers. Ashley, who worked as tenant organizer for NAG and actively participated in community board meetings on the rezoning, describes the Greenpoint-Williamsburg as divided among several community-based organizations each representing a specific area and serving a different population.

El Puente represents Latinos in the South [Williamsburg] the Los Sures. In the East, there is St. Nick’s Alliance, which also serves Latinos. Peoples’ Fire House was sort of around here [Northside] so they serve whoever lives here. Going north into Greenpoint, you have North Brooklyn Community Development Corporation, and
they do a lot of stuff, but predominantly serve Greenpoint’s Polish community. NAG we […] tended to work with the hipster community.

Differences between these various groups sometimes slow the local political process, but under certain conditions CB1 was able to organize effective, community-wide action. Support to protect North Brooklyn against undesirable industrial uses brought the community together in pursuit of a common goal. A desire to live in a clean and safe neighborhood smoothed over differences and reduced the social distance that normally keeps ethnic groups apart. Conflicts still arose and some of them were never reconciled, some groups participated more than others at different times, but in general, the community achieved a level of organizational cooperation that allowed them to create a unified vision to protect the community against future undesirable development.

In the 1990s, local residents and appointed officials carried out an eighteen-month study which resulted in a comprehensive waterfront development proposal (197a plans) based on a combination of residential, mixed use, and commercial zoning. Submitted with an equal measure of community pride and hope, the proposals received final approval from the City Planning Commission in 2001.

Polish community’s contribution to the 197a plans was limited. None of the key polish neighborhood-based organizations took an active role in the community planning. Most of them focused on the massive influx of new immigrants that settled in Greenpoint following the collapse of socialism in Poland. However, a handful of well-established older-generation Polish-Americans, became key actors in the process and participated directly through non-Polish local non-profit groups. The three most notable activists included Richard Mazur, Christine Holowacz and Christopher Olechowski. Both Mazur and Olechowski arrived during the postwar wave and
lived in Greenpoint since the 1950s. Mazur first settled in Greenpoint with his family when he was three years old. He lived in Greenpoint all his life and eventually became the founder of North Brooklyn Community Development Corporation, a non-profit organization devoted to developing and managing affordable housing in North Brooklyn. He was actively involved in the drafting of the Greenpoint 197a plans, opposed the TGES plant and advocated ‘sensible’ rezoning.

Chris Olechowski’s family settled in New York few years after the end of WWII. They came from Poland via the UK, where Olechowski was born and learned to speak English. Closely attached to the polish community in Greenpoint, Olechowski started his community service as the head of Rezoning Task Force created in response to the proposed rezoning plan. From 2009 to 2013 he served as the Community Board#1 chairman and 50th Assembly District leader from 2012 to 2014.

Christine Holowacz came to the United States from Poland as a teenager in 1972. She served as the president of Greenpoint Property Owners since 1989, and worked on housing issues, especially those concerning senior citizens, co-sponsoring informational housing seminars with the North Brooklyn Development Corporation for owners and tenants. Holowacz served on the Greenpoint 197a Committee, and since 1999 has worked as community liaison on the Newtown Creek Monitoring Committee, ensuring that the community is protected from the potential environmental dangers presented by the upgrade of a wastewater treatment plant.

Community vision, which Mazur, Olechowski and Holowacz helped to author, centered on the mixed-use, mixed income character of the neighborhood, and focused on affordable housing provisions to protect the area’s low-to-moderate income residents as well as on preserving area’s manufacturing base, which many of the local residents depended on for jobs (Curran 2007).
Public waterfront access and more park areas also figured as top community concern. In an interview, Katarzyna, a Polish American resident and a long-time community planner and activist describes the community vision for the waterfront as one based on low-key development and open space such as parks, plazas, and boardwalks; a development, which in her opinion would not only increase local residents’ quality of life, but also spur economic growth by bringing tourists into the long-depressed area.

Community vision for the waterfront was to turn it into open space, low-rise housing. My feeling was it should be boutique hotels and a pristine landscape with lots of trees and flowers. So that tourists would spend their day in Manhattan and do their shopping and all the hustle and bustle and noise and nightlife and Broadway shows and then take a ferry back across the river and quietly sit in their suite, in their boutique hotel on the river, slide open the curtains and look at the spectacular view of the skyline that they just spend the day on. Well, that did not ever happen.

[Interview, 12/14/14]

As an important voice of the community, Katarzyna’s statement indicates that local residents not only advocated for waterfront redevelopment, but also had a specific idea of what that transformation should look like. They hoped the rezoning and waterfront revitalization would reinforce the “urban village” image that residents of the Greenpoint-Williamsburg area have protected for decades. At the same time, the vision compromised on low-rise luxury residential and commercial development such as ‘boutique’ hotels and other tourism-related amenities in hopes tourist dollars would help revitalize the area, however, hotel taxes in New York City are not directly applied to better the communities where the hotels are located.

In 2002—only a year after the approval—the Bloomberg administration overturned 197a plan and to the dismay of the local community introduced a new plan, in which economic development was defined in terms of real estate and corporate investment rather than jobs and
affordable housing for residents (Susser 2014). New York City political elites practice a well-established policy of using zoning instead of planning to govern land use policy (Angotti 2011). Don, a Polish American residents and tenant organizer at North Brooklyn Community Development Corporation who preceding the 2005 Rezoning was among the first to advocate for ‘sensible’ waterfront redevelopment, relates his experiences at Community Board meetings on the rezoning and the political limitations imposed on local areas by central agencies such as the City Council or the Department of City Planning. His statement highlights that local policies serve private rather than public interests and fail to protect moderate and low-income residents against the loss of affordable housing. As a result they reshape neighborhoods physically, socially and culturally and decrease socioeconomic diversity in changing urban communities.

I always made the statement, even at City Planning, there is no such thing as City Planning. They do not plan anything. If they were to plan something than they might have plan something beautiful, if you have a vision of this beautiful waterfront, this would require to bring in a city planner, architects and landscape designers to do the planning. City Planning is a misnomer, as City Planning said to us at the first meeting, the first question I asked them when they announced waterfront rezoning: What about housing and affordable housing as part of the development process? They said that’s not part of our plan. They said rezoning is an economic development tool. So they don’t plan, they react to economic proposal. When someone says rezone because I want to build, they rezone.

[Interview 12/12/14]

The new City Council proposal presented no budget requests to create public access on the waterfront, no initiatives to preserve light industry and very few provisions for affordable housing (Angotti 2005). In-sync with mayor Bloomberg’s new conceptualization of the city’s brand as luxury product (Brash 2011), the rezoning proposal favored large-scale luxury residential and commercial development, but did not provide protective measures for the most vulnerable population affected by the rezoning: middle-to-low income residents and senior
Shortage of affordable housing is one of the most critical problems facing New York City today. Between 2005 and 2012, the median monthly rent across the city increased by about 11 percent, but the real income of the city’s renters has stagnated, rising from $40,000 to just $41,000 in 2012 (De Blasio Ten Year Plan 2014). During the same 20 years, almost 55 percent of all rental households in New York were rent-burdened or spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs, and 30 percent were severely rent-burdened or spending 50 percent of their incomes on rent. Housing costs all across the city are rising much faster than incomes, making the city more unaffordable to growing number of middle-to-low income New Yorkers.

The unprecedented number of rezonings under the Bloomberg administration exacerbated the crisis by stimulating luxury residential and commercial development in low-income and working-class neighborhoods. Although Bloomberg vowed to construct or preserve 165,000 affordable housing units by 2013 most of it relied on voluntary inclusionary zoning (Department of Housing Preservation and Development 2007). The disappointing results of this strategy proved that unless developers were allowed to increase market rate units by increasing building heights, they were not legally bound to provide affordable housing. Under voluntary inclusionary zoning law, developers agree to set aside 20 percent of the total number of units for affordable housing, and, in exchange they are allowed to build 33 percent more square feet than is otherwise permitted. Affordability criteria are also set at income levels that disqualify many working-poor residents from becoming eligible.

Not only do rezonings and gentrification promote luxury housing development, they also trigger deregulation of existing affordable housing stock. Keen on maximizing market
opportunities, many landlords strive to forego tax subsidies and convert rent-controlled and rent-stabilized buildings to market rate rentals. Between 1994 and 2012, the city suffered a loss of about 150,000 rent-stabilized units, or 16 percent of the total regulated stock (NYC Housing Preservation and Development 2014). This significant loss coincides with wide-spread rezoning, intensification of gentrification and real estate boom in New York.

In an effort to preserve affordable housing, reduce displacement of working-class population, as well as assure public waterfront and park access, a massive coalition of outraged community-based groups and local political representatives, including Brooklyn Community Board 1, North Brooklyn Community Development Corporation, Greenpoint Waterfront Association for Parks and Planning (GWAPP), Los Sures, El Puente, Concerned Citizens of Greenpoint, Newtown Creek Alliance, Neighbors Allied for Good Growth, Peoples’ Fire House, local Catholic churches and various other neighborhood associations, strongly opposed the terms of the proposal. Displacement of current residents, was also seen as a perpetuation of racial and ethnic injustice, as both Williamsburg and Greenpoint are home to large ethnic and immigrant populations.

Local activists demanded 40 percent affordable housing with income criteria set to reflect local area, contextual development (limitations on building heights), and more parks and open areas, public waterfront access, and preservation of mixed land use character of the neighborhood including light industrial, residential and commercial uses.

Again, Community Board 1 acted as the umbrella organization to lead the community coalition against the unfavorable terms of rezoning, just like it did when the community was opposing the power plant. This time around, however, community consensus did not come together easily. Ethnic territorial boundaries and social divisions got in the way of effective,
district-wide organizing. Expressing her own frustration at the lack of cooperation among
different ethnic groups—which in her opinion might have built a stronger base for more effective
negotiating—Ashley was quick to say that the neighborhood coalition was “mostly in name”.
Local groups put their names on petitions and appeals, occasionally went to rallies together and
held up signs, but never collectively engaged in a serious political debate over the changes
reshaping the neighborhood.

We know from all of history if you divide a community that’s how you conquer it. That’s
one of the reasons why gentrification was able to come in here the way it did. I mean
clearly, because of our waterfront view and because of our industrial history, [which]
makes it a natural target anyways. But the fact that communities didn’t tend to work
together, they did sort of, but I feel like it was mostly in name and they didn’t actually
politically strategize together. Like they didn’t sit down together and say we gonna go to
our council reps and ask: What’re we gonna say? What are we going to demand? I feel
like they had some time to do rallies together, but strategizing, coming together behind a
closed door and formulating a plan that did not happen and that’s a problem. It still
continues to be a problem.

Local activists, including NAG, found it especially difficult to bring Poles and Latinos to work
together on community issues because a long history of conflict divided the two groups.
Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Latinos and Poles competed over territory and dominance in
Greenpoint. As swelling tides of immigration brought more Dominicans and Puerto Ricans to
Brooklyn they began expanding from Bushwick, and other Brooklyn neighborhoods further
north into Williamsburg and Greenpoint. At the same time an increased rate of immigration from
Poland created high demand for affordable housing among newly arrived Polish immigrants who
concentrated in Greenpoint. Because to Poles the in-coming minorities represented the spearhead
of the outside world, which threatens to destroy the community, they used the advantage of
homeownership to prevent Latinos from settling in Greenpoint. This angered the Latino
community who felt excluded and unlawfully barred from access to affordable housing. At
times, both sides resorted to street violence. Ashley, who witnessed Latinos and Poles interacting
at community board meetings sensed feelings of mutual resentment rooted in past conflicts.

There has always been, and I cannot quite put my finger on what it is, a friction between the Polish community and the Puerto Rican/Dominican community. I feel like just now, maybe, some of that past fighting from the 80s and the 90s is maybe getting healed. But in 2005, they typically didn’t work together on things. They tend to have a border, anything that happens north of the [Greenpoint-Williamsburg] border, the polish community gets to dictate, anything that happens south of the border the Latino community gets to dictate. […] I sure have been at meetings where I felt like what am I missing? They’ll refer to something that you don’t quite know what they’re talking about, but you get the sense that, oh, there was drama in the 80s and 90s.

Ashley further explains how the lack of homeownership put Latinos in a more precarious situation than area’s other residents at risk of displacement. No other tenant group has been affected by the territorial division between Poles and Latinos, more than the small pockets of mostly Dominicans who lived on the northwestern portion of the Greenpoint waterfront. Because they consider it a “polish territory”, Latino organizations including tenant services in south and east Williamsburg tend not to get involved in anything that happens in Greenpoint. As a result of this territorial division, the small population of Latino tenants in northern Greenpoint was left without assistance.

There was very little dialogue between the pockets of Latinos on the waterfront with the larger Latino community in the south. They were easily displaced partially because they didn’t know their rights. And because most if not all of them were tenants, not homeowners [emphasis added]. So this division everything north is Polish, everything south is Latino, didn’t really help the little pocket of Latinos in the north. St. Nick’s crossed the borders and came up here a little. But in general the border got in the way and the groups were angry about it.

In Greenpoint, majority of Latino and Polish immigrants experienced gentrification differently; high rate of homeownership among Poles protected them against immediate displacement. In contrast, the tenant status of the Latino population made them more vulnerable to changing housing market. Rising rents and rising costs of living quickly diminished the Dominican
population in Greenpoint who was unable to organize politically due to physical isolation from wider Latino networks in the South Williamsburg.

Although ethnic friction between the Hassidim and Polish immigrants occasionally surfaced in landlord-tenant conflicts, Ashley saw the two groups as generally aligned in terms of ethnic traditionalism and the norm of non-involvement in neighborhood politics unless it directly caters to their own group interest.

As a tenant organizer I had very often times, I was like wow... Hassidic landlord, Polish tenants, the fights have been very heated and ethnically personal. As a group though the Hassidim and the Polish people they are always like we are the same, because most of the Hassidim tended to come from places in eastern Europe, both groups are traditional, family-oriented, but I don’t think as communities they had ever come to work together, but the Hassidim don’t really work with anyone outside of them. Unless they really have a political interest they tend not to speak up about things that happen north of Broadway. That’s their line. They were not ever involved in the power plant opposition or the superfund or other environmental stuff that’s really based in Greenpoint, at all.

Conversely, when a conflict broke out between Hassidim and Latinos over a rezoning in South Williamsburg known as the Broadway Triangle, Poles remained passive as the area didn’t really concern them directly.

In general they [Hassidim] didn’t really get involved in the [2005] rezoning, at least vocally, I don’t know behind closed doors. Their battle had a lot to do with the Broadway Triangle, and the polish people aren’t really involved in the Broadway Triangle at all. That was a fight that ended up being between the Hasidim and the Latinos and Polish stayed out of it. Broadway Triangle was another rezoning and it’s a lot of city owned land and the Hassidim have dictated what happens there. They wanted low-rise [development], Latino community was pretty much left out of the community planning. […] they wanted tall towers because they wanted more affordable housing. Hassidic wanted low-rise and wanted it centered on the Hassidic community.

Ethnic territorial boundaries and ethnic tensions have at times stood in the way of building a
truly unified front, one that could engage different community voices to resist the problematic aspects of the rezoning plan, preserve neighborhood mixed-income character and protect the most vulnerable residents from displacement.

**Community Divisions and Weakening Group Solidarity**

CB#1 leadership eventually created a Rezoning Task Force made up of five committees, each targeting a problematic aspect of the rezoning proposal: 1) Economic Development — to stimulate business and create local economic growth, 2) Height and Bulk— to address questions of building height and size as most local residents wanted the new development to fit in the context of the neighborhood’s prevailing architectural style, 3) Density — making sure the infrastructure, including public transportation such as buses and the subway, but also roads, bridges and sidewalks can handle a growing neighborhood population, 4) Open Space — to advocate for more open public space and parks, and 5) Affordable Housing — the purpose of this committee was to demand inclusionary zoning as a protective measure to keep the neighborhood socially diverse. Rezoning and rapid real estate appreciation, especially rising rents, create a threat of displacement to low-and-moderate income residents, who can neither afford to rent the new units, not even remain in the old ones.

A local polish activist, Chris Olechowski was elected the chair of the Task Force. A representative of a Greenpoint nonprofit also involved in the same project, commented on the importance of Olechowski’s job by highlighting that: “Olechowski conducted all of the meetings of all the committees combined. It was a big job. We consolidated everybody’s opinion and he basically authored the community board’s position on the rezoning”.

As an elected official, Olechowski worked for the Community Board and represented all of
Greenpoint and Williamsburg. Although not directly supported by polish organizations, he tried to engage them in the neighborhood debate over the rezoning, because the change was also impacting Greenpoint’s polish residents. He made sure that polish pastors made announcements during Sunday mass about rezoning meetings sponsored by the polish bank, and conducted by himself and other polish-speaking local activists. Some of the meetings were held at the Polish National Home, an important local polish organization, which participated only as far as making the facility available, while Olechowski made the speeches and circulated information in polish.

Antoni, a longtime resident of polish descent, active in the community opposition to the rezoning, comments on the lack of participation of the key polish organizations:

It doesn’t necessarily mean that his [Olechowski’s] voice represented the entire polish community in Greenpoint. Not all of them were aware of the rezoning. The neighborhood-based polish organizations didn’t really take a position in this. The Unia [Polish&Slavic Federal Credit Union] helped to organize a couple of informational meetings at the Polish National Home, but they were not otherwise committed to the cause. The churches were directed by the bishop, by the diocese. Polish pastors were very cooperative, but it didn’t come from their own initiative. We publicized our meetings about the neighborhood changes and about tenant organizing in the parishes. We would have up to 400 polish people at these meetings. But, I would make the observation that there were no big polish organizations backing up the resistance to rezoning, and no organizations were formed to mobilize neighborhood actions.

[Interview 12/5/14]

One of the most important division in polish communities is between ethnics (either native-born Americans of polish descent or Polish-born who immigrated in early childhood) and immigrants (foreign-born Poles) the majority of whom arrived quite recently between 1980s and 1990s. Although linked by common ancestry, distinct cultural and social identities of the two groups created internal borders based on socio-economic status, language proficiency (either Polish or English), political attitudes and competition for leadership, which generated mutual mistrust and undermined group solidarity (Blejwas 1981; Erdmans 1998).
The contrast between the two groups became salient in the arena of collective action to support the opposition to the 2005 rezoning. Greenpoint’s Polonia failed to organize a unified front against the terms of the rezoning and was divided on issues of affordable housing. Although a handful of ethnics such as Mazur, Holowacz and Olechowski were actively involved in the rezoning plan, majority of Greenpoint’s new polish immigrants failed to exert political pressure to guide the process.

In the absence of community-wide polish response to neighborhood change, polish interests in the community and polish opposition to the 2005 Rezoning have been represented and facilitated mostly through a non-profit North Brooklyn Development Corporation (NBDC) headed by a longtime resident and polish ethnic himself, Richard Mazur. Founded over 25 years ago, NBDC is committed to affordable housing including senior housing development and management, economic development, community development and tenant services.

In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s community development organizations used to acquire ownership of buildings with unpaid property taxes and at risk of abandonment through the city’s Third Party Transfer program (Newman & Wyly 2006:50). Once in the hands of community organizations such buildings were developed into affordable housing for low-income residents. But due to the recent housing boom, community organizations find themselves competing against private developers who are able to make higher bids.

NBDC has successfully sponsored six affordable housing projects to date, for a total of 208 affordable units in Greenpoint. The Herbert Street Condos, their most recent project is a 14 units condominium at 37 Herbert Street in Greenpoint. The units were available for purchase through the New Foundations Homeownership Program of New York City’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the New York State Affordable Housing Corporation and the
Housing Partnership Development Corporation.

In addition, jointly with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, NBDC administers the Greenpoint Environmental Benefits Program, with $19.5 million fund, established with the money paid by ExxonMobil in 2011 settlement with New York State related to a decades-old oil spill in Greenpoint.\(^\text{13}\)

Stan, a representative of the organization highlights that despite the lack of references to Poland or ‘polishness’ in its name and official description, informally the organization has a polish profile and caters predominantly, but not exclusively, to polish population, but members of other ethnic groups are not denied services.

Our entire staff is Polish. We go out of our way to make ourselves look like an independent organization, but every polish person comes to us. We essentially cater to polish people. Even the Polish and Slavic Center sends people here. Our goal is to improve the quality of life of the residents of community and if you’re Spanish you can also come here and we’ll help you.

[Interview 12/5/14]

In fact, Stan mentioned local tenant advocacy group that brings members of different ethnic groups, especially Latinos and Poles, to work together on housing issues.

We meet at least once a month with the Latino community, because the problems are the same. They organized a building around the corner on Franklin Street, where there was mostly Latinos who got evicted out of their homes because landlord wanted to fix up the building and rent it to richer people. So we sat vigil with those people, I brought them hot soup in the wintertime. When we [North Brooklyn Development] organized a building on 175 North 8\(^\text{th}\) street that was mostly polish tenants, they [Latinos] came and supported us.

[Interview 12/5/14]

The Latino-Polish alliance described by Stan is a very new development in the community history. In fact it might be the first sign of a dialogue between Latinos and poor Poles, although

\(^\text{13}\) www.gcefund.org.
full reconciliation still remains largely out of reach and Latinos and Poles are still a long way from cooperating on neighborhood issues in the future.

Besides the post-rezoning episodic alliances with the Latino community, however, Stan stresses the North Brooklyn Development Corporation is the core institution serving predominantly Polish immigrants affected by rising rents.

Polish participation in the opposition to the 2005 rezoning was in great measure stimulated by us. Although we are not a polish organization we cater to polish population with needs, mostly housing needs. We take care of seniors and others who don’t have as much money. The support we got for the rezoning and the fight to make it inclusionary for affordable housing. We were the ones fighting the gentrification of the community from the angle that affects polish population. They had to move out of Greenpoint, so our job was to try to find them housing in Greenpoint or protect them from getting evicted.

[Interview 12/5/14]

Stan further details how the rezoning fight involved mostly poor Poles and some polish community leaders, but not the bulk of Polish homeowners, who emerged as gentrification supporters:

A lot of the people who were instrumental in the movement for sensible development of the waterfront were polish. Just take Mazur, Chroscielewski, Olechowski, Bikowski, they were active on behalf of the entire community, or nationality and took the forefront. Besides them, it was the poor Poles who were most enthusiastic for our rezoning fight, and they were out there chanting. You know, we would translate some of the chants and songs in polish. Our numbers were in the few hundreds Poles standing behind in our fight against the power plant and the rezoning. It was easier against the power plant, people felt threatened. It was much harder to unify Polonia against the rezoning because property owners, which was also the case for non-polish population, were not bothered by the rezoning.

[Interview 12/5/14]

Drawing on his own polish heritage and his extensive experience assisting Greenpoint’s polish residents, Stan stressed that homeownership is one of the primary goals of polish immigrants settling in the US. Because of the high rate of homeownership, Polish immigrants were not as
easily displaced as the Latinos.

A tenant organizer in South Williamsburg once asked me: How is it that Greenpoint has retained more of the polish population than we have of the Latino population in Williamsburg? I told him, homeownership. The Poles bought property and that’s the difference. And it’s not an ethnic difference, it could be because they come from a country where everything was a common property under communism. Coming to America a Pole would rather eat bread and onions and never have meat and pay the mortgage and pay a house than take care of luxuries.

In fact, he emphasizes that Polish property owners embraced the rezoning because it benefited them through rising property values and higher rents:

I will tell you that polish homeowners probably welcomed with open arms the rezoning, because that meant that the property values were going up and they were very happy about it. Our eviction problems aren’t with non-poles evicting poles, *its poles evicting poles* [italics added]. Everybody is greedy. Once you saw the dollar sign, the little lady that paid you $400 for 30 years, became very unimportant when you knew you could charge $2500 because that’s how much people were willing to pay, so you found a way to get rid of her.

[Interview 12/5/14]

Surprisingly, polish tenants in Greenpoint also emerged as gentrification supporters, because they were aspiring homeowners themselves.

Even they [the renters] are more sympathetic to homeowners, because they are in the process of saving money to buy a house. Their mentality is: “I’m not with the poor people. My intent is not to be a renter all my life, so I like the idea of being able to collect a higher rent. Because once I buy a house, I will do the same thing”. And they do. So its all about being the part of the American Dream. […] they don’t mobilize for affordable housing, because they don’t want to associate with those poor, struggling, displaced tenants.

[Interview 12/5/14]

Besides economic self-interest, Stan described ideological legacy brought over from communist Poland as an important factor discouraging polish tenants from demanding affordable housing:
In the communist system, you never got anywhere or anything if you didn’t go around the rules and didn’t give a bribe. So they think that those Poles who get into the affordable housing are somehow cheating or bribing city officials.

[Interview 12/5/14]

In communist Poland and other eastern bloc countries, corruption was an everyday phenomenon. The pervasive shortages that characterized centrally planned economies prompted consumers to bribe state bureaucrats and economic managers in order to access hard to find goods, particularly apartments and cars (Muzio-Węclawowicz 1996). The experiences of widespread bribery in the socialist housing system continued to inform and shape polish immigrants’ beliefs and attitudes about public housing in the US. Because some community members heard unfounded rumors that one had to pay a bribe to the polish pastor and to the head of NBCDC Richard Mazur in order to get a subsidized apartment they opted out of this form of public assistance as a way of coping with neighborhood change.

Zbigniew, a polish deli owner and former member of CB#1 echoes the importance of earlier experiences in communist Poland in shaping polish immigrants’ beliefs and attitudes towards political life, which affected the ability to organize in the enclave. According to him, polish indifference to calls to community action is partially explained by political apathy and a culturally conditioned suspicion of public officials acquired during the communist times:

There are about 50 people who show up at the Community Board meetings every month, including the staff. Since Greenpoint is a polish neighborhood I expected many Poles to be present at those meetings, but on average there were only three. Theoretically speaking, Community Board is representative of the people who live in the neighborhood and most of the residents are polish. When I joined the Community Board, I was the third Polish person there. I asked myself, where is the rest? Where are the Poles? I was sure that at least half of the members would be polish. But Poles are not really interested in community activism. They only care about their private affairs, maybe some activities organized through the polish church, but other than that they stick to themselves. I think this is a part of the communist times mentality when it was best not to get involved in anything and not to participate in any political activities, because those things could be later used
against you.

[Interview 8/6/13]

However, the fact that several new political organizations, most importantly *Pomost*, were created by newest cohorts in the 1980s and 1990s suggests the new immigrants were politically active. Yet, their activism was aimed externally at supporting anti-communist opposition in Poland rather than internally at protecting the interests of the local ethnic community in Greenpoint.

In summary, polish immigrants emerge as gentrification proponents rather than opponents for three interrelated reasons. First, participating in gentrification is beneficial to homeowners because of higher rent rolls and rising property values. They embrace the process even if doing so means ending leases and evicting their co-ethnic tenants.

Second, the latter are aspiring homeowners themselves and as such are more likely to identify with the successful homeowners than with the poorer members of the community who having failed to accumulated wealth are now facing displacement and may have to rely on public assistance to meet their housing needs.

Additionally, ideological heritage brought over from communist-era Poland, such as internalized distrust of government bureaucracy and suspicion of corruption among local public officials undermined ethnic solidarity and further discouraged poor polish tenants from organizing and participating in local campaigns for affordable housing. In general, Polish immigrants scorn state dependency, which they view as a “handout” and associate such benefits with the corrupted communist system they had loathed for decades (Erdmans 1998).

Lastly, the bulk of polish immigrants in Greenpoint consisted of newcomers in need of employment, housing and language training. Those needs predetermined the profile of ethnic
organizations they formed which for the most part dealt with problems of immigrant adjustment. Moreover, desire to participate in neighborhood politics was missing, because of strong identification with the Polish national society and politics.

Polish ethnics have continually sought the involvement of polish immigrants to preserve polish character of the changing neighborhood, but to various degrees of success. This was surprising given that the high concentration of Polish immigrants in Greenpoint, makes them the area’s strongest ethnic influence and therefore invests them with a degree of political leverage. Even when the encroachment of high-rise development on the Greenpoint waterfront threatened the future of ethnic community, local polish organizations have done little to protect neighborhood’s polish character.

**Greenpoint Waterfront Development**

In December 2013, the City Council approved a mega-project known as Greenpoint Landing and 77 Commercial Street on the Greenpoint waterfront— the planned development was to be larger than Williamsburg and Long Island City waterfronts combined.

The larger of the two, Greenpoint Landing (see Figure 1), consists of ten 30- to 40-story luxury residential towers featuring up to 5,500 housing units and 4,900 square feet of ground-floor retail space covering 22 acres of North Brooklyn waterfront, and an additional low-lying base building at 21 Commercial Street (Community Board 1 Public Hearing Notes 2013). In exchange for development rights purchased from the city at a subsidized rate ($8 million for 295, 000 square feet) the developer/owner, Greenpoint Landing Associates LLC, a subsidiary of Park Tower Group, has agreed to provide a total of 1,382 affordable housing units, build 2000 square feet of waterfront access, donate land for a 640-seat public elementary school, expand
existing public park areas and possibly add a pedestrian bridge connecting North Greenpoint to Long Island City, Queens (Community Board 1 Public Hearing Notes 2013).

When completed the high rises will bring an estimated 10,000-15,000 of new residents into a neighborhood of 37,000 (as of 2010 Census). The greatest problem posed by this new development activity is financial speculation on land and buildings leading to mounting financial pressures, in the form of rising rent, evictions and non-renewals of leases, all of which is threatening to the low-income residents and low-margin retailers already struggling to stay in the neighborhood.

At first glance new towers rising on the derelict industrial waterfront may seem like a case of revitalization without displacement, in reality, however, waterfront redevelopment impacts land values and residential and commercial rents further upland. This makes sense, given that the City’s ability to create value through rezoning is based on rapid real estate appreciation. When real estate values go up so do property taxes and ultimately tax revenues.

As poorer residents leave under the economic pressures of gentrification, local social spaces, including shopping streets, gradually shed ethnic and blue-collar identities, and neighborhood retail stores start catering to the distinctive lifestyles of the higher-status residents who replace immigrants as the neighborhood’s core purchasing power.

Thus the redevelopment of the waterfront remakes the neighborhood as a whole. As developers break ground for the new luxury buildings, the old identity of the neighborhood rapidly crumbles and the working-class community transforms into shinier, and increasingly more exclusive enclave of luxury housing for affluent residents.
Voicing concerns of hundreds of other local residents over the impact of the development, Jan, a long-time resident and head of local preservation nonprofit stated his dissatisfaction with the undesirable neighborhood change.

My commitment to Greenpoint is very strange. I could have lived anywhere in the United States, but I’ve liked it here. I saw a potential beautiful future, I wish they restructured the waterfront according to the 197a plan, it would have been a much prettier community. Now it will be supersized, homogenized, sterilized, a place where no one knows your name. They erased the warmth. Whether it is the Polish section or the Italian or Puerto Rican, or a nice bodega with Dominican food or polish food, you always get the local sounds and smells, and you know you are in Greenpoint. This is why people came here to begin with. I fought for it every day.

[Interview 12/12/2014]

Jan’s statement expresses a strong attachment to Greenpoint, shared also by other Polish-American residents whom I interviewed during my research. His concern about the changing
character and the disappearing “warmth” that characterized the area before the rezoning is coupled with the disappointment at the waterfront not being developed according to the 197a plan which the community painstakingly worked on for several years. Jan indicates that some of the community members—himself included—had “fought’ to preserve Greenpoint’s small town image because that’s what makes the neighborhood special and in his opinion has attracted newcomers to move there in the first place.

Regulations set by the 2005 rezoning agreement allowed the new waterfront development, Greenpoint Landing and 77 Commercial Street (and all future North Brooklyn waterfront development) to proceed without the need for an additional public review process. However, Greenpoint Landing involved an additional purchase of city-owned property (22 Commercial Street), and the developer of 77 Commercial Street requested a permit to increase building heights and the city sought an approval from the local community board. Greenpoint Landing had been initially capped at 15 stories (150 feet) to reflect the area’s R6 zoning, but the developer requested to double the height to 30-40 stories (400 feet) high-rises, for which they needed R8 zoning 14.

The proposed double height for Greenpoint Landing further infuriated local neighborhood groups, already resentful of the rezoning, and aroused another wave of opposition. CB#1 voted “no” on 30-40 story high rises and pressured elected officials to revise what the locals considered to be an out-of-scale development. In a renewed effort to preserve what was left of the mixed-income character of the neighborhood, the community had placed affordable housing back on the table. In fact, the level of frustration among the residents was so high, some of the community groups considered opting out of ULURP altogether and fighting the underlying rezoning.

14 The high-rise portions of The Edge and Northside Piers on the Williamsburg waterfront are examples of the types of buildings allowed under R8 zoning.
This time around the Polish community showed more discontent. By 2013, mass residential displacement reduced Greenpoint’s polish population to half of what it was in the years leading up to the 2005 rezoning. Although other factors such as significant drop in new arrivals, reverse migration and suburbanization of the existing immigrant population also contributed to this sharp decline, rising rents and property values are among the main forces currently driving demographic change in Greenpoint (Stabrowski 2011).

Because the new high rises on the waterfront threatened an erasure of Greenpoint’s polish character, Polish ethnic, and at the time chairman of CB#1, Christopher Olechowski, embarked on a self-conceived campaign to demand polish-specific affordable housing as a concession to the community largely composed of polish residents. At this point, it became apparent that the city authorities intended to override the community board’s vote and approve the developer’s request for higher towers. Although preliminary talks to create additional affordable units in exchange for increased building heights were scheduled to take place, no concrete proposals were yet revealed. Ahead of the scheduled talks, Olechowski intensified his campaign during the Polish Heritage Day, an event established to promote and enroot Polish identity in Greenpoint. He believed the city authorities should protect polish community from disintegration by guaranteeing a percentage of the new affordable units to polish residents facing eviction or struggling to keep up with rising rents.

“Greenpoint for Poles”

On October 20, 2013, Greenpoint’s Polonia celebrated the annual Polish Heritage Day. The conservative leaders of the polish community, including local pastor, rev. Marek Sobczak and Community Board 1 chairperson, North Brooklyn’s 50th District Leader and a long-time local
activist Christopher Olechowski, introduced the celebration as a political vehicle to mobilize polish immigrants to support the idea of polish-specific affordable housing.

The event took place at Father Jerzy Popieluszko Square, a small plaza at the Greenpoint-Williamsburg border, featuring the bust of Jerzy Popieluszko, a charismatic Catholic priest murdered in 1984 for his support of the underground trade union “Solidarność” (Solidarity). In Poland, Popieluszko is celebrated as a national hero, second only to Pope John Paul II, the first Polish head of the worldwide Catholic Church, and Solidarity’s leader Lech Wałęsa. In 1985, Polish-American leaders in Greenpoint—many of them political exiles from communist Poland—requested from the City Council and then mayor Edward Koch to rename the square in the honor of the martyred priest. From then on, this public space was strongly identified with Poland’s postwar history and polish political immigration to Greenpoint.

Timing of the event was crucial, in just seventeen days, the City Planning Commission and the City Council was set to pass final approval on the Greenpoint Landing and 77 Commercial Street and Olechowski saw it as an opportunity to escalate his campaign in Greenpoint. His intention was to direct the attention of city officials to declining ethnic density and changing character of the neighborhood.

Following commemorative celebrations at Popieluszko Square, Olechowski circulated petition ([www.change.org](http://www.change.org); [www.nowydzienik.com](http://www.nowydzienik.com)) calling for the preservation of Greenpoint’s polish character and specifically demanding a percentage of affordable housing at proposed waterfront development set aside for long-time polish residents facing displacement from their rental apartments:

We demand that local politicians, city officials, as well as developers give priority to Polish immigrants, who have been forced to relocate to other neighborhoods or are on the verge of eviction from existing buildings due to rising rents. [We demand] that the quota for Polish residents qualifying for affordable housing be set
in accordance with the percentage of the Polish population that has traditionally resided in Greenpoint.

[Excerpt from Olechowski’s Petition]

In a short speech he gave before circulating the petition, he framed the need to maintain Greenpoint’s “polishness” as a patriotic duty of every polish immigrant and evoked Popieluszko’s social activism as a call-to-action for the polish community to save what is left of the diminished polish stronghold. In doing so he made an appeal to the close affiliation of religious with nationalistic feelings among Poles and evoked narratives of the polish nation’s victimization at the hands of the communist regime.

Just like Popieluszko demanded social justice, so we too have to demand that this neighborhood, in large extent inhabited and maintained by our countrymen, should retain its polish character.

[Excerpt from Olechowski’s Speech at Popieluszko Square, 10/20/13]

The audience of close to fifty participants consisted entirely of Polish elderly, mostly aging immigrants who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s. The event, however, attracted almost no young people. This suggests that the particular brand of religious nationalism evoked by Olechowski is eroding among younger generations of Poles who are less likely to remain as patriotic or even as Catholic as the older cohorts. Instead Polish national sentiment is being supplanted by a new sense of Polish American identity. Eroding Polish-centric identity among younger Polish immigrants and the increasing identification with American peers diminishes the potential for an ethnically framed, neighborhood-based protest against neighborhood change and the subsequent disintegration of ethnic community in Greenpoint.

In hopes to influence local policy and to push for more affordable housing for low-income
and elderly polish immigrants, Olechowski presented his appeal to the office of Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz in one of the public hearings on the planned development. He justified his demands based on his definition of Greenpoint as a polish neighborhood.

“Regardless of your background, Greenpoint is always associated with being “Polish”. For decades it was home to many generations of Polish immigrants: those who came for bread in post-WWI period, those condemned after WWII, and those exiled activists during the Solidarity period in the 1980s […] Here, we raise our children, build Polish Churches and establish Polish organizations and businesses. Greenpoint was the place where sooner or later our roads would meet […] because Greenpoint was always the symbol of our national identity.

[Excerpt from the Petition]

Part protest, part religious ceremony, the event was intended to increase polish visibility in the neighborhood and to voice concerns over the marginalization of the polish group in comparison to the in-coming population in the rapidly changing Greenpoint. Polish and non-polish community organizations, however, considered the event exclusionary, possibly even racist. All speeches including Olechowski’s were delivered in Polish without English translation; the petition written in Polish was also targeted at Polish-speakers only and carrying the title “Greenpoint for Poles” it could offend non-polish members of the Greenpoint community.

Although the event itself was a minor ripple in Greenpoint’s political landscape, the petition, disseminated via the internet and presented to Borough President Marty Markowitz at a public meeting, attracted local media attention. Press articles and private blogs criticized Olechowski’s “discriminatory” (see Hoffman 2013) demands and rightly pointed out the legal problem: the setting aside of housing units for any ethnic group is a violation of numerous city and federal laws, including the New York City Human Rights Law of 1945, Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which prohibits discrimination “based on
race, color, religion, sex or national origin” (http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/hce/title8.php). In response Olechowski proclaimed the polish group as “an adversely affected minority” whose “right to stay put” (Newman and Wyly 2006) and to maintain ethnic community should be respected and protected. In a private communication he welcomed the idea of other ethnic groups, especially the Latinos, to organize separately around the issue of affordable housing in Greenpoint, as they had done elsewhere in New York City.

Ultimately, a compromise reached between local City Council representative Stephen Levin and Greenpoint Landing developer, approved the increased building heights in exchange for 200 additional affordable housing units and a development of a new park at 65 Commercial Street, currently an MTA storage site (see figure 1). Not surprisingly, request for Polish-specific housing was rejected and the petition which garnered a couple of hundreds signatures was scrapped.

First of all, the lack of legal ground to support Polish-specific affordable housing prevented community organizations, normally dedicated to helping and organizing polish tenants, such as NBCDC, from taking his efforts seriously. Community development corporations receive much of their funding from public sources and are particularly disinclined to support any action that falls outside of the legal perimeter set by local or federal laws (Stoecker 1997). Lack of collective approach to an issue affecting not just polish, but a wide range of local residents, and Olechowski’s unwillingness to cooperate and consult with other polish or non-polish neighborhood groups set him apart from the rest of the community. As Antoni, a middle-age tenant organizer providing services to polish immigrants at the North Brooklyn Community Development Corporation describes:

Olechowski’s campaign was ill-conceived. There is no way from a Civil Rights
standpoint that you can have affordable housing only for polish people. It was
great speech, great thought, but not ever executable, there was no way to effect that
kind of change […] We [NBCDC] want Poles to stay in the community, we work
on those issues, but he [Olechowski] never consulted us. It was an interesting
statement in terms of getting attention, but if anyone ever reads it, I don’t think
anyone ever believed that he could ever execute this. To me he sounded like an
idealistic college student who wants a revolution […] Without thinking he took the
idea and ran with it. He didn’t consult with other polish institutions or
neighborhood-based groups.

[Interview 12/5/14]

Polish and Slavic Center (PSC), a neighborhood-based social and cultural services
organization and the largest Polish-American organization on the East Coast, has also largely
disapproved of Olechowski’s rallying call. Although devoted to serve Polish-American
community, PSC relies heavily on public funds to operate most of their social programs
including those that serve the elderly. The popular “Krakus” Senior Center housed in the PSC’s
main building at 176 Java Street in Greenpoint is attended by approximately 130 seniors daily.
Like other similar programs administered by local agencies around the city, Krakus Senior
Center is funded by the NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA). Joanna, a middle-age,
representative of the organization points out that political engagement in campaigns that violate
anti-discriminatory laws could jeopardize the flow of funding and result in a termination of
further public assistance; a risk the PSC is not willing to take.

[…] we are partially financed by the Unia [Polish and Slavic Federal Credit
Union]. But that alone doesn’t cover all our expenses, we need public funds and
because of that we don’t support political actions that go against anti-
discriminatory housing laws. You can’t demand government-subsidized housing
only for polish people. There are non-polish residents who also need it. But I
understand that he meant well, Krzysztof is very committed to the Polish
community.

[Interview 1/29/15]

Ultimately, Olechowski’s resistance neither drew on, nor mobilized effective ethnic solidarity.
The exclusionary terms of his campaign kept Polish community-based organizations from joining his efforts and he simply lacked in influence and man-power to deliver powerful opposition on his own. His campaign has also come too late on the timeline of neighborhood’s change. By the time Olechowski made his speech at Father Popieluszko’s square, Greenpoint’s Polish population was already halved and the community had clearly made “silent” exit its first choice. He did, however, garner some support from the local Catholic church.

In contrast to publically-funded social and tenant services organizations, Polish Catholic parishes, openly supported Olechowski’s action. Sharp decline in Greenpoint’s polish population and the in-migration of non-Catholic newcomers negatively affected membership at Polish Catholic churches. Back in the early 1980s and 1990s polish parishes in Greenpoint figured among the largest on the East Coast, but as the ethnic population dispersed in mid-2000s, churches began to lose members at a faster rate than they were gaining new ones. According to a local pastor, between the years 2008 and 2013, attendance at polish-language Sunday masses dropped by forty five percent:

Overall, I can see how the changes in Greenpoint are a big improvement, the buildings look newer and the streets are cleaner and feel safer. But the results of those changes are not good for our parish. We are losing a lot of members. I first came to lead [name of the parish] in 2008. At that time there were 4000 people attending the polish-language Sunday mass. In comparison now we have about 2200, so there is a clear difference.

[Interview 10/29/13]

In fact, he links dwindling church membership to rising cost of housing in Greenpoint and the out-migration of polish immigrants to satellite enclaves in Queens neighborhoods of Maspeth and Ridgewood, where polish-language Catholic masses are becoming more available.
Greenpoint is getting too expensive for Poles. Many of them are moving out to Maspeth and Ridgewood, because it's more affordable. Maspeth is an old Polish neighborhood that dates back to the 19th century. They have an old Polish parish there, Holy Cross, the church used to be almost empty on Sundays. But now everything has changed, the growing number of Poles in Maspeth brought the parish back to life. It makes sense, Holy Cross is closer to where they live. There are also Polish masses available in Ridgewood. Mostly at the old German parishes, which are now becoming Polish.

[Interview 10/29/13]

A Polish priest at a German-established St. Matthias Catholic Church in Ridgewood, Queens, confirms growing Polish presence in the neighborhood,

If you take a walk down Fresh Pond Road, you will have no doubt, Ridgewood is becoming more Polish than Greenpoint. There are Polish delis and meat markets, practically on every corner, even stores owned by other ethnic groups sell Polish products. We have Polish bookstores, green grocers, doctors, Polish credit union, even the headquarters of Nowy Dziennik [Polish Daily News], has opened a branch here.

[Interview 11/26/13]

He further stresses that the expanding population of Polish Catholics in Ridgewood is one of the main forces reviving the neighborhood’s dying Catholic parishes,

I first came to St. Matthias in 2012, at a request of Polish parishioners who wanted more Polish-language masses. They needed someone to conduct the service in Polish. This is a multi-ethnic parish so they had masses in English, German, Italian and Spanish. At that time there was only one mass in Polish on Sundays at 9:30AM. The Polish priest came to celebrate the mass from Maspeth, there were no permanent members of the clergy here at St. Matthias, I am the first. We’ve added an evening Polish mass on Sundays at 6PM. If the demand keeps growing, we hope to add a daily Polish-language mass during the week in the near future.

[Interview 11/26/13]

The death of Greenpoint as a Polish enclave occurred parallel to the birth of new satellite enclave
in Ridgewood, Queens. Displaced Poles, and those who simply wanted to live in quieter areas, concentrated in more affordable neighborhoods in close proximity to Greenpoint, where they continued to shop, visit the doctor and meet with relatives. But as more Poles relocated to the new enclave, the number of ethnic businesses increased and local Catholic parishes began to offer masses in Polish language and attract more Polish parishioners.

The Catholic Church is the main social institution consolidating Polish immigrant communities abroad. In the *Polish Peasant in America* (1974), the classic study of 19th century polish immigration to the United States, Thomas and Znaniecki defined the Catholic parish as an “instrument for the unification and organization of the Polish-American community” (p.1528). More than a house of worship, the church served as the center of community life and the priest as moral leader and an important intermediary between the immigrant community and the larger American society. Church was the first place new immigrants visited in order to seek assistance with housing, employment, and legal matters or to network with earlier, well-established Poles. This social function carried into the 20th century when subsequent waves of 1950s, 1980s and 1990s immigrants arrived in the US. But a statement from a pastor at one of Greenpoint’s polish churches suggests that his parish, like neighborhood’s other polish parishes, no longer fulfills that purpose.

In the 1980s the parish hall was the center of polish immigrants’ social life. Different local groups and associations gathered here almost every hour to conduct their weekend meetings, or to organize a dinner party. We had English classes for newly arrived people who needed language training. We had after school programs for polish kids. A major social event almost every Saturday. Today the place is empty. Nobody is using the parish hall. […] So, yes, I’m concerned about the future of this parish.

[Interview 10/29/13]
Unlike other ethnic institutions, which have more flexibility in terms of location, Catholic churches are deeply linked to their neighborhoods and cannot easily relocate (Gamm 1999). For this reason polish religious leaders are more inclined to support local efforts to preserve at least some aspects of polish community in Greenpoint. Although skeptical about some parts of Olechowski’s petition, a local polish pastor supported the local leader’s effort to collect signatures, simply because he envisioned it as the spark that could potentially ignite polish community into a more “realistic” action. He felt particularly strong about offering tuition scholarships to polish kids enrolled in the local Polish Catholic school, which could act as a powerful incentive to keep polish families in the neighborhood.

I’m not sure how realistic was it to demand affordable units in the new waterfront development to go mainly to polish people. This is something that turned other polish organizations away from Olechowski’s campaign. Poles have no sentimental bonds with Greenpoint, the property owners are driven by the housing market, not by the well-being of the community. But I supported what he [Olechowski] was doing with the hope that perhaps it would awake the larger polish community in Greenpoint into a more realistic action. They could sponsor polish kids to go to the polish Catholic school. It used to be the parish school, but due to lack of funds it was converted into an academy. The polish business community could raise money to offer scholarships to some of those kids, maybe then, polish families would have more reasons to stay in the community, but nobody thinks about this. Nobody wants to do anything.

In further comments, the pastor brought up the deterioration of polish public spaces, which he views as symbolic of the institutional decline and the lack of collective momentum that characterizes polish community in the post-rezoning Greenpoint.

We have two great polish public spaces in Greenpoint, but we don’t take care of it. The Popieluszko Square has been neglected for years, its become a gathering place for polish drunks. And Father Studzinski Park is strewn with trash, it has really structurally deteriorated over the past ten years, but local polish politicians are not concerned with this situation. Nobody cares.

The pastor then drew a symbolic connection between the physical deterioration of polish public
places and the decline of local polish organizations.

Like our public places, Polish organizations are also in decline, they lack the energy and funds to come up with new initiatives. The ones that are still going are fighting internally and with each other. Whatever polish organization you look into, you will see disagreements, competition over leadership and over who is more important.

Formal organizations exist and persist because they fulfill needs considered important to their members. Ethnic organizations in particular represent collective identity and forge ties of mechanical solidarity pulling individual members into the collective orbit (Kwong 1994). But rather than fixed in time and space, ethnic communities are in flux and subject to change. When composition and density of ethnic population is altered, the survival of traditional organizations comes under threat (Lopata Znaniecka 1964).

Since the early 2000s, the size of polish community in Greenpoint has been declining as a result of rising rents, relocating to more affordable or quieter areas, or returning to Poland. The loss of existing ethnic community and the lack of new waves of immigrants to replenish it has had a profound impact on local polish organizations and institutions. Faced with multifaceted community transformation and changing needs and orientations of its members, ethnic institutions must adapt to fulfil new functions. Change is particularly difficult for the parish, which depends on tradition and faith to legitimate its existence, but other ethnic institutions apply adaptive strategies that enable them to survive the intersection of residential dispersal of the polish community and the gentrification of the neighborhood.

Established in 1904 Polish National Home, or in common parlance “Dom” [after its polish name Polski Dom Narodowy] is an important example of such adaptive strategizing. Over the decades of its existence, the focus of the organization has shifted in many directions from nurturing Polish patriotism to aiding WWII refugees, to supporting anti-communist opposition in
Poland during the 1980s. In 1991, the National Home has been visited by Solidarity leader and Poland’s first democratically elected president Lech Walesa.

Dom has also served various cultural functions, organizing social activities, and providing meeting space to Greenpoint’s Polish clubs and associations. It also houses the Polish American Folk Dance Company (PAFDC), formed in 1938 to help preserve Polish folk dances and songs (Mann 2013). PAFDC membership consists predominantly of American-born Poles, who are drawn together by symbolic ethnicity. But it sparks less interest among recent polish immigrants who tend to resist the conceptualization of polish culture as peasant folk culture and instead focus on more intellectual aspects of the nation’s cultural sphere (Erdmans 1998). Artists who arrived in Greenpoint in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, made the decision to exhibit their contemporary work and the work of other invited artists from Poland at Starbucks on Greenpoint’s Manhattan Avenue, where the art could be experienced by more eclectic audience and without reference to patriotic or nationalistic themes.

More recently, however, Dom has been reorienting its character once again to meet the new challenges of the disintegration of polish community and gentrification of the neighborhood. In non-Polish circles, Polish National Home is associated less with an ethnic organization and more with Warsaw, a nightclub and a concert space located on the ground floor of Dom’s main building at 261 Driggs Avenue. Heralded by New York Magazine as the best rock venue in 2002, Warsaw showcased many alternative and indie bands including Swans, Beach Fossils, Panda Bear, as well as favorites such as Patti Smith, all of which attract non-polish fans. The venue has also served as filming and crew holding space. HBO, MTV, ABC and CBS have all filmed major productions at Warsaw.

In addition to American bands, Warsaw also showcases contemporary alternative music from
Poland. Gram-X Promotions, a Polish American-operated marketing company has been promoting polish artists in the US for the past 10 years. Their concerts bring hundreds of young Poles from all over the East Coast to Greenpoint to experience live contemporary polish music. The concert experience is entirely in polish and polish brands of beer and vodka as well as polish cuisine staples pierogi, kielbasa, and borscht are served at the bar.

Facing demographic changes and disintegration of polish community in Greenpoint, the Polish National Home has become a multipurpose association that caters to several different groups, and at the same time maintains polish identity and symbolically anchors polish presence in the neighborhood. PADFC brings older cohorts together and gives them opportunity to connect through symbols of Polish folk culture, Gram-X Promotions organizes concerts that feature live music from Poland of interest to younger generations seeking meaningful connection with homeland, and concerts of American bands attract Greenpoint’s new artistically inclined non-polish residents. While this type of strategizing helps cover costs of operation and allows to survive changing environment, the core purpose of the Polish National Home, which has always been to serve and further the interests of the Polonia and Poland has been undermined.

The leadership of the Polish National Home has not been advocating the preservation of polish community in Greenpoint and they did not take a clear position in the fight against the terms of the 2005 rezoning, neither did they support Olechowski’s campaign for polish-specific affordable housing. With the exception of hosting a few public meetings organized by North Brooklyn Community Development, the Polish National Home did not participate in the struggle against the dangers of rapid gentrification especially in relation to displacement of ethnic population. Partially, this is because successful adaptation involves embracing and even perpetuating change. But declining numbers of Poles in Greenpoint, increasing identification with
American society and competition from private companies such as Gram-X Promotions as the new polish culture brokers necessitates a reinvention of the role of ethnic institutions in order for them to survive and perpetuate their activity.

Conclusion

The high homeownership rate among polish immigrants is the primary reason explaining the lack of unified polish opposition to neighborhood change. Polish landlords took the option to participate in gentrification by collecting higher rents, ending leases, or even harassing and evicting their co-ethnic tenants. In this sense private interests took precedence over community interests and diminished loyalty and voice.

For polish immigrants homeownership is the definition of success and symbolizes a lifetime of hard work and sacrifices. The privilege and security that comes with homeownership justifies the separation from their home countries and the ordeal of immigration. This also explains why majority of polish tenants are sympathetic to their co-ethnic landlords and justify raising rent as the landlord’s right.

For elderly or impoverished Polish tenants, however, rapidly rising costs of housing in Greenpoint translate into rent hikes, landlord harassment, building negligence, ending leases and evictions. Despite this, campaigns for affordable housing did not become the focus for polish neighborhood organizations or that of Greenpoint’s ordinary Polish residents. In large extent this is due to the stigma of poverty attached to such forms of social activism and the unwillingness of polish immigrants to identify with the poor members of the community. For this reason most tenants exercised exit rather than voice in response to rapidly rising costs of housing in Greenpoint.
Intra-ethnic divisions and cleavages including migrational cohort, homeownership, socioeconomic status, cultural orientation, and ideological heritage have also undermined ethnic solidarity and hindered collective action. Although, Olechowski, the former chair of CB#1, embarked on individually-conceived campaign to fight gentrification and to get city officials’ attention, the campaign turned into a fiasco after Olechowski voiced his demands for legally sanctioned ethnicity-specific affordable housing.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

In 1985 the *New York Times* noted that despite the sweeping economic and demographic changes that had transformed almost every neighborhood in Brooklyn and in the rest of the city, Greenpoint “has remained primarily as it has always been—*an ethnic urban village*” (p. C1). And despite close proximity to the nation’s largest financial and cultural center—Greenpoint lies less than half a mile across the East River from midtown Manhattan—the *NYT* reporter observed that the neighborhood was in almost every sense a “world away” (p. C1).

Indeed, in the mid-1980s—an era of economic globalization, massive loss of manufacturing jobs, and the expansion of cities as command centers of the new economy—Greenpoint was still home to almost 500 manufacturing, processing, retailing, and warehousing firms that employed approximately 21,000 workers, most of them local residents (Greenpoint Historic District Designation Report 1982, 8). Greenpoint, especially the Newtown Creek area, was the largest remaining industrial cluster in Brooklyn. But the local residents, mostly second or third generation European immigrants, were constantly faced with the threat of looming deindustrialization and fierce competition over increasingly scarce industrial jobs. Yet despite the changing conditions, they held on to their urban communities.

Although by the 1980s most upwardly mobile white ethnics had left for the suburbs, white flight was not as evident in Greenpoint as in other Brooklyn neighborhoods. Subsequent waves of Polish immigrants continued to arrive and settle there until the early 2000s. The neighborhood was always very receptive to this unexpected, but entirely welcome, injection of white immigrants, who functioned as the “reserve army in the white residents’ longstanding battle with the "Hispanics in their midst” (Stabrowski 2011, 70). The existing Polish-American
community as well as the area’s native-born working class (mostly Irish- and Italian-Americans) embraced newly arriving Poles warmly, and the Poles in turn embraced this privileged status and engaged in the racial competition against Hispanics.

But unlike Brooklyn’s elegant, “brownstone” neighborhoods—Brooklyn Heights, Park Slope, Clinton Hill, Fort Greene, and parts of Bedford-Stuyvesant—Greenpoint never housed the rich, or even the upper middle class. Since the 19th century it had been an industrial center that housed mostly the working class. In the 1980s Greenpoint was too undesirable and too isolated from the city to attract wealthier residents. Even the impoverished artists who began migrating in the 1980s across the East River from the Lower East Side preferred Williamsburg because of the short and easy commute to Manhattan on the L subway line. As a result, during that period gentrification and redevelopment were largely absent in Greenpoint. Yet, the “cautious beginnings” (1985, C22) of the process were visible in the renovations of 19th century frame, brick and stone buildings that had the aesthetic appeal of 'authenticity' desired by early gentrifiers (Zukin 2010).

The revitalization of Greenpoint was, in fact, initiated not by the middle class, but by the massive influx of Polish immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s and the subsequent infusion of small-scale immigrant capital into real estate and retail businesses. The influx of immigrants stabilized the neighborhood socially and economically and placed Greenpoint in stark contrast to the economic disinvestment, social disorder and concentrated poverty in the adjacent, predominantly black and Latino, neighborhoods of Bushwick and Bed-Stuy, which were still suffering from the racial upheavals in the 1960s and 1970s.

Trying to capture the neighborhood’s unique position during the decades directly preceding the current wave of gentrification, the NYT reporter concluded that “Greenpoint has
not turned into an upscale urban neighborhood (though it may yet) and it has never slipped down into being a slum” (p. C22).

Over the course of the next three decades, Greenpoint’s potential of becoming an ‘upscale neighborhood’ would be fully realized. In the years immediately preceding and following the 2005 North Brooklyn waterfront rezoning (roughly 2002-2011), median market-rate rents in Greenpoint and Williamsburg increased by 82 percent, higher than in Brooklyn as a whole (50 percent) and higher even than in Manhattan (76 percent) (Susser & Stabrowski 2015, 2). By the late 1990s, Greenpoint was attracting increasing numbers of artists, students and young professionals and members of the creative class, who valued close proximity to Williamsburg as well as more affordable rents. But it took another decade, and significant zoning changes, for corporate developers to enter the waterfront areas and initiate the large-scale redevelopment projects that drove rents and home prices beyond the reach of working class families.

As this process continues to intensify, this dissertation has attempted to document the impact of gentrification on the area’s Polish immigrants, who face not only a dramatic neighborhood change, but also the loss of a long-established ethnic community. Much of gentrification scholarship has focused on the causes of gentrification, as well as on the reasons that drive gentrifiers to move to gentrifying neighborhoods. To date, close examination of the impacts of gentrification on local residents remains an understudied topic. Earlier research relied on the assumption that displacement and economic hardships are the primary experiences for longtime residents. Without downplaying that gentrification-led displacement poses a real threat to gentrifying communities, this dissertation has demonstrated that the experience of
gentrification is more varied than displacement and loss. Instead, gentrification elicited a set of different responses within the community of longtime Polish residents, which, borrowing from Albert Hirschman’s research, I categorize as participation, exit and adaptation. This is the first study to show the variations in the way an ethnic community responds to economic, demographic and social transformations of their neighborhood. It also deconstructs the easily made assumption that Greenpoint represents a unified and socially homogeneous ethnic community. I argue that this assumption stands in the way of a deeper understanding of how urban change affects immigrant life.

Ethnicity often evokes images of a monolithic and unifying identity rooted in common heritage and shared cultural background. Indeed, ethnic identification is one of the “binding fields” (Blokland 2003) where Polish immigrants forge group identity. Historically, Greenpoint’s Poles and other white ethnics, asserted ethnicity to claim control over the neighborhood against the increasing Hispanic presence. By renting and selling properties exclusively to other white ethnics, Greenpoint property owners excluded Hispanics and African Americans from participating in the local housing market.

More recently, ethnicity has been used to distinguish Poles from another group making claims in the neighborhood— the gentrifiers. This time around not race but nationality, language, culture, immigrant status, and age served as the dividing line. Poles commonly refer to gentrifiers as “Americans,” which labels them as community outsiders, but without the connotation of racial difference. In gentrifying black or Latino neighborhoods (e.g, Harlem, Bed-Stuy, Bushwick) the characterization of gentrifiers as “whites” has a negative connotation linked to the contraction of racially-marked urban space. But the term “Americans” deployed in gentrifying Greenpoint is more positive and aimed at distinguishing younger native-born
newcomers from the *immigrant* old-timers. Affluent, young and mostly white, gentrifiers symbolize economic development and growing neighborhood prestige. Although some Poles associate gentrifiers with physical and social displacement, newcomers are generally tolerated, even considered desirable, and their increasing presence is perceived as synonymous with a steady neighborhood growth. In both cases Polish ethnicity was equated with “whiteness,” but it was used to keep Hispanics out and to let gentrifiers in.

Ethnicity, however, does not consistently function as a unifying force. Some scholars argue that ethnic groups, especially when defined by physical parameters such as residential concentration in ethnic neighborhoods, are characterized less by unitary identity and more by class divisions and conflicts (Kwong 1987; Lin 1998; Sassen 1991; Hum 2014). Ethnicity may be asserted as a unitary force in times of intergroup conflict, but in everyday enclave life, the assumption of social homogeneity masks stark social inequalities based on income, homeownership, age cohort, level of education, English-language proficiency and lifestyle.

My exploration of gentrification in Greenpoint revealed that Polish immigrants did not invoke ethnic solidarity or shared experiences to forge strategic alliances and enhance the community’s political influence in determining the course of neighborhood change. Rather than mobilizing collectively as a united voice, Polish immigrants faced gentrification and dissolution of their ethnic enclave privately and with fragmented responses.

In order to analyze those responses, I used the conceptual framework developed by Albert Hirschman, who argues that individual actors, or groups of actors, respond to declining or changing firms, organizations or states with three forms of social action: *exit*, *voice*, or *loyalty*. *Exit* is an economic choice to withdraw from the dissatisfying situation, *voice* is the political choice to stay and fight for improvements, and *loyalty* represents noneconomic factors such as
psychological and emotional commitment that moderates between exit and voice. Because his model focuses on individual actors and their calculated responses to change, Hirschman’s theory appeared to be a useful tool to express nuances in the dominant gentrification discourse, which defines the experience of longtime residents in gentrifying neighborhoods mainly in terms of victimization and loss.

But my empirical research revealed that local responses in Greenpoint were not identical with those theorized by Hirschman. To develop a clearer picture of how gentrification intersects with internal segmentation of ethnic communities, I unpacked the blanket term “local residents” into four separate, yet sometimes overlapping, categories: homeowners and landlords, tenants, shopkeepers, and community leaders. In place of exit, voice and loyalty, I proposed participation, exit and adaptation. This dissertation examined the conditions under which property owners, tenants, shopkeepers and community leaders in gentrifying neighborhoods make these different choices.

Participation

Far from experiencing neighborhood change as ‘passive onlookers’ or ‘helpless victims,’ Polish property owners emerged as the most enthusiastic proponents of gentrification. Homeowners and landlords quickly recognized the economic benefits attached to rapidly rising rent and home values. Rather than an “invasion” of outside forces that threaten the survival of ethnic community, they saw gentrification as a welcomed urban process of extracting value from land. Economic participation involved a set of practices that ranged from selling buildings to non-Polish individual homebuyers or to corporate developers, as well as frequent rent increases, refusal to renew expired leases, harassment, and even legal and illegal evictions of co-ethnic
tenants. By pushing lower-income Poles out, renovating vacated apartments and marketing them to more affluent newcomers, Polish landlords facilitated the settlement of gentrifiers in the neighborhood and simultaneously undermined housing security among Polish tenants.

This embrace of gentrification is hardly surprising. The influx of Polish immigrants in the 1980s led to the revitalization of deteriorating buildings which made up the majority of housing stock in a neighborhood long plagued by poverty and disinvestment. By adding value to their homes and by reviving local commerce, Polish immigrants improved the overall image of the neighborhood and paved the way for contemporary, market-led and state-facilitated growth and reinvestment. From the day they became homeowners, Polish immigrants regarded their homes primarily as investments. They could hardly hope for a better opportunity to cash in than the 2005 waterfront rezoning and concurrent post-industrial redevelopment which drove property values up all across North Brooklyn and placed property owners at the winning end of the process.

“Happy” Versus Forced Exit

Exit stands for voluntary or involuntary physical relocation from the neighborhood and is subdivided into “happy” and “forced” based on the economic and noneconomic factors driving the decision to leave. Exit generally is exercised differently under different circumstances, but it invariably involves actors who respond to neighborhood change by withdrawing and going elsewhere to look for better opportunities.

An overwhelming number of Greenpoint’s Polish tenants responded to growth and redevelopment with exit. New economic pressures in the form of rising rents, as well as landlord refusal to renew leases, building neglect, and landlord harassment made exit a forced rather than
a voluntary decision. Yet rather than responding collectively by staging anti-displacement protests or mobilizing community-wide, affordable housing campaigns, most Polish tenants responded privately by moving out. Exit is essentially an economic response, which in the context of gentrifying Greenpoint proved both more practical and more rational than exercising voice. Community-wide collective action takes a long time to come into effect and requires mobilization of both external and internal resources. Because Polish immigrants were unfamiliar with the local political process and could not guarantee outcomes, many opposed collective action as a response to displacement.

Moreover, recent Polish immigrants expressed general distaste for political involvement (Sanguino 2008). This was particularly true among those who arrived as political refugees. The idea of collective political action was for them associated foremost with the opposition to the repressive communist government that ruled Poland at the time they left. Political mobilization against entrepreneurism and the free market, on the other hand, seemed illogical and ill-conceived. It also clashed with the view held by many Polish immigrants, especially property owners, that an infusion of capital into the neighborhood creates economic opportunities and opens new paths to upward mobility, and therefore, is desirable. Besides aversion to political involvement, voice has also been weakened by other factors including advanced age of the ethnic population, changing residential preferences and the formation of nearby satellite enclaves.

Voice becomes particularly unpopular when exit presents a less time-consuming, less ‘messy’ option and one that results in pre-calculated outcomes (Hirschman 1970). The emergence of satellite enclaves in close geographical proximity to Greenpoint increased the appeal of exit. Priced out of Greenpoint, Poles dispersed to more affordable areas, particularly in southwestern Queens, where they reestablished enclave-like conditions including the
development of ethnic commerce, the introduction of Polish-language masses at local Catholic parishes, and the opening of new branches of the ethnic bank (PSFCU).

Wealthier Polish tenants moved to Queens or to other areas to take advantage of lower real estate values. The expansion of the Polish credit union into Maspeth and Ridgewood, combined with relatively low property values and a stream of displaced co-ethnic tenants wanting to rent from Polish landlords, created favorable conditions for some tenants to become homeowners outside of Greenpoint.

Other displaced Poles ended up as renters and were faced with spatial fragmentation of community life, which was now split between residence in Ridgewood and social networks and services based in Greenpoint. As rampant gentrification in the neighboring Bushwick spilled over into Ridgewood, social inequality between landlords and tenants increased, and Polish tenants once again became vulnerable to residential displacement.

*Exit* was also a common form of response among aging property owners, for whom leaving the neighborhood was a logical outcome of economic participation in growth. After selling their buildings or turning former homes into rental property, Polish property owners did not want to stay in Greenpoint. Instead they “happily” exited to quieter, suburban areas, or migrated back to Poland to spend their retirement in single family homes away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Old-timers felt little need to hang on to a neighborhood that was quickly becoming non-Polish. After the economic and social need to concentrate in the enclave crumbled away, cultural and sentimental attachments became obsolete. The changing character of the neighborhood further amplified Polish old-timers’ sense of cultural displacement. The neighborhood no longer felt “theirs” and the new residents’ lifestyle did not reflect their own values.
Lastly, confronted with the double bind of rapidly increasing commercial rents and declining numbers of co-ethnic customers, many traditional ethnic shopkeepers also responded with exit. Some of those who left were too old and too close to retirement to continue operating under increasingly complex conditions. Increased competition from new retailers, a changing customer base, and the phenomenon of doubling rents destabilized previously thriving ethnic stores and rendered them unprofitable. Even those who owned the buildings in which they operated and therefore were not subjected to rising rents, withdrew from commercial activity because they lacked the intimate cultural knowledge necessary to implement innovation. But younger Polish entrepreneurs went a different route.

Adaptation and Innovation

Greenpoint’s Polish shopkeepers represented a socially heterogeneous group and their responses to neighborhood growth varied widely based on the level of economic, social and cultural capital. Unlike their older counterparts, younger, better educated, and entrepreneurially minded shopkeepers took the initiative to change business practices in order to adapt to neighborhood change. Instead of catering exclusively to co-ethnics, whose numbers were in decline, they invented new retail identities to appeal to the affluent newcomers. Some repositioned store character from “Polish” to “European” or altogether rejected ethnic-specific identifications and instead emulated the aesthetic language and symbolic themes associated with the broader neighborhood transformation.

In place of the traditional Polish delicatessen, or meat markets, young Polish entrepreneurs established cafés that served fair-trade coffee and French pastries, boutiques that specialized in organic cosmetics, or Polish restaurants that catered to a middle-class palate. This
embrace of neighborhood change was not only economic—through upscaling and catering to the tastes and wants of the in-migrating middle class—but also cultural and symbolic, through identifying with the same set of values, beliefs, and everyday practices shared by the gentrifiers. In this sense, young Polish entrepreneurs embraced neighborhood change and reinforced Greenpoint’s new commercial identity, which now provided a cultural platform for the expression of their own changing values.

*What About loyalty and Voice?*

Despite intensifying gentrification pressures, Greenpoint’s Polish community has not contested the economic, demographic, and symbolic changes, which over the last two decades have magnified the existing, and created new forms of community fragmentation. The lack of voice or opposition to redevelopment is pertinent to the greater practicality and overall appeal of the participation and exit options. Polish property owners favored economic participation and exit to voice because they welcomed neighborhood change and saw their economic interests aligned with the processes of gentrification. Because they themselves aspired to become homeowners and eventually landlords, Polish tenants failed to build an effective opposition to gentrification. For them, the option to exit and to seek better opportunities outside of the enclave proved more practical than to stay and voice demands for affordable housing. Exit was additionally reinforced with the formation of satellite enclaves in the more affordable Queens neighborhoods of Maspeth and Ridgewood, which became new destinations for thousands of Poles priced out of Greenpoint.

By adapting to change through innovative business practices, younger, shopkeepers have also undermined ethnic solidarity and reduced community potential for voicing discontent.
Innovative shopkeepers emerged as proponents of gentrification because they, along with the gentrifiers, were co-authoring commercial change in Greenpoint.

In Hirschman’s theoretical scheme, loyalty is an important factor determining the ratio of exit to voice and plays a key role in shaping how individuals respond to change. Strong loyalty translates into greater probability of voice and reduces the chance of exit. When levels of loyalty are low, however, exit becomes the primary form of response. This dissertation has demonstrated that property owners, tenants, and entrepreneurially minded shopkeepers prioritized economic interests and external opportunities over loyalty or concerns over tradition, identity, and community. Weak loyalty contributed to the unwillingness of key community stakeholders to give up private interests for the sake of collective aspirations and collective welfare. Although individually some Poles did express concern over enclave’s dissolution, they failed to frame their discontent politically.

Political action was further undermined by the fact that community institutions were having trouble maintaining themselves. The neighborhood was already changing, and Polish ethnic organizations were having difficulty retaining membership and resources. Neighborhood change caused some community organization leaders and members to feel detached from the community and ambivalent about gentrification because as homeowners they felt they would benefit from neighborhood improvements. Other longtime members were being displaced, and as they left the community, they left the organizations.

Organization leaders expressed doubt as to whether they had any control over the direction of neighborhood development. They pointed to the rigidity of the zoning laws and the inability of community boards to successfully curb land speculation and real estate development. The North Brooklyn Community Development Corporation (NBCDC) was the only nonprofit
that offered tenants services and provided legal assistance directly to Polish tenants facing landlord harassment, building neglect or illegal evictions. But this type of assistance was offered on an individual basis and never expanded into a community-wide protest.

Most Polish tenants knew their landlords personally, interacted with them on a daily basis, and identified with their right to raise rent. This is related to Polish tenants’ aspirations to own property, and to their reaction to communist seizure of, and restrictions placed on private property under state-socialism in Poland. But there is also another dimension; inside the tightly knit community, relationships between tenants and landlords were negotiated through informal channels, including personal friendships, community connections, and even informal work arrangements. For this reason most tenants were more likely to exit than to stay and fight their landlords to whom they were bound in ways other than just economic. But the lack of political involvement came from the specific cultural understanding of economic reality. In their minds, resisting what they saw as a “natural” process of gentrification and demanding affordable housing was equivalent to questioning the free-market economy, something the vehemently anti-socialist Polish immigrants were unwilling to do.

**Gentrification and the Future of Ethnic Communities**

In “Death by Gentrification: The Killing that Shamed San Francisco” (*The Guardian, March 21, 2016*), Rebecca Solnit argued that gentrification can kill, both literally and figuratively. In the literal sense she referred to the 2014 killing of Alejandro Nieto, a longtime Latino resident of the rapidly gentrifying Mission district of San Francisco. Nieto was shot dead by the police while having lunch in the Bernal Heights Park after two white newcomers to the neighborhood mistook him for a gang member and alerted the police.
For the local Latino residents, Nieto’s killing symbolized how neighborhood growth and the influx of young, predominantly white, tech workers had brought the erasure and “death” of not only individuals like Nieto, but also the entire community.

“People are losing something, a sense of connection, a sense of community, a sense of memory and history. And it’s really kind of like a lobotomy for the neighborhoods as everything that makes people connected to the past, to each other, to a sense of meaning, to an identity, gets stripped away, and it all turns into a kind of shiny new kind of place that could be any place in the developed world”.

Solnit saw this tragic event as the extreme end of what might happen when gentrification compresses the spatial distance separating distinct, and often polarized, groups, but does little in terms of negotiating the social and cultural distances between them. Symbolically, death by gentrification, or to further use Solnit’s metaphor, gentrification as frontal “lobotomy”, refers to the process of city building, which cuts the connections between people, place, and identity, destroys the sense of community and history, and irrevocably erases intricate social worlds. As this process expands into disinvested areas outside the urban core, it impacts working-poor, immigrant, ethnic and black populations. Historically, immigrants and African Americans have been less wealthy and earned lower incomes than non-immigrant whites; they are also more likely to be renters and therefore more vulnerable to rising rents and evictions. As constituents in a political system dominated by private interests, resource-poor ethnic and racial minorities cannot easily mobilize to demand policy change. But in the existing model of urban governance, which privileges the view of cities as tourist and entertainment destinations, the needs and interests of the working class are swept aside. The future of such communities and how will they fare in the current tidal wave of redevelopment and displacement remains uncertain and contingent on dynamics specific to those very communities as well as on the social, political, and economic characteristics of the cities in which they are located.
By contrast, the gentrification of the white immigrant enclave in Greenpoint has been ambiguous and elicited varied and fragmented responses from the Polish immigrants. Although redevelopment and displacement speeded the process of the enclave’s dissolution, not all Poles were victimized, and many had economically benefited from the neighborhood change. In a way it mirrors similar developments in other gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhoods; an in-migration of affluent newcomers and a real estate boom cause property values and rents to rise and make the neighborhood unaffordable for working-class, immigrant families, most of whom are forced to relocate to cheaper areas. But Greenpoint departs from this traditional narrative of gentrification in several important ways.

First, at the onset of gentrification, Greenpoint’s residents consisted mostly of white ethnics with a growing number of new arrivals from Poland. There were only small pockets of racial minorities such as Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and very few African Americans. This ethnic composition meant that both gentrifiers and local residents were of the same race, which is why neighborhood change did not have the racial undertones it had in majority-black Harlem or predominantly Latino Bushwick, where economic changes are laced with race.

Second, concentration of Polish immigrants in the lucrative niche of general building construction and the establishment of the Polish credit union as a source of home mortgages and small business loans allowed many Poles to become primary home and business owners in the area. For them, the 2005 North Brooklyn Waterfront Rezoning was a twist of luck. Property values in North Brooklyn soared almost instantaneously, an event embraced enthusiastically by Polish homeowners, homebuilders and landlords, who participated in the neighborhood growth. In fact, many of the Greenpoint landlords evicting Polish tenants and replacing them with
wealthier newcomers were Polish themselves. Thus, not race, but class – manifested as economic divisions between landlords and tenants – played the key role in undermining community solidarity.

Third, not all ethnic commerce was displaced as a result of gentrification. Some Polish shopkeepers engaged in innovative business practices and adapted to changing conditions. Commodification and selling of ethnicity for the purpose of creating an ‘authentic’ urban experience for tourists and residents alike demonstrated successful ethnic adaptation. Alternatively, younger, cultured and entrepreneurially minded Poles let go of ethnic symbols and established retail businesses based on the newest urban trends and appealed to anyone with cultural sophistication and the disposable income to appreciate it. Commercial adaptation and innovation not only create more revenue for ethnic shopkeepers, they also reinforce and enhance the “trendy” image of the neighborhood at the expense of the ethnic one. In this case, younger Poles’ middle class cultural aspirations and a desire to shed the working class definition of ethnicity undermined community solidarity. Lastly, crucial factors such as an aging population, suburbanization, and stalled immigration magnified the impact of gentrification on Greenpoint’s Polish community and accelerated the rate of change.

As gentrification expands and intensifies in New York, a city known for its distinctive ethnic diversity, and in other cities across the US, immigrant and ethnic neighborhoods are increasingly the battlefields between real estate–driven economic development and immigrants’ right to the city (Hum 2014). But not all gentrified or gentrifying immigrant or ethnic neighborhoods are the same. As my research in Greenpoint demonstrated, Polish immigrants responded to gentrification with three forms of action: participation, adaptation and exit. Rather
than unifying politically against the forces of neighborhood change, Poles yielded to, even actively participated in the neighborhood growth. While participation and exit, but not voice, figured as dominant responses among a majority of white European immigrants, this pattern might differ when the key community stakeholders are immigrants from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean.

For instance, in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park, lower-income Latino and Asian immigrants mobilize class and race identities to form political alliances against market-driven economic development, which ignores the needs and interests of the poorest residents (Hum 2014). Similarly, in the San Francisco Bay Area, where intense gentrification has displaced a significant number of Latino and African-American households, local residents voice discontent through forms of collective action ranging from street protests to occupying vacant homes and setting up eviction blockades (Causa Justa Just Cause 2014)

Racialized immigrants concentrated in the same space and drawing on shared experiences of exclusion and discrimination engage more actively in the process of defending their neighborhood. Seeking access to affordable housing and advocating for anti-displacement policies are at the center of this struggle. By contrast, majority of Polish immigrants in Greenpoint yielded to the forces of gentrification by either participating in or adapting to the neighborhood growth, or by leaving the enclave altogether for better opportunities elsewhere. In each case private interests took priority over community interests. This outcome suggests place is no longer central to Polish American community building and identity formation.


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